

Oral History Interview with
Gerald Vande Vusse

Conducted July 11, 1997
by Ann Paeth

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interviewer: Ann Paeth

AP: The first thing I need you to do is state your name and your birth date and where you were born.

GVV: My name is Gerald, they call me Gerry, Vande Vusse. I was born January 25, 1918 in Zeeland, MI.

AP: Have you been in this area all of your life?

GVV: All except six years when I was in Florida on two occasions: from 1960-1965 and 1983-1984.

AP: Why were you there?

GVV: I was promoted to personnel director for Chris-Craft corporation and moved to Fort Lauderdale. Their headquarters were in Pompano, and we lived in Lauderdale. I went to Fort Pierce to start a new plant for S-2 yachts. I was about to retire, so they asked me to go to Fort Pierce to do the first hiring and get the plant started. Then we came back here. We knew we were coming back. We didn't sell our house. They knew it was temporary. I could have stayed, but I was ready to retire. So I went for just one year.

AP: Did you grow up in Zeeland?

GVV: I grew up in Zeeland, went to Holland Christian High School, married my girlfriend from Holland Christian High, and lived in Holland since 1940.

AP: What did you do once you were married?

GVV: I went to work in a grocery store immediately after graduating from high school. It was during the Depression. I was able to find work immediately after graduation. So I did not go to college, as much as I wanted to, but couldn't afford. I left the grocery store to work for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. I was trying to sell Chris-Craft a group policy for their employees in Holland. I was rejected for service because of my eyes. The employment manager at Chris-Craft suggested that if I couldn't serve in the service, maybe I'd consider working for Chris-Craft because they were building landing boats for the war effort at that time. So I left and went with Chris-Craft, and have been in the boating industry ever since.

AP: What kind of work did you do for them?

GVV: I was always in personnel administration. I was personnel manager here in Holland, and, as I said, transferred to Pompano to become corporate personnel administrator. We had six plants at that time. So, we went there and lived there for five years, and then had a request from the local plant manager that we consider coming back to Holland. Much to my wife's surprise, I was glad to come back. I was not too enthusiastic about Florida.

AP: What did she think of it?

GVV: She was glad to come back. We had five years in Florida, and I enjoyed work there. That was in '65. In 1967, I had an opportunity to come to work for Leon Slickers, who had started Slick-Craft at that time. It's S-2 Yachts today. Ironically, I had hired him on his 18th birthday, for Chris-Craft. In '67, he hired me. I worked for them until my retirement.

AP: Sounds like you made a good choice in hiring him.

GVV: It worked out well. I can't say that I was highly motivated. In fact, I really didn't have a career selection that I was going to accomplish. I kind of just got into them by circumstances. And things worked out. I went to work the day after I graduated from high school, and I worked, continuously, without any unemployment, until I retired. I moved from one job to the other, left one on Friday and started a new one on Monday. The changes I made were my decisions. I had a satisfying and happy married and career life. Three fine sons. Seven grandchildren. I'm just a happy old man.

AP: What was the boating industry like over here? When did it start up? Tell me about it.

GVV: Chris-Craft was a family owned operation in Algenac, Michigan. They had outgrown the labor market in Algenac, and were looking for a place to expand outside of the Algenac area. They were attracted to Holland because of the large number of wood workers here. At that time, boats were all being built out of wood instead of fiberglass.

AP: And there were so many furniture makers in the area...?

GVV: That's correct. That was the attraction. They came to Holland in 1939. They built the plant on Aniline and Ottawa Beach Road. Which, at that time, was the largest boat manufacturing facility in the entire industry. We just got started. Then World War II came. We requested to bid on landing boats. Chris-Craft built 10,000 landing boats. Thirty-six foot landing boats, that are plywood construction with metal

hull sides. We built the 6,000th landing boat here in Holland and put a banner on the side and paraded it through town...

AP: To boost morale?

GVV: Yes, for the community and for us. Then immediately following the end of the war, we went back into pleasure boat construction.

