

Oral History Interview with
Charles Cooper

(unedited)

Conducted November 27, 1996
by Larry Wagenaar

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Larry Wagenaar

LW: I don't know a lot of the details of your own personal history. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about where and when you were born, and then talk a little bit about your own history, and then talk about your father a little bit and go from there.

CC: Well, I was born in Talmadge Township, Ottawa County, December 27, 1917. According to my mother, it was a real rugged winter with snow way up over the fence post in the yard. I went to school first at Kinney School which was six grades in one room. Kinney School was over on the Northwest side of Grand Rapids. Dad worked the farm and you'll find out what happened there in the book I just let you have there. He worked also as what you'd call a stevedore, at that time at the railroad in Grand Rapids. He had to provide transportation about eight or ten miles to get to the railroad warehouse. He had an Indian motorcycle. It would be worth more today than it was then by a long ways. (laughs) After his brother was killed in an accident, his brother returned from the war, the first World War, he was going to be in a partnership with him, but he was tragically killed in a barn while storing hay in a rack. By this time Dad had figured out that farming wasn't going to be a good deal for him, so he went out and bought a truck. Then he started hauling produce and corn, wheat--anything that needed to be handled. When the fair came to Marne, he handled a lot of the stuff, rides and things, from the railroad to the fairgrounds. He also had the wheat and corn, everything for the farmers, to haul it to the

elevators. He hauled furniture, anything that could be put on to a truck he hauled. Then in 1929, he saw that the thing that was going to go over would be long haul trucking. He started hauling from Grand Rapids, Holland, to Chicago. From that start he gradually added on other territory, Muskegon, Fort Wayne, Anderson, Indiana and Indianapolis. We purchased the Felix Truck Line which gave us rights to go into Cincinnati, Ohio, and Root Transit, which gave us rights into Cincinnati. These were added on to Holland's original territory. I guess I got into it real early. I can remember when dad also baled hay. I can remember him setting me on top of about three bales and couldn't move any place. He'd give me a tally and I had to record the weight of the bales as they were unloaded. One of the first big movements that we had was hauling celery from Grand Haven to the market in Chicago. This was one of the things that enabled Holland to go on, this movement of celery. I can remember when I was old enough to set a box of celery up on the tailgate of a truck. They took my brother and I to Grand Haven with them and we'd help load celery in the summer. It wasn't too bad a deal. He paid us all a quarter a week, so we had a good deal that way. During the second year we got a dollar and a quarter a week, which was a pretty good raise. I graduated from Holland High School in 1936 and played football on the Holland team. Made a lot of friends, enjoyed the people.

LW: What was Holland like in 1936?

CC: In 1939 was when we moved to Holland. In 1939, there was a lot of Dutch spoken on the street at that time, just in conversation with people. As you probably know, our name doesn't look like a Dutch name, but my great grandfather came from the

Netherlands, and when he got to Coopersville, Michigan, the attorney who he went to see about getting his naturalization papers and so forth said that there were so many Kuypers in the area that he ought to change his name and make it Cooper, and that's how we got an English name instead of a Dutch name. So we went right to work when we got out of school. I know one year I was at the Muskegon Terminal managing that. That wasn't much of a job because there were only a couple of trucks a day. But there were a lot of slot machines in there. We used to haul slot machines for a guy. He'd bring them in and set them on the counter and we'd get some change and start playing them. It was very nice (laughs) because when they had taken all of our money away, we could just open up the back and get it back out again. (laughs) But I guess our next move back to Holland, got married in 1939.

LW: Your wife's name is?

CC: Loretta Van Ort was her name. She lived on the channel at Macatawa. I shouldn't say it that way, she lived on the channel going out into Lake Michigan, second house from the corner there. We went together for just a year.

LW: How did you meet?

CC: Oh, in a drug store, Peck's Drug Store. Actually, I met her before but it didn't stir any interest for either her or I. She worked at Peck's Drug Store and they found... (telephone) Tony said we got this new girl over at the Drug Store, you ought to go over and meet her. Actually, her brother-in-law was married to Loretta's sister, so I knew through them. I guess you'd have to say we met at Peck's. We rented a house on East 7th Street. I think we paid \$18 a month for rent there.

LW: Times have changed. (laughter)

CC: They sure have.

