

Oral History Interview with
Henry Vander Plow

(unedited)

Conducted March 25, 1997
by Ellie Norden

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Interview with Henry Vander Plow
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Interviewer: Ellie Norden

EN: I'm really happy that you allowed me to come today to talk with you because I know you have a long history to tell us about. First of all, if you'd tell us your name. Include your middle name if you have one.

HVP: I'm Henry Vander Plow, Henry Robert Vander Plow.

EN: When were you born?

HVP: 1916.

EN: Do you remember the month and the day?

HVP: December 15.

EN: I hope you'll speak up so that we can hear you, okay? Where were you born?

HVP: I was born in Muskegon.

EN: What was your mother's name? You can't think of it right now? Do you remember your father's name?

HVP: Henry.

EN: Henry. So you were named after him. How about brothers and sisters?

HVP: I had an older brother John and an older brother William and a younger brother Robert.

EN: And your wife's name?

HVP: June.

EN: What was her maiden name?

HVP: (No response)

EN: Was she born in Muskegon too?

HVP: Yes, and she married...but perhaps you don't want that right now.

EN: That's okay.

HVP: She married Bill Boss.

EN: He died in the war?

HVP: Yeah. He was killed in the Battle of the Bulge.

EN: When were you married to June? After the war?

HVP: Yes.

EN: How about children?

HVP: Well, we had no children except one by her previous marriage.

EN: What's his name?

HVP: William.

EN: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your family?

HVP: Well, in regards to William, he was killed in the Bulge. There was a family in Haan, Luxembourg, that keeps fresh flowers at this date.

EN: Have you ever been there?

HVP: No, but we exchange Christmas cards at Christmas time and June writes a letter to them.

EN: When did you come to Holland? Was it soon after World War II?

HVP: I think so because I didn't have no job or anything.

EN: You were in the war, World War II?

HVP: Yes. From '41-'45.

EN: In what service were you?

HVP: Navy.

EN: Did you go right from high school?

HVP: No, I think I had one year at Ferris State University, Big Rapids.

EN: What did you study there?

HVP: Well, I had in regards to government, I liked government.

EN: You came to Holland because you didn't have a job. What are some of the organizations that you have been involved in?

HVP: Well, I was involved in the VFW and I wasn't in there very long but I attended some of the Elks. Mainly the VFW and in more recent times I became a life member of the VFW.

EN: What was your main job all these years?

HVP: One of them was I did tickets for my brother because he had a beverage business and I sort of run that in Holland for him.

EN: What was the name of that business?

HVP: Smitty's Beverage.

EN: What else did you do?

HVP: Well, of course, later on I got out of that and I had an opportunity to go to work for the Holland Police Department.

EN: In what capacity? What did you do?

HVP: I worked in the parking meter division. It was my job to give tickets to those

whose meter had expired. I was to write them a parking ticket.

EN: You did that for many years?

HVP: About six years.

EN: Did you like that work?

HVP: I liked it, but I learned how to deal with people that didn't agree with what I was doing (laughs). That was the hardest part. I had to do it out of fairness, including giving my wife a parking ticket!

EN: Were there any unhappy times? Dangerous situations?

HVP: Not really. I don't think dangerous, but you had to have patience because I was doing a job that was legal, doing a job which I was assigned to do, and I figure when they assigned me to a job that's my duty to do it and do it in the fair, easy way I can even though they don't agree with me.

EN: After you did the parking meters, did you have another job?

HVP: Then I worked, if I've got it correctly, I worked running the city jail. Taking them into court, fingerprinting them and sometimes picking them up.

EN: How many years did you do that?

HVP: I think it was about six years. It was a nice job, but you had to be alert. I tried to be nice to them, not talking to them too much about their problems, but being nice to them so that it made it easier for me to keep control of the jail.

EN: That was a good philosophy.

HVP: It sort of shook me up, but I had a young fellow that they took to court and we had a rule that you're not to (let) them have a belt in the jail in the cell box because

that's a tool for suicide or do damage in some way to them. And this young fellow...I detected the belt going out...and I wasn't there when they got back and they left the belt on and things all went wrong afterwards.

EN: That was a bad situation.

HVP: And I went back and I kept my composure enough, but I got on the phone and said, "You get me medical help and tell them not to spare the horses. I've got a bad situation." And that kind of shook me up. Still is in my system.