AP: So did the operation switch completely over to making boats for the war effort?

GVV: Yes, a hundred percent. It was interesting that the first landing boat on the beach at Normandy, France, was a Chris-Craft landing boat. General MacArthur road a landing boat into the Philippines in the war in the Pacific.

AP: How else did World War II affect things around here?

GVV: It had a tremendous effect on the area. One of the side effects was that female work in industry was almost introduced at that time. Not many gals worked in industry at that time, but the labor demand and the lack of guys to hire forced us, really, to hire gals.

AP: So you being in personnel would have seen a lot of that. You were doing all the hiring.

GVV: That's correct. You know all the prospective employees, and I have to say the gals made a big contribution and worked out well. There were several other plants in Holland that were doing work for the war effort. Hart and Cooly was one of quite a few plants that were working for the war effort. It was an interesting time. I stumbled into the industry because, I think I mentioned, I was trying to sell a policy for the employees, and then came and went to work for them, stayed with them until

I was in S-2. I think that one of the things that sticks in my mind in the war effort was the concentration of employment in companies that were producing materials for the government. They got special consideration from the recruiting, that if you were working in a defense plant and considered to be a key employee, some employees were exempted from the draft, because they were in essential industries. It really changed the complexion of the area as to the relation of furniture being made, which still remained a key employment area, but not the predominant means of employment at that time. Of course, the city was considerably smaller and very, very Dutch. I remember that Heinz corporation couldn't get enough employees. They sent a recruiter down to Texas, I believe, to recruit employees to come here. That really introduced the Spanish American work force here in Holland, the first of the Spanish American people came to Holland as a result of being recruited to work at Heinz. They proved to be good employees and spread out and now are a significant factor in our work force here. But it was the single key for the migration of Spanish American people into Holland. Which was really significant for Holland as well. I think it made it easier for us to get a little more American rather than Dutch. More non-Dutch.

AP: The melting pot kind of thing?

GVV: That's correct. We were almost a totally Dutch community until that time, so it was significant in the history of Holland. It was a good thing for Holland, I think.

AP: What do you think of the cultural mix in Holland today, what is it like?

GVV: I'm pleased. I'm a little concerned that we're not making a significant enough effort,

and it's not only true of Holland, it's true everywhere, of integrating our young people into the work ethic that we enjoyed before. There is not quite the family orientation there was when I was growing up. That shows that I'm getting older, I guess. I think kids today don't have respect for the older people, or the feeling of making a contribution to whatever industry they go into, doing a good job. They're more, get by if I can. There is more problem with law enforcement now as it relates to teenagers and young people than there was when we were growing up. That's not only true in Holland, that's true everywhere. In fact, it's probably less true in Holland than in many, many communities. I'm still enthusiastic about Holland. I'm very pleased to be here, as evidenced by people being surprised that we moved back from Florida to Holland. At that time it was kind of exciting to move to Florida. I always enjoyed Holland and had the opportunity to come back here.

AP: Do you stay for the winter?

GVV: Yes, we do now. We went back to Florida for a few winters. But now that I'm retired, when the snow comes, I can put another log on the fire and read a few more books. I have no desire, really, to go to Florida. I'm a real Holland enthusiast. We're fortunate to have a wonderful school system. Both public and Christian. It's just a great place to raise a family, I feel.

AP: What schools did your kids go to?

GVV: Holland Christian. As I indicated, I went to high school there and met my wife there. We were married in '39, and lived here outside of the two times we lived in Florida at the request of employers I was working for. Otherwise, we've lived in

Holland.

AP: What has been your experience with the Holland Christian Schools? I think they're a bit unique in that other towns, their parochial schools are attached to churches, and they're small and run by the church. But Holland Christian, I think, is a little bit different?

