

The Hope College Oral History Project for 1995  
The Joint Archives of Holland

Interview #20  
Mrs. Mary Duistermars  
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:  
Jason Valere Upchurch  
18, July 1995

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- Interview w/ Mary Duistermars @ The Tulip Time Office
- Tulip Time Office / 171 Lincoln Avenue / Holland, MI 49423
- July 18, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

**Begin Tape 13 : Side B**

MD: My name is Mary Duistermars. I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on [date removed], 1948.

JVU: How are you associated with the Tulip Time festival?

MD: I've been with the festival for nine and a half years. The last--I would say eight years of that time--I've been the business manager. About a year of that time, I served as interim director, and for about nine months, I've been the executive director.

JVU: Well, I guess since you've been director, you've been involved with all areas of the festival, but are there any areas specifically that you deal with more so than others, or that you've dealt with in the past?

MD: I think I've probably been the one person around here that's been involved in almost every area. Being the business manager as well as the office manager for all those years, I was mainly responsible for the day-to-day operations of the festival. I was basically at all of the various committee [meetings] of the Board of Directors and staff meetings, and it was my responsibility to see that the festival operations were all in control.

JVU: Can you describe for me any changes that you've seen in the festival since you've been involved?

MD: You're talking about the activities of the festival?

JVU: All aspects of the festival.

MD: There's been major changes from the financial end of the festival. I think, about nine years ago, when I first came, we realized that we were one of the top attractions internationally.

In fact we are rated in the top ten super attractions, internationally, and we knew that we had to stop running the festival like a coffee kletz operation, and we had to get serious and become professional. So, it was my task to really organize the business office. I, along with the executive director then, started going out and getting corporate sponsors to help us fund the festival because we knew we could no longer do it on ticket sales alone. We really upgraded our systems, and it paid off.

The other thing we did [was to simplify our literature into a booklet]. The majority--probably 75%--of our tourists are motor coach traffic. It used to be that the [tour companies on the] data base we use to receive literature on the festival, used to get an envelope with thirteen different brochures in it, and they didn't have a clue how to put all this together and order tickets. So, that first summer--I guess it was the second summer I was here--we sat down, just the two of us, the previous director and myself--and we put a tour booklet together which included the information from all these other brochures. [We] decided that if we could make it easy for that group tour leader sitting in [his/her] office out in Pennsylvania, to just fill out an order form and plan the itinerary, then we would get more sales. That was a tremendous success, and from then on we've just made one Tulip Time booklet every year that goes out to about, right now I believe about seventy-five hundred motor coach companies throughout the United States and Canada. So that was another way [we improved] our procedures and increased the sales.

We upgraded a lot of our shows, [and] created dinner theater type shows. We now have up to five different shows where you can enjoy dinner and then watch a performance. The best thing that a group tour leader appreciates, is having to just get her group off the bus once in a three hour period. When you're dealing with senior citizens, and you have to make several stops and get those people on and off the busses, it becomes very difficult, so they really appreciate only having to make one stop, eat dinner, and watch a show.

We've also seen the addition of some more headline entertainment. We're trying to bring in people that will appeal to a broad range of people, not just senior citizens, but local people as well. We've had some successes with that, especially this year with the Smother Brothers coming.

We opened up a new children's area this year, called Kinderplaatz. Again, we've been perceived as a festival for senior citizens, and we wanted to change that. We wanted to have more local people come out for the shows, and to enjoy family activities, so we opened up a children's area with petting zoos, the Art's Council came and did face painting and crafts. We had choirs, clowns, puppet shows, just all kinds of entertainment for kids, and it was a real success. I think these are some key areas of change.

JVU: And you think these changes have been good for the festival overall?

MD: Yes, I do. I know that in this industry, you have to give . . . you have listen to the people that come and you have to listen to your town, and . . . stay current and fresh with ideas, so that you can get the attendance. Another success I do have to mention, is that we've been able to create activity downtown. It used to be that downtown merchants thought that Tulip Time was the worst time of the year for them, so now we're trying to--with Dutch dance and with some evening entertainment--bring people downtown, especially on the Mother's Day weekend, and they've seen a real turn-around in their business.