EN: You still remember it. Then after the city jail what did you do?

HVP: I was involved...I don't know what time I did...but in that period of time I was on the Maplewood School Board for several years before it was a part of the City of Holland. And then I played a pretty good part in getting that when it came up for election to get it into the Holland School system. That was an easy job, but there again you had a little opposition. I had one lady that if she saw me on Eighth Street and she was coming towards me she would go across the street and then come back across the street after she got by me.

EN: She didn't want Maplewood to be in the Holland School District?

HVP: She put all the blame on me. But I took that more or less in stride. I did what I thought was the best for everybody and had the support of most of them.

EN: You worked in the Holland Police Department until you retired?

HVP: Yes.

EN: When did you retire?

HVP: Hmmm. I don't really know that...

EN: Many years ago?

HVP: It's in here, but I don't know.

EN: Okay. You've been retired for several years?

HVP: Yes.

EN: About twenty probably.

HVP: Yeah, around that.

EN: Have you seen many changes in Holland?

HVP: I think so. I think that they are getting a little more time and again...Instead of sort of like I don't know if I'm saying it correct or not, a close-knit city it is getting diversified with different types of people and you have to...I feel you have to go along with the good part of it...what you think is the basic parts of Holland before. Not belittling that person but try to convince them that the things that are happening are __?__.

EN: What changes have been good in Holland?

HVP: For instance, if you did anything on Sunday...A simple illustration, if you mowed your lawn, you were kind of put on the bad list.

EN: And now?

HVP: Now they probably don't think it's the proper thing to do but they don't condemn them, they rather try to encourage them to come along their way.

EN: Are there any negative aspects about Holland that you see?

HVP: I would like to see more people get involved in government. They're starting to condemn it...easier to speak up. And then if you lose, you lost. I used to go to all

the council meetings.

EN: Oh? You did?

HVP: Most all of them. And I would go to the pre-council meeting because that's where they discuss it and then the final policymaking comes at regular council meeting.

EN: You did that regularly? For many years?

HVP: Quite a bit. The chief of the police department called me in and told me I had no right to be there.

EN: He told you not to go?

HVP: I said I've got all the right in the world. You call up the mayor or you want me to call and get on the line and have him tell you? I said, "I went there and I found out I can be there." The only time a person can't be in is when they're discussing something like a personnel problem, then you have to leave. But then they have to tell you when it's over.

EN: So you did speak up?

HVP: Oh, I'd speak up sometimes on what I thought. Government was my main subject in school. I didn't have to take the test. I gave the test! That's how easy government came to me.

EN: Have there been any problems in Holland, disagreements, controversy?

HVP: Well, you've got one right now a little bit - the so-called arena center.

EN: What do you think about that?

HVP: I don't go along with where they want to put it. I still think that the area of the GE is the most...I mean, I look at it on traffic and everything and there's very little

traffic adjustments you would have to make and I get some of that experience by _____ to Muskegon with their arena and had it down town by the lake front.

EN: Early on in your life, were there any disagreements that you can remember?

HVP: No, although you know when I had that...when they started out with that beverage business, a lot of people just really called me some nasty names. People and church people were really nasty to me.

EN: Why? Because you sold...

HVP: Because I swore that I would do nothing to interfere my Sunday...my religion...

EN: Why were they angry at you?

HVP: Because they didn't believe that should be done in _____.

EN: Or had alcohol maybe.

HVP: And then when (unintelligible) then I got into the other.

EN: Into the Police Department. Did you like that better? Police Department?

HVP: Oh, yes. I always did. I always did like that. I used to ride with my friend, Bud Borr. Sometimes I'd walk. There's a lot that happens out there on the street. Just before I retired, I got three or four different incidents and through watching people, I got them. They were wanted.

EN: And you found them.

HVP: Well I talked to them...checked up on them and they were wanted. Right on Eighth Street I was on my motorcycle and I see this rough looking young fella hitch hiking on Eighth Street. We just had a new chief - I think it was Lindstrom. Boy, that ain't going to go good if I let him hitch hike right on Eighth Street! And then I

joked with him a little bit and I got him to go along and after I got him to give me his ID card, I said, "Let me tell you how my radio works." And while I was doing that I was getting to see if there was any information on him and as it came back I knew that I ought to be careful. He's an escapee from Jackson Prison!