GVV: I think I can really answer that question rather well. I served on the Holland Christian School Board for two or three terms. Our distinction is that we are a parent controlled school, not really a church school. The school society owns the buildings, and the boards are all local people. We've had probably a vision with a slight prejudice, but we've had excellent administrators and an academic oriented emphasis, probably by necessity. We didn't have a lot of money to put into vocational classes. All of our kids were taking college prep courses, that's what we offer. We've always been a totally self-supporting, the society is, and it still operates the system and pays all the cost of the education. There's no government subsidy for the Christian School, which is true in other parochial schools, as well, that's not peculiar to Holland. It's been, again, maybe I'm a little prejudice, but a very successful operation, I think, and still is. There is an excellent relationship between the Christian and Holland Public Schools, and, to a lesser extent, the Catholic school, although there's been a good relation there, too. Again, I think we're fortunate to be in this area, and the constituency of the community is so deeply based in a work ethic, and that has contributed to the attraction of industry to Holland, because of that reputation. Many of the industries that came here from other areas were attracted to

the caliber of employees they were able to hire here. So it's been a real good thing for Holland, educationally and industrially. I think that the mix today is good. As I said, I wish we could do a better job of integrating, but that's true everywhere. The gang thing, that sort of thing, is apparent here now, obviously, when you read the papers. But again, I don't think it's as prevalent as it is in bigger cities.

AP: Are there some organizations or things you see going on in the community that are addressing that? Are there some things that you think Holland is doing right?

GVV: I think our Chamber of Commerce does a fantastic job. I think the churches, together, cooperate. The competition, I don't feel. Basically a Christian basis for our decisions and, again, work ethic. I think the Bible teaches us that we should do our best, wherever we go. That has influenced people's attitude toward their work. It's not just enjoying what they do, which is important, but a feeling of obligation. It's a privilege to go to work, and it's an obligation to do your best. So a career in employment, which has been my background in all my work, has been satisfying to me. I enjoyed it. I obviously met scads of people. I probably employed, or made the decision to employ, more people, and this might be challenged, than most guys. Chris-Craft got to be a significant employer in Holland, and we had a, this is still in existence, the Holland-Zeeland personnel association. I think they have contributed to a consistency of emphasis which kept the tone of relationships between industry and labor, both organized and unorganized. Maybe another prejudice, I certainly don't have any bone to pick with organized labor, but as far as I was concerned, I wanted to represent the kind of employer that would recognize the needs of employees

enough so that they wouldn't feel they had to join a union to accomplish what they wanted as far as employment was concerned. Personally, it's been a very satisfying career. I would have never made it working with my hands. My first employment was between my junior and senior year in high school. I went to work for Herman Miller in Zeeland and went to work in the machine room, and was not a very good employee. Not that my attitude was bad, but my skills with my hands--I still can't hang a picture right.

AP: You mentioned the unions a second ago. Did a lot of people resist unionization in Holland?

GVV: We did at Chris-Craft. We encouraged our people not to join, again, indicating maybe a prejudice. But when we had the war effort, there were wage controls. The government controlled the wages. We were not allowed to increase wages without government improvement. The A. F. of L. came into Holland to organize Chris-Craft. They told the employees... One of the factors that influenced Chris-Craft people to join the union, I think, was the fact that the unions were able to get bigger concessions from the War Labor Board with regard to increasing wages than individual employers. We had to petition the government in order to raise wages. We had been somewhat successful, but not as successful as the organized plants. On the strength of that, I feel we were organized when they had a vote by a 4% margin. 52% voted for the union, 48% against. Then of course they were designated as the bargaining agent for Chris-Craft employees. But we were able to establish a good relationship with our union. We had a continuously good relationship throughout the

area that we were organized. I think we had one strike during the time that we were organized. That was really on wages. I think that, again, I don't want to indicate a prejudice against unions, but I think that what's happening at Haworth is an indication that the Holland people still are... They bowed out now at Haworth. A much larger percentage of workers in Holland, I think, and I don't have any statistics to back this up, are non-union than in many other areas. So we're blessed with good industries that feel they have the obligation to do the right thing by their employees and are interested in employee contributions to the success of the company, and not making decisions only with relationship to the profitability of the company. Although that ties in together, because when your people are happy at their employment, they do better work, and they're more happy to be doing it.