LW: You had been involved in the trucking business with your father from the get go, really, when he got into it. You saw it basically just blossom from a one truck operation to multiple.

CC: There was a discussion at the table whenever we all got together, talking about this line or that line and what they were doing and we had to do. It was an interesting time.

LW: Tell me how your father dealt with the road conditions, especially that early on. I can't imagine... they didn't have freeways, they didn't have great highways. Was that a big challenge?

CC: Yeah. You had a lot more accidents. Not too many serious accidents, because you didn't get enough speed up to get into serious... But when dad started, he had two trucks that he'd bought. We worked in the Upper Peninsula for a year, in the summer, and mother and my brother and I joined him when school let out and we lived in a tent up there all summer right in a lumber camp. Then when he came back in the fall, he started Holland Motor Express, and the finance company took the trucks away from him. He couldn't pay the charge. So he went out and leased a couple, and we started out from that again and that time there was lots of time devoted to it and lots of effort. I remember once Dad came home and he gave the whole company to mother. Things were so bad. When the banks crashed he was fortunate enough to get to Chicago and got in with one of the banks that didn't crash

and operated that way. He had a lot of get up and go, I guess you'd say.

LW: How many trucks did the line have when you got out of high school and really started working for the firm full time at that point, right?

CC: I don't know how many we had at that time. Probably, maybe six. Good people, Marinus Van Wyk, who just died. He was one of our first drivers. Tony Zeerhof was my brother-in-law. He's dead now. But he was one of the first. Tony Rutgers, just a bunch of old names... People worked in those days. It didn't make any difference what had to be done, they just went ahead and did it. Our mechanic was John Bussie, who just died last year, too. John worked out in the street in front of the office by the old cannery building. He worked on the street on his back underneath the trucks getting them to run. You had a lot more breakdowns than they do nowadays. You know you can run one of these diesels nowadays and very seldom do you see one break down. It was an exciting time. I know my wife and I were driving to Chicago one day for some business we had to do over there and we saw a truck broken down, went off the road and turned over half way and it was an older Wolverine Express, which was one of our competitors. I stopped and asked, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm taking some pictures. When I get feeling too good, then I show these." (laughs) His name was Marty Diamond. We were all competitors, tough competitors in the trucking business in those days. But at the same time, I think we were friends, too. We had a lot of contact with each other. This was about the time that the Interstate Commerce Act took effect which, what it gave you was rights on a certain area, certain runs, that you had at that time.

Wherever you were operating, you could apply for that and we got everything that we applied for that we were serving except Logansport, Indiana. There was a friendship between somebody down there which kept us from getting Logansport.

LW: What year did the act go into effect?

CC: I think probably '36.

LW: So it was the real regulatory control then in the trucking industry?

CC: Yeah. It would give you a fair return on your investment and your time and your effort. It furnished a stability that hadn't been there before. Before that, you'd get a shipment today. Tomorrow, the next guy cut the price a little bit and he got it, and it was no good. You wouldn't have seen the industry prosper as they have.

LW: Can you talk a little bit about the competition with the railroads and how that played out because that was probably your biggest non-truck carrier that you competed against, wasn't it?

CC: The railroad was not a competitor, really. They had a class of freight that they could handle, do it cheaper. They were heavy haulers of bulk commodities and things that weren't good for the trucking industry at that time. I would say that they were not a factor. As an example dad told about, they would load a boxcar with stops all the way down from Grand Rapids to Three Rivers, and that train would go down and drop these off at the various towns that they went through, groceries, dry goods, and all of that kind of stuff. They could not compete against the trucking companies. It was just a case that there was too much advantage by truck. The truck could take the shipment right from the shipper to the consumer, and the consumer did not have to

pay drayage charges or anything else like that. You see the grocery business today and the big, big stores, Meijers and Thrifty, and all of the big stores that we have. It's hard to believe that back in '36, '37, '38, you had maybe seven or eight cartons in a shipment from Murdoch in Chicago to a little grocery store up here. They'd order every week. They'd get a order and it would be delivered right to their door.

LW: Tell me about the growth of Holland Motor Express from the time when you started and obviously it continued to grow and some of the factors that played into that.