JVU: Do you think that Dutch pride in Holland is what brought on the Tulip Time festival, or do you think the Tulip Time festival has caused a rise in Dutch pride here in the town?

MD: Well, way back when the Tulip Time festival started, I think--according to my information--is [when] Lida Rogers decided that there should be some kind of a planting of tulips. It started attracting visitors into Holland, and I think people took a lot of pride--the Dutch people at the time--in showing off their town, and the beauty of it, and I think that it just kind of grew

from there. As people started coming to the festival, and started seeing how this town was taken care of, and how proud the people were, all of a sudden, they were here, and what should [we] have them do? So, activities started occurring around the blooming of tulips, and I think it just grew from there. I think pride has a lot to do with it.

JVU: Holland has become more and more ethnically diverse. It's not the pure Dutch that it once was. How do you think that has effected the festival over the years?

MD: I think Tulip Time is for everyone. It's a community celebration. There are no barriers with the tulip; anybody from any nationality or ethnic group can enjoy the tulip. I think we always have to be aware of how our town started, and that it was settled by the Dutch people, and we certainly have to celebrate that, but it doesn't mean that we have to be Dutch to enjoy the activities.

When I look at the entertainment that we provide during the festival, there's really only four or five out of about twenty different opportunities that are really Dutch. The headline entertainment that we bring in, those people aren't Dutch. Most of the shows aren't Dutch, but the parades are-- well, because of the street-scrubbing and because of the Dutch dancers and so forth--but we invite anybody and everybody to participate in the Tulip Time festival. So, I feel that we are very diverse. I think just like a celebration, for example. like Frankenmuth has with their Bavarian festival, you don't have to be German to enjoy that, just like you don't have to be Dutch to enjoy our festival.

JVU: How do you think Holland feels about the tourists that come into the city for the tulip festival, overall?

MD: I'm so involved with the festival, and I love it, that I can put up with the traffic. I know a lot of people like to leave town, they hate all the busses around, and the traffic and the congestion, and getting to work and everything. But then you also have a group of people who sometimes just take their

vacation days during Tulip Time, so that they can become involved and help out, and I really feel that this festival would not be successful if the people in Holland didn't love it. We continue to be successful every year, we continue to always have volunteers that we need. We don't force anybody to join the High School band, we don't force people to join Dutch dance, but look how many turn out every year. So, I think the people that do participate have a ball. We never have trouble getting the churches that do the group meals, to get volunteers to get the meals. I never have trouble finding people to work the information booths. Once you get involved, you get excited and you just love it. Sure there's always going to be the element that don't like it, but fortunately for us I think the majority of the people do.

JVU: Does the Tulip Time Office, when you bring in tour groups and that sort of thing, does the Tulip Time office, depending on the group, point them in either a social direction or a cultural direction?

MD: No. In our tour booklet, it's twenty-four pages of everything you ever wanted to know about Holland, Michigan. It offers all the attractions, all the different shows that are available, the parades, the museums, whatever you want to do, it's all there laid out in front of them, and if they'd like information or assistance in trying to plan things and make it try and fit their budget, we can certainly help them, but it is not our intent to push one event over another. They have all the information and they kind of know what their people would like to do, and they just work with us in putting the itinerary together.

JVU: What sort of experience do you think the tourists have that come to Holland?

MD: Mostly positive. The letters that we get back are incredible. They can't believe how beautiful this town is. They can't believe how the young people come out for this festival, whether it's in a show or Dutch dance, or all the parades. We always get letters on how proud we should be of our community,

because we show such great hospitality during Tulip Time.

JVU: What about as far as Dutch culture goes? Do you think they have an authentic Dutch experience?

