

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

Interview #11
Mr. Harry Hoekstra
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
28, June 1995

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- Interview w/ Harry Hoekstra @ The Hope - Van Wylen Library
- Pineview Lane / Holland, MI
- June 28, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

Begin Tape 8 : Side A

HH: My name is Harry Hoekstra. I was born in Indonesia, which at that time was the Dutch East Indies, on January 24, 1922.

JVU: How are you associated with Tulip Time?

HH: I was asked to participate one year, to sing a song at the [Dutch Heritage] Show. I didn't know anything about it, but I consented, and so it was four guys--Dutch immigrants--we sang a Dutch song at the show. I took the opportunity to watch the whole show, and afterwards they asked me what I thought of the show, and I said, I just said not too much. So then the next year, somebody called me and asked me if I wanted to coordinate the show, and so this is what I did, and I gave it the name, "The Dutch Heritage Show."

JVU: Now is this the only area of the festival that you've been involved with?

HH: After I quit that, I became a tour guide, and I've done that for several years.

JVU: Are you still doing that today?

HH: This year I didn't do it, because we had a graduation of a granddaughter in Albuquerque, so we were not here for Tulip Time.

JVU: Could you describe for me any changes that you've seen in the festival during the years that you were involved?

HH: We made changes at the . . . the show started in 1940, and I think I started about 1962 or '63, somewhere in there. I directed the show for about twenty-two years. It started in 1940 as a costume show, and this was especially added to Tulip Time to

make money for the people that were in the Netherlands, and had been overrun by the Germans in World War II. So, this was the effort that at least so I was told. Well, when we came there, it was a costume show and it was--I felt--it was pretty dry. We needed a variety show, and I started ut with a lot of Dutch immigrants, and I worked together with a gal with the name Mary Ellen Mrock, and she worked at the time at the Holland Sentinel. She was the narrator, and I got all kinds of ideas what to do to make the show go, and we worked a lot with children, and we had Dutch songs and so on.

Then, after a couple of years, she got married, and she quit, and I took over as director. I came to the conclusion that it would be much better if I would cut out all of the Dutch and keep it Dutch but translate everything in English. So, all the songs--the folk singing, and all these songs--I translated and kept the melodies, but I translated it in English. For the rest, I wanted to keep the show as Dutch as possible, so I insisted on costumes being absolutely worn the way they should be worn, and I insisted whenever a Dutch word were pronounced, it had to be pronounced correct, and we did several games and folk . . . folklore things from a wedding, and from St. Nicholas visit, and all kinds of things that we added to the show, and over the years we dropped some things that we felt that were not that terrific--as the applause would indicate--and we would substitute it with something else. Finally, after twenty-two years, I said I had done it long enough, and that I had fund somebody who was capable and willing to take over, and so that's what happened, and I quit.

JVU: Who took over the show after you?

HH: That was Mrs. Van den Brink. She took over, and she has done it for several years, and she just quit last year.

[Brief discussion : Spelling of name]

HH: I know that she was a parade marshall in the Thursday parade this year. They gave me that honor in 1982.

JVU: Do you think the changes that you were discussing in the Heritage Show were good for Tulip Time?

HH: The show became a very popular show, and we were always sold out. We were one of the first shows that was sold out, and later on I found out that we were the second largest money-maker for Tulip Time. Personally, I felt, why should we be taking money from people at the show, when the costume show, for entrance was fifty cents a person, and so I tried to keep it at fifty cents a person, and I always made the remark: "Don't expect too much, because you're only getting fifty cents worth of a show."

[laughs] Afterwards, a lot of people would come to me and mention that it was worth a lot more than fifty cents. Anyway, by the time I quit, it was five dollars.

JVU: You said originally, the show was to raise money for the Dutch who were under . . .

HH: Under A.S. [German Rule]. Unfortunately at that time, I was still in the Netherlands also. I came here, and I immigrated first to Wisconsin, and later on I lived in Grand Rapids, and later on I got a job here in Holland. So, this is why I got involved in Tulip Time. One of the funny things was that I thought that they didn't want me to participate unless I had a Dutch costume, and so I had to come from the Netherlands to America, before ever I wore a Dutch costume.