CC: I guess we hired the right people and had lots of good people working for us. I think that Harvey Buter, Les Walker and some of the other people that worked for us, they gave their everything to it and just made the company grow. We were kind of Dutch background and we were conservative. We figured we had to save our money and invest it wisely in equipment. We did go to diesels early in the life span of diesels. I remember going to Detroit with my dad. We had taken two old gasoline trucks down there and taken it to Cummings Engine and they put diesel engines in them, which you would call experimental at that time.

LW: What year was that roughly?

CC: Oh, well that's hard to say but it's got to be somewhere around '38, '39. No, wait a minute. It was later than that. It was probably in the early 40's, right after the war. I guess it's kind of hard to say at what time all these things occurred. Unfortunately, not enough of it ever got wrote down because we were just too busy. As has been said, our first shipment was fifty cents from Holland to Chicago. The shipment from Hart and Cooley and Company. Other shipments developed from that and we would

give the service on it. Another thing that helped was the freezing of Lake Michigan, because we were able to take over the business that the steam ships could not do. In the winter time, why they just bombed out, and all the freight had to go by truck. In fact, I just finished reading that book about the Secory, somebody had just done some research on that. That went down off of South Haven with the loss of 39 people. That was just another case of you couldn't operate the year round with steamships, and you needed year-round service.

LW: When did you take over the firm from your father? Your father must have retired at a point?

CC: Yeah. I can't tell you. Let's see. I'd have to check back. Oh boy, I can't tell you.

LW: That's all right. But did your father kind of retire from the business?

CC: Yes. He had a back that went bad and he had an operation on his spine up at Mayo Brothers. He was a good dad. He would get myself and my brother, when my youngest brother came in, and sit down and discuss things, and I never seen him get upset about anything. (laughs) Oh, I shouldn't say that. But you could take any problem you had to him and discuss it with him, but he'd never tell you what to do. He'd let you figure it out for yourself, which you should do.

LW: What were your brothers' names?

CC: Robert Harry and Gerald Jay. Bob was a year and a half younger than I, and Gerald was 15 years younger. He was born in Holland, the rest of us were born in the county. He was a good dad. He enjoyed life. He enjoyed retiring. He retired completely and went to Florida, bought a home down there. Before he died we

bought a home and we were there for 17 years so we sold it last year, bought a condo so we wouldn't have so much to look after.

LW: Are your brothers still living?

CC: Robert, Bob as we called him, died. It's got to be 15 years ago. Gerald is still living. He got a buck this year.

LW: Oh, did he? (laughs) Now maybe because I'm sensitive to it, but I drive around these days in 1996 and everywhere I go, I see Holland Motor Express. Of course, the ownership has changed and so on. But the name has just exploded across the midwest.

CC: That's right. A few years back Loretta and I went to the Netherlands for two weeks and just traveled around through there. As we arrived in the Netherlands we picked up our rental car and drove out of the airport yard and here's a Holland car (Motor Express) going across in front of us. (laughs) We saw them in England, Scotland, Ireland, Turkey, pretty well every place that we'd been.

LW: All started from one truck! When did you sell your interest in the firm? When you retired, is that when you did it or...?

CC: I'm retired 17 years. I retired when I was 67 and I'll 78 next month, and we have been pleased with the people that we dealt with. Actually, I had no problem of any kind with the people we dealt with. We made an agreement and that's the way it worked out. Just absolutely there was no, "You didn't do this," or, "You did this," or anything else. It was just well done all the way through. They were a good company and they hired good people.

LW: This was TNT that you...?

CC: Yes. When we sold out we were doing about \$80,000,000 revenue and I think this year I think its going to be aroung \$550,000,000, and its still growing. They're adding on new territory.

LW: I just noticed recently the designation has changed on the trucks from TNT to USF?

CC: Yes. I don't understand it completely, exactly what it was for, but I know that it gave them rights into Canada by changing the name that way. So they now have terminals in the got three big cities in Canada: Toronto, Quebec... They're in Canada now, for sure.

LW: Were your children interested in the firm at all? In working in the firm?

CC: My son was working in the maintenance department in charge of the maintenance at the Grand Rapids, the garage. I'd rather not discuss that.

LW: You mentioned a while back that you piloted or helped guide some changes in government and in bills when we first walked in to start talking. Can you talk something about some of the efforts that you did? Sort of working beyond just the firm and how it affected the trucking industry?