MD: You know, that's hard for me to answer too, because I never have really been to the Netherlands. I think for the most part, we're pretty authentic. I know our costumes, and the costumes that we wear during the festival, whether it's in the office or in the parades around town, have to be authentic. They are authentic Dutch costumes. We have attractions in the area that offer a glimpse of what the culture of the Netherlands was like-- I don't believe that it is so much [like] this in the present day. Windmill Island is certainly an authentic Dutch windmill, you know, so they experience what that is like. I think we're just a modern town that took on a celebration of our Dutch culture, and with the tulips and the costumes, I think we're about as accurate as we want to be.

JVU: Do you have any specific memories of past Tulip Time festivals that stand out as particularly memorable or special?

MD: I would have to say, this year--1995 festival--for me, was probably the best that I can ever remember, because of the fact that we had excellent weather, we just had beautiful weather, we had a wonderful schedule of events which included, like I said, the new children's events this year. We had wonderful relationships with the media and our corporate sponsors, and everything was very positive, and it just seemed that it went so smoothly. But I think weather is always a huge factor, and it couldn't have been better this year.

So . . . personally, 1995 was great. I think my very first festival in 1987--I was new on staff, I replaced somebody who had been here nineteen years, and I wasn't trained by anybody. [No one] told me that I was supposed to get riders for the Tulip Time float, and I had no idea that I was supposed to do that, so the very first float in the parade on Wednesday, went through with no riders. I guess I'll always remember that as being a . . . it never happened again. I never had a job

description written down, so it was just kind of like, figure out what you're supposed to do, and that was one thing that got missed.

JVU: Are there any specific people that you associate with the Tulip Time festival, that you've worked with or you know put in an effort year after year?

MD: Sure, there's a lot, and this is hard because you don't want to miss anybody. There are so many people in this town that put out hours and hours of their time to make sure that the festival is successful, and I think I would have to start, number one, with our board of directors. Every person on the board is a volunteer, and it takes a lot of time with monthly meetings and committee meetings, and they are working committees where they actually get out and roll up their sleeves and get to work on what has to be done.

Other people like Barb Appledorn, the Dutch dance director, she is just incredible. She works very, very hard as well as the High School directors and the alumni directors. We've got people like Henry Vander Linde, who works with the bands. He has an incredible history with the festival, so he's a real source of information. Andy Van Slot is another one who's worked with floats for years. Frank Kraai, is a person who is always available as a guide, or as a volunteer. Cal Langejans certainly has been around for years with the show, The Festival Musicale, and also the Tulip Time Salute. There's just so many people that put in hours and hours worth of time and effort to make the festival a success.

JVU: What about historically, some names of people who have helped the festival?

MD: I'm not really qualified to answer that, not growing up in Holland, Michigan. I came here about fifteen years ago, so way back when, I'm not real sure who was around.

JVU: Do you think there has been one specific event in the history of Tulip Time, which allowed the festival to grow the way it has?

MD: Well, I think the number one attraction to me, is the tulips. People come here to see the tulips. Number two: I think it's the Dutch dancers. Any time you have fourteen hundred people that come out in the streets in costume, and dance, that's a huge, huge attraction, and that is one thing that we are noted for worldwide; people know about the Tulip Time Klompen dancers.

I think financially, one of the most successful moves that we've made, was to get an entertaining group like The Stars of Lawrence Welk. They continue to be the number one rated program on cable TV. People always ask us why do [we] keep bringing them back? Well, for years, they accounted for about 60% of our annual budget from their ticket sales. That's changed a bit, because we've reduced some of the shows, and I would say right now that they account for about 20% of our annual budget.

The motor coach groups are right from that era. They enjoyed the Welk show in the sixties and seventies, and it continues to just sell out almost every year.

JVU: Do you see any problems or challenges for the festival at this point? What are maybe some challenges it faces for the future?

MD: Sure, I think we have to stay competitive, because there are so many opportunities out in the tourism industry of places to go. People actually have an unbelievable amount of [choices] like Branson, Missouri, and North Carolina. There's a new community going up there that is similar to Branson, where it attracts a lot of motor coach [tours]. In Michigan alone, there's [hundreds] of festivals, so you constantly have to stay fresh in your industry. We attend a lot of travel and trade shows. We belong to many organizations like The American Bus Association and National Tour Association, that constantly have information available about the groups that they work with.