EN: What did he do?

HVP: He stayed there. He didn't catch on! And then I heard the siren coming like mad down Eighth Street and that officer swung that car in there, grabbed a hold of that guy and slammed him in the car and the guy said, "Oh boy! Two different guys. I thought to myself." But that's what he was. The day before a Wisconsin trooper gave him a ride in his cruiser to the highway.

EN: Oh, and he didn't get caught!

HVP: No.

EN: Do you know anything about the bank robbery, the famous bank robbery?

HVP: No, I heard about it.

EN: Only heard about. No information?

HVP: That same couple days there was a car stolen in Grand Rapids at a big store. One of the big deals. And so I was right on my motorcycle again when the gas company was on Ninth and River. I looked down at that license on my car and looked across the street at the stop sign and there was that stolen car from Grand Rapids.

EN: Let's change the subject a little bit and talk about Hope College. What do you know about Hope? How has it changed? How have you been involved?

HVP: Well, not too much. I go to some of the activities. I think their changes are

meeting the times. It probably was a little conservative school, not that being a little less conservative was better, but I think it's come a long ways.

EN: As a policeman were you involved in any way?

HVP: Not too much. Except for one preacher (laughs)

EN: Who was that?

HVP: Oh, his first name was Eugene. (Laughs)

EN: Oh, oh. We better not continue with that, okay? Do you think that Hope College has been good for the community, and if so, how?

HVP: Well, in that it brings in different nationalities and that brings the so-called Holland and the Dutch community which used to be pretty heavy that way learn to get mixed and get involved with other nationalities and personalities. I think they've come a long way.

EN: So you think that's good for the community. Any problems with Hope College being here?

HVP: No, I don't think so.

EN: Let's think about the changes in Holland in the fifties and sixties when a lot of industry came in. Any changes that you see? Good? Bad?

HVP: Well, they've stayed pretty close to a six-day work week leaving the Sunday so you could go to the church of your choice and concentrate on that type of day. Which I think was good.

EN: Do you think it has helped Holland? How about the growth of Holland?

HVP: I think it's grown very rapidly. I think our main one now is the Center which I

don't wholly agree with what the mayor is doing.

EN: The new arena you're talking about. You mentioned a little bit about church. Have you been involved in church?

HVP: Oh yes. I was involved in Unity Church in Muskegon, a block from my house.

EN: And now since moving to Holland?

HVP: Well, I've gone over to Maplewood for a while because we lived over on Thirty-Eighth Street. But they had a plan where they would let my wife...I wasn't even a member. They would let her transfer but not me.

EN: Why?

HVP: Because I had that business.

EN: Because you had the beverage business. And you couldn't transfer. So what did you do?

HVP: Well, we just took it...We just didn't join. Couldn't join, I mean, I couldn't.

EN: Is that so. Do you think this day and age they'd let you join if you had that business?

HVP: I think they would because they researched me enough to know I'd never do it. I wouldn't go to any meetings there or do any business on Sunday. The church came first. They made the agreement that my son and June could go, but I couldn't. I could come but not be a member.

EN: So did you leave?

HVP: Yeah, we eventually left.

EN: And where are you members now?

HVP: We're at First Reformed. We were over to Trinity for a while when it was on the old location.

EN: Do you remember when you came to First Church?

HVP: No, I...

EN: I remember you were there in 1964.

HVP: Was I? It must have been about that time and we've been really happy. I haven't probably gone as much, but I felt so good there because they were so good to me in my work. They went out and prayed in my prison work. We had some of the men that went out and made some kind of an ornament or so out there and then...

EN: You talked about prison work. What's that?

HVP: Out to the Dunes.

EN: Can you tell us about that?

HVP: Well, I spent most of my spare time there.

EN: What did you do?

HVP: Well, I was the coach of the basketball and softball teams. And I raised games and so forth with that and tried to train them in how to play the game better and stuff like that. With June's blessing I spent practically every Saturday of the year there.

EN: So you must have made many friends at that prison?

HVP: Oh, yes. I got quite a few things here that I got from prison connections.

EN: In this room where we're sitting there are many things on the wall which tell us of that time.

HVP: It made me kind of sad that they did what I feel was a political maneuver.