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

HH: I cannot say that. In a way, I am very disappointed with the Dutch people, or the people of Dutch descent. To me, it's just a money-making thing. In many ways I am disappointed. I never took any money for being the director of the Dutch Heritage Show. The person after me, right away started charging money. I felt if the community just volunteered their help, and so on, it's

much more spontaneous. What I like to do is bring out the things in which I have my pride.

[Facts and figures of Netherlands shared.]

JVU: What aspects of the Tulip Time festival here, reflect that kind of Dutch pride that you have? Obviously the Heritage Show does. Anything else here in Holland that reflects an authentic, sort of, Dutch experience for the tourists.

HH: Well, maybe the show of the tulips itself. The things that I like the best, is the Klompen dancers. By the way, this is not Dutch. The music is Dutch, but the dancing is absolutely not Dutch. The Dutch, the folk dancing is much tamer than these gals here. I enjoy it here, they kick high. But what shows the Dutch pride? The cleanliness I suppose, the stree-scrubbing and those kind of things. If you come in the Netherlands it right away hits you that windows sparkle, everything is so clean, although that is going down hill. Anyway, that's probably all that I can say.

JVU: The city of Holland, Michigan has become more ethnically diverse. It's not as much of a Dutch community as it once was. How do you think that's effected the festival?

HH: In a way, it strikes my funny bone. I mean, you see a group of Mexicans doing Dutch dance, and you see all of these different nationalities doing something that is supposed to be Dutch.

JVU: Do you regard that as a celebration of the Dutch heritage of Holland, or how do you view that? Is it a positive or a negative?

HH: I see it a little bit as, kids just want to have fun.

JVU: So is that a positive or a negative?

HH: To me it is a negative.

[Brief discussion of ethnicity in the Holland community,
not directly related to the history of Tulip Time.]

JVU: How has [ethnic diversity] effected the festival over the years? Has it had a major effect on the festival at all, on Tulip Time.

HH: To me, the Tulip Time festival in Holland, Michigan, is an American festival. It's not a Dutch festival. As such, you have to take it.

When I first saw the parades, I was kind of disappointed, because in the Netherlands, the floats are decorated with the real flowers. Holland is a flower country, so all the parade floats and everything, they use the real tulips . . . and here it's all paper. Then I talked about it to somebody, and they said, "Yeah, but look how much work people put into it." Then I could appreciate it also, but to me it's still a little bit less than what it is in the Netherlands.

JVU: What do you think Tulip Time . . . means to the city of Holland, Michigan?

HH: I think it's real good for the kids. They have a chance to parade, they have a chance to play in the bands, they have a chance to be Klompen dancers, they have a chance to come out and perform. One High School teacher came to me one time and said, "The kids you have worked with," he said, "they have learned more from the Netherlands by you giving this one show, then I tried to teach for a whole year. You get involved in something and it's always good. Tulip Time has a lot of our children involved, the children of the community, and that's always good.

JVU: Has Tulip Time always been sort of a good educational device you think?

HH: I think so. I think so. I think, on the other hand, I think we could do away with things like the Lawrence Walk Show, and use our own talents, like the Holland Chorale.

[Brief discussion of Holland Chorale, and Lawrence Walk, not directly related to the history of Tulip Time.]

JVU: Do you see that the [community feeling of Tulip Time] has changed quite a bit?

HH: Yes.

JVU: What do you feel it is then, about Holland, Michigan, that has allowed this festival to grow to the size that it's grown to? It's huge for such a small city.

HH: Yeah, you've got to respect that. I think it's quite good, but I have a feeling--maybe I'm critical, but--I have a feeling that it's going down hill--the quality of the festival.

JVU: How long have you seen this happening for?

HH: Going down you mean? Oh, I would say the last four or five years.

JVU: I past years, when you were involved with the show, do you see any growth in the show?

HH: Yes, yes.

JVU: In what areas?