We have to keep our database current, we have to track who comes each year. We have a system where we can track who's come to the festival over the last five years. Maybe some [group] came in 1992, but they haven't come since, [so] we write

a letter and [invite them to come back]. We have to [stay] very, very competitive in our marketing. We go to a lot of travel and trade shows, and we actually set up our booth, and go in Dutch costume and give out information on the festival, and try to persuade the groups to come.

JVU: What do you feel Tulip Time has meant to Holland?

MD: Tulip Time has meant so much to Holland, and I don't really think the people of Holland understand. I think the challenge for me is to really work hard at communicating what the festival does for Holland, Michigan. I know, and you can get the statistics from about any tourism organization, that the Tulip Time festival has about a six million dollar impact on Holland, Michigan, and about an eleven million dollar impact on West Michigan. We fill hotel rooms, we fill restaurants.

The other thing that I'd really like to communicate, is [that] the money that goes back to this community from the people that work during the festival. People have this notion I think, that when you go to the show, and you pay the money for the ticket, that Tulip Time keeps all the money, and that is probably the most misunderstood issue of the festival. They don't understand that after the festival, after all the money is tallied, the festival keeps enough money to cover operations. But I am writing checks for [thousands] of dollars to Evergreen Commons. I'm giving checks to all the churches who worked with the group meal program. They are making thousands of dollars. The schools are making money because of their participation in Tulip Time Salute show.

The Community Theater is getting [several] thousand dollars after the festival. The flower show, the quilt show, The Cappon House, The Netherlands Museum; all these people [receive] money because of what the tourists pay. The corporate sponsors that work with us are getting the recognition of being tied to a community event, and that is a lot of mileage for them.

When you're a sponsor you don't always need to spend dollars to advertise and put something in the newspaper or

magazine. Connecting with a community event like [the] Tulip Time Festival gives you a lot more mileage in a lot ways than spending money for an ad. So, I think that message, knowing that the money goes back to the people that work with the festival in this community and raises an incredible amount of money for schools and churches and organizations, that's the message that doesn't get out.

I have a couple of Hispanic groups that help us out doing some work during the festival, and every year I write checks for four or five hundred dollars to the groups who come and work with us. The churches provide people for the information booths around town, and I'm giving [hundreds] of dollars to [those] church groups that help us out. Youth groups give us people that we call bleacher patrol. They help the senior citizens up and down the bleachers for the parades. After the festival, I'm writing checks out to their youth groups for [several] hundred dollars. We use Holland High School guides to give a little narrative on our boat cruises. I'm also giving them [hundreds of] dollars after the festival.

I think that is the message that gets missed in this town. They don't understand how [the profit] goes back to the community, and that's what I really want to help communicate not only this year, but in the future.

JVU: What is your favorite part of Tulip Time?

MD: Boy, that's a toughie. My favorite . . . I don't have a favorite part. I think I have a couple [of] things I guess I could say on that. I wouldn't be in this job if I didn't love all the people that I get to meet and get to work with during this festival. I have met so many wonderful people, that are so enthusiastic and so positive, and you feel like you're doing something for your community, and I just love looking at all those people. I also love what I just talked about, writing checks and presenting them to the organizations. Being proud of the fact that we have just the best volunteers in this town, and they come through for us at Tulip Time. They work hard, they

have fun, and they raise money for their group. So I like that.

And then it's also just really a ball during the festival. You work so hard all year, and it finally hits, and you're working sometimes twelve and thirteen hour days, and we're all in the small little office at the Civic Center and it's just an absolute zoo, but we're working hard and there's one problem after another coming up. We get lost people. We get people that miss their bus and accidentally get on a wrong bus, and we're chasing people down to Kalamazoo that should be headed for Traverse City. It's just unbelievable, [and] it's real intense, but it's so much fun, and after the festival is over, it's like this huge let-down. I guess it's all of it. I really love it.

The important thing is for the community to understand what we're all about, and how sure it might be a pain to have to put up with the traffic, but look what the community gets back because of this [event].

-End of Interview-