EN: To close the Dunes prison.

HVP: For a dollar or two they gave it to Laketown Township and that didn't set so well with me. That closed my career there.

EN: You were there for many years helping out as a volunteer. That's good. What do you think about the Dutch heritage in Holland. Is it still strong? How does it react with other groups?

HVP: Well, I think it's strong amongst the older population, but the younger population I believe are probably holding some of their truths but are blending off into different directions.

EN: Has that been good for Holland and in what way?

HVP: Well, I think that we had to more or less regroup or get used to meeting that situation head on. I think that was one of the big changes. At Tulip Time I had do some traffic work and one time the traffic work was over by Emmanuel on the corner there and a lady came up to me and she said, "You've got a lot of nerve to be working on Sunday." Well all I said was, "You probably had a part of Tulip Time and I got to work under Tulip Time rules so you're making me work on Sunday." (Laughs)

EN: What about crime in Holland. Has that changed?

HVP: Well, I think that we're getting a little more. Maybe not drastically but it has more or less happened. I think that comes and I don't know how to get away unless you try to work with those groups that are coming in and have different ways of doing things. They're basically good, too, but they don't do things like the Dutch did or

so. And therefore we get sometimes a little friction there. I believe that if you treat them right and if they do what I do, stick to my...but don't force them to go but if they think sometimes enough of me they'll come along. Or they won't interfere with my religious part of my life.

EN: Is there any big turning point in your life that you'd like to talk about? Anything that changed your way of thinking or...?

HVP: Well, I think I developed more patience toward people with different ideas over the years. I come out of that closed sort of network and by getting older and getting mixed in again. I don't necessarily have to agree with all of them but they've become good friends of mine. But they have a different outlook on things. So I don't abandon them because of their different outlook.

EN: Well, that's a good attitude. What do you hear other people saying about Holland, people from outside of Holland, from out of town?

HVP: I think there are a lot of good, favorable...I think the one danger with people coming in new and even some of the older ones that don't get involved in the actual workings of it, not necessarily be a leader but go to some of the meetings and speak up. Say, "This is how I feel about it" rather than to say, "Let them have the say."

EN: You have family I know in Muskegon, relatives and all. What do they think about Holland?

HVP: Well, they didn't come over here too much. They just thought it was one of those strict towns. But they found that out later on too. Now both my father and mother are gone...

EN: We've covered a lot of subjects and a long period of time but I wonder if there's something I haven't asked you about that you would like to share? Anything about your life in Holland?

HVP: Well, I've enjoyed my life and I never regret coming to Holland and I figure that this is where, unless something radically will change down the road that I have no idea of, Holland's always going to be my home. People have been good to me and I tried to be good back. I think the biggest thing even in city government is not trying to force things on people but to work the thing out to let everybody have a good say about it and bring everything out in the open. I think that makes a good city. When you get a feeling that something's going behind their backs, and I think that's one of the things that's facing it on this arena bit.

EN: Any incidents in Holland that stick out in your mind that I haven't covered?

HVP: No, I don't think so.

EN: So you think we've covered everything you wanted to say?

HVP: Well, I think I would probably find more because as you say these are all...

EN: All your memories here in this book.

HVP: My mother, my father too, but we never won my father completely over to the church. He would go to certain things but my mother was very, very faithful.

EN: But you have a good Dutch name.

HVP: Yeah, that helped coming to Holland! Holland has gone through changes and everything is. If you're going to advance you're going to have changes.

EN: Did your father come from the Netherlands?

HVP: He did and he just worked in a factory and a man took him under his wings at a very adult age and taught him how to be a carpenter. Not because he was my father but but that man liked him so well as a carpenter that he kept him on as long as he was able to do the work.

EN: Well, thank you, Mr. Vander Plow. We've talked a lot about Holland and you seem to know a lot about it. If there's more that you want to talk about later, you let us know.

HVP: Okay.

[interview ends, then starts again]

EN: Mr. Vander Plow is talking about going to the World's Fair in Chicago.

HVP: I was young at that time, about 3 or 4 of us young fellas decided we wanted to go see a World's Fair, never had seen one. That was 1932. I think I had four dollars and we didn't have a car or bike or anything. So we just went down to the freight yard and we got in a boxcar that was going to Chicago - and we went to the World's Fair that way!