AP: So with the work ethic in Holland and the pride in workmanship, really a union shouldn't be necessary?

GVV: That's my opinion. That's correct. I'm sure that there are union people that would challenge that, but that's my opinion. As I say, as it related to us, had there not been the government restraints on our ability to increase wages, we probably would not have ended up being organized.

AP: Is that still in place?

GVV: No.

AP: I didn't think so. Why was it?

GVV: That was because of the scarcity of labor at that time, and the government wanting to maintain a level of employment that was stabilized in the economy. So there

wouldn't be a run-away of wages.

AP: And that would probably affect inflation?

GVV: Yes. There's an abundance of work right now, also. But there was more work than there was laborers to do it. The unions with their ability to take people out on strike could force employers to raise their wages, and the government would let them. That was not in the best interest of the government and the war effort, so they couldn't raise wages without going through the War Labor Board to authorize that increase. I think the other interesting thing with relation to tie in with my employment history was the diversity that came to Holland in industry as a result of the people leaving the furniture industry as the most important employment in the area. That had a lot to do with the broad labor base that we have now, as related to all types of work. You can find most any type of labor, whether it's Park Davis or Hart Cooley. Not Chris-Craft anymore, but they were a significant employer at one time. Now, S-2 Yachts... The boating industry has made a significant contribution to the economy of Holland. It still does. I feel that's good. It's a wonderful town, I think. I hope that we're really successful at integrating other ethnic populations into Holland. That's about my story, I guess.

AP: Good. Let's talk about some other aspects of the town. Are there some organizations or activities that you've been involved in? You mentioned the school board...

GVV: And the personnel club. I was never a member of any of the civic organization--Rotarian... And the churches have been very important in Holland. They still are.

AP: What kind of involvement did you have with the churches?

GVV: I was in the council of the 16th Street Christian Reformed Church, which is no longer in existence. It's the Providence Christian Reformed Church. I was in council there several occasions when I wasn't in the school board. Just the working together of the community I'm enthused about to this day. I think, by and large, people are proud of being citizens of Holland. Our city government is doing a good job. I have a prejudice there. My son is a councilman. The overall Christian ethic of every individual being an image bearer of God. We owe each individual respect as an individual, although we're inclined to be narrow minded, I think that we do accept other religions and other lack of religion, if that's the choice of the individual, they're right. I think being a Christian is the basis of a happy, happy life. If we can convince people of the happiness that's available... When I was growing up, the emphasis on religion was a "don't." You should not do this, you should not do that, rather than a positive influence, the joy of living a Christian life. So I think that if we focus on the opportunity for true happiness by being a good Christian is a tremendous asset. I think we're influencing people toward Christianity more by our present approach by all of the churches. So I hope we will continue, personally, to work in that direction. I hope that Holland continues to be a wonderful place to live. We're surely growing rapidly. I can't get over how the community is growing. As far as increasing the population of corporate Holland, there isn't much chance of that, because all the property is developed. The townships surrounding Holland are rapidly growing. (tape ends)

AP: What kind of things has the growth affected? Good changes, bad changes? How has that affected Holland?

GVV: That's a tough question. Really, I'm enthusiastic about Holland growing and I want to attract more people to Holland. But I think the work ethic has maybe deteriorated a little bit in the last few years. I don't think we have the employee/employer loyalty that we used to have. Again, that reflects my age and my background, but that's my honest opinion. Because the economy is so strong, it's much tougher to be an employment person, like I was, hiring people today. The personnel people have a much tougher job finding enthusiastic, contributing employees. Again, a dangerous reflection, really, of the quality of people entering the labor market, today, maybe it's not as high or as good as it was years ago. There I feel strongly that we talk about the problems of the teenagers more than we talk about tremendous contributions that our young people do make. We've got scads of wonderful kids. We ought to emphasize that other than the problems created by those that are not making the contribution that they should. That's pretty much how I feel, I think.