CC: Well, I was active in the Michigan Trucking Association and served as the president of it for one year. In fact, I think dad and I are the only two people that were father-son president of the Michigan Trucking Association. I was also on the regular _____ Carrier Conference and we had meeting four times a year with them trying to keep everything going the way it should be and regulations being the way it should. It was a nice time. We had the best time--all the people that we met through the Board of

Governors of the American Trucking Association. I was chairman of that. It was through this association that worked with a lot of industry people. I know we worked with Ford Motor, our people went down there and they designed a tractor that would satisfy us. As a result of it, they went into the heavy truck industry quite extensively, and we think we had something to do with it. Not extensively. It was just that we worked with them trying to get things going good.

LW: It sounds like you and surely the firm has had a lot of impact over the years in the trucking and transportation industries. Had a lot of impact on the growing economic base of a lot of places but Holland in particular by being able to transport these materials so effectively. Because Holland has grown so much financially and successfully over the years and I can't help but think that your firm didn't have a lot to do with that growth and was a part of that puzzle.

CC: Well, actually the growth was over a much wider area than just Holland. Holland was just a small part of our business. We had so many other accounts scattered throughout the whole areas, we went out into Davenport... While there was a strike on, we talked to this guy who owned the company in Davenport. He was so discouraged because of the strike. By the time the strike was over, we bought him out. (laughs)

LW: Were your drivers unionized at any point?

CC: Yes, they were unionized by a hatchet through the radiator in Chicago in the market trying to deliver celery into the market. It was a bad deal as far as union situation was. They'd get out and put a hatchet through the radiator and you were done for the

day.

LW: When did your drivers unionize? Do you remember roughly the year? Or the decade?

CC: It must have been about '36 or '37...

LW: Pretty early in the history of the firm?

CC: Yes. We had a good relationship with our people. We had strikes a couple of times, but, actually, the drivers were supporting us. We think that we treated our people fairly. We could ask them anything. If you told a man what you had to do, he'd do it and get it done. Well, I think our relationship with the union was sometimes hectic, but on the whole we had good relationships with our people.

LW: Did you have a lot of contact with the firm after you retired or did you kind of watch from the outside?

CC: I just watched from the outside. It was about 13 years before I finally walked into the office up there the other day. My wife and I had an invitation to come up when we get back in the spring to see the changes. I went through it just roughly four or five weeks ago and the growth was just phenomenal, you know. You can't believe the changes with the computer and what they're doing with that now. It's just absolutely amazing. The freight bills arrive at the terminal before the freight does. They're all sent by wire.

LW: I'm thinking if anything else I wanted to ask you here.

CC: Well, I'll tell you. I thought that you would be interested so I went and made a copy of that.

LW: Good, I was hoping I could take it with me to xerox it. This will be wonderful. It will fill in a lot of detail about your father's pioneering work. Are there any other reflections that you have that you'd like to share or things we can talk about? We talked about your early history and we didn't talk much about Holland itself. You've lived in Holland a long time. One of the things we're also doing as you may be aware is the sesquicentennial project to just gather people's impressions of how Holland has changed over the years. Any reflections on how it was when you first moved here in the late thirties? How those changes occurred?

CC: Holland was a nice place to be a nice place to raise your children at that time. You didn't have the worries that they have now. There were never no gangs. The closest you got to any roughness was on the football team, and everybody enjoyed that. I would say its a shame that we don't have that same condition nowadays. I was in the Junior Chamber of Commerce here which give me a lot of contacts with a lot of people, and we encourage our people to be active in the community. I think that Harv Buter is a good example of the type of people we had and he would get us involved in things.

LW: What were some of the things you were involved in the community over the years? Active in the Chamber, that sort of thing?

CC: Yes, I served two years as president of the Chamber of Commerce, and Deke Conners I think was the one that was supposed to be... he has transferred out of town before he got going on it, so it just worked out that I had about two years as president of the Chamber of Commerce and I was in the Junior Chamber of Commerce. The

church, Trinity Reformed Church. Let's see, what else?

LW: You said president of the Rotary Club and president of the Board of Public Works?

CC: Yes. I was a director of the Old Kent Bank for twelve years. I served as president of the Holland Motor Express for thirty years. The business went from \$5,000,000 a year to \$85,000,000.

LW: Wow, that's phenomenal growth!

CC: I guess that kind of does it.

LW: I appreciate your taking the time to speak with me this morning.