AP: Could it be, too, just from some things that you're saying, that it doesn't seem that too many people are prepared to go into the labor force today? Like it used to be most people graduating from high school would go on into that labor force?

GVV: I think the fact that we have to draw people from outside the area to fill the job spots that we have and the demands of expansion, both existing and new companies coming into Holland, that's drawing new people into Holland, is certainly a factor in our growth, as well. I think something I haven't talked about that I feel is important is

the cultural activities in Holland. The emphasis on the arts and Hope College's tremendous contribution to the cultural opportunities in Holland is very, very important. And our public school system is certainly one of the best, as indicated by the very great success of their students, by and large. We've had great superintendents of instruction in the Holland Public School system. As well as the good base we've been able to make for the overall contributions of our Christian/ Public School system. So it's just a great place to live, I think.

AP: This sometimes puts people on the spot, but are there any individuals you've known or leaders in the community that you can think of as being particularly influential or outstanding?

GVV: There have been a lot of wonderful people in my life. I just can't think of anybody that's been so outstanding.

AP: What has been your opinion of the Holland City government through the years?

GVV: I think it's excellent. I think Al is doing a great job as mayor. I think that the community is responding to the challenges of increasing our tax base to attract things that will make our community more desirable on an overall basis. The challenge we've got coming on the cultural center--I strongly hope we'll be able to pass the necessary millage to be able to create the civic buildings and activities. It's always thought to face the increase in taxation, but overall, when you look back on what's happened as a result of it, it's a lot easier to vote for than if you just think of what the immediate results would be. There are people who can't seem to afford more, and have a right to vote against it, certainly. But we've always had a pretty

substantial majority favoring the progressive things for the community. I think that will continue. We sure are blessed with a wonderful superintendent of schools in the public school system today, which is a continuation of the kind of administration we've had in the public school system, and equally true of our Christian School system. I think our part in the community has made substantial contributions, educationally and culturally to the community.

AP: Maybe as a final thing to think of, are there one or two things that you are most thankful for in Holland, or most appreciative of?

GVV: I think one single thing would be our strong religious base, which has, in my opinion, contributed to the success, for lack of a better word, of the community and keeping it a desirable area to live in and to work in, both as an employee and as a manufacturer. It's a good place to live, and should continue to be. Of course, we're blessed with Lake Macatawa and Lake Michigan so close by. It's got a lot of things going for it in addition to the people. I think I've said it before, but I think Hope has made a very substantial contribution to Holland.

AP: It certainly is a beautiful area.

GVV: Yes, it is. We travel quite a bit, and I'm always glad to go, but I'm always glad to come back. I don't think my wife ever expected to come back to Holland once we moved to Florida. But she was glad to come back when I had the opportunity. I asked her if she wanted to come back, why, she was ready to come back. We never regretted that we did that.

AP: Well, are there any other things that we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk

about or that we've missed?

GVV: No, I think we've covered the base pretty well. You've been an excellent interviewer, and I hope my responses have been satisfactory, they've been honest, that's for sure. It's kind of an interesting assignment that you have. Have you been doing a lot of interviewing?

AP: Yes. In fact, within the whole project, your our 100th today. I feel like I should have a prize for you, but I don't. I've done over twenty so far.

GVV: Really? What's your background? Are you a native Hollander.

AP: No, I'm from Bay City.

GVV: Came from the east side of the state. Attracted here by Hope? Well, it's really got a tremendous reputation in the educational assessment, and by the educational people themselves, Hope is very highly regarded nationally. It's one of the outstanding small colleges in the nation. Our school systems, both public and parental, are doing a good job.

AP: Well if there's nothing else, I think we can just wrap up. Thank you very much.

GVV: You're very welcome.