HH: Attendance. We started out in the old building which was used [as] the Salvation Army . . . used to be the First Reformed Church--in the basement there. Later on . . . we went into the Women's Lit Club, then we went into the basement of the Civic Center. Then, we were in one of the side halls of the Civic Center. Finally we got into the Civic Center, and several times I was able to fill it up. Then Lawrence Walk came, and then we had to get out, so then they gave us the Holland Christian auditorium; the auditorium that's in the Holland Christian High School. That's what we have . . . I guess we still have it there today. That holds, I believe, eight hundred and fifty people or something like that, and we always filled it up.

JVU: What other areas of the festival did you notice any growth in during the years you were involved?

HH: Attendance over all. It was attendance. I have a feeling, as a tour guide, that the busses for instance, the tour busses, the coaches, is down. There's less of them coming. I don't know

in other things. I think the shows are still very well attended, but maybe it's me just getting older [laughs].

[Brief discussion of tour guides and tourists.

Not directly related to the history of Tulip Time.]

JVU: Do you think the tourists have a positive experience?

HH: Yes, in a certain [way]. The trouble is, I'm Dutch, and I see for instance the signs of Windmill Island. The sails: They have these little signs on different street corners and so on that direct you to how you get to Windmill Island. Now they show the sails of a mill; they're backwards. I mean that hits me. And American doesn't know the difference, but a Dutchman sees that and says, "Why couldn't you for the same money, do it right?" Then I walk through town, and they have all the provincial flags and so on, and many of them are upside down.

I see the Dutch flag, the Dutch national flag certain places, upside down. That irritates me. Then for instance, they have "Pretplantz" which is spelled the German way, with a "z" on the end instead of an "s." It's a little thing, but to me why not do it right. There are so many Dutch people here, why not ask somebody, "How do you spell that word?"

"Kinderplantz" they had this year. They spelled it with a "z" on the end. It should be spelled with an "s" on the end. These are all things, just little things, but they happen to irritate me.

JVU: This next question deals with what you're talking about here I think. What level of authenticity do you think the tourists experience here as far as Dutch culture goes?

HH: Way down.

JVU: Even at Windmill Island and the tourist attractions, because I know the manager at Windmill Island . . .

HH: Yeah it was Jaap deBlecourt. He did his best. For instance, there again, they have the little Netherlands thing, where you go

in and they show you. You know, it's a miniature thing where you have canals and little things are moving and so on. All the windmills are going the wrong way. They go clockwise instead of counter-clockwise. Every windmill goes counter-clockwise. Every Dutchman knows it, so if I have Dutch friends over, I'm kind of ashamed to take them there, because the first thing they say, "You see that windmill is going the wrong way!"

JVU: Are there any aspects of the festival, any parts of the festival, any of the festival events that throughout the years you were involved, you felt really reflected the Dutch Heritage? Besides your show obviously.

HH: Yes, the original ideas were good. Like the street-scrubbing and so on. Through the times, things have changed. It used to be that the street scrubbing in the Netherlands, a woman would come out of her house, and have just a little steps in the front, and they would scrub them off. That was all, and here they go down the streets, scrubbing the streets. You never see that in the Netherlands; that's not Dutch. You have to come up with something, so scrub the street. Actually, it's just the steps or the sidewalk in front of your store or something that's being scrubbed, and that is being cleaned by the people, the merchants or the people that live in the house. They would just do that little piece in front of their house. More of those kind of things. I cannot think of too many things, but the parades I think are great, and the Klompen dancing is a good thing. Actually, the Klompen dancing I have seen in America, I like better, because I like it a little bit livelier, kicking up the feet. It's more upbeat than the Klompen dancing in the Netherlands, but if you say is it authentic: no it is not.

[More discussion of Dutch culture.
Not directly related to Tulip Time.]

JVU: Since you've been a tour guide, and you've had to deal with tourists, can you describe to me some of the things that people have mentioned to you through the years about the city, and also about the festival?

HH: People come with all kinds of questions, and it's good to know a lot of answers.

JVU: What would be an example of some of the questions?

HH: How much are these homes worth? How many tulips are growing in this town? Those kind of things.

[List of questions.]

JVU: What are some of the comments they make about the festival?

HH: That depends on the people you have. I had a group from Chicago that was very critical, nothing was nice. Most people really like the town, it's a nice town, it's a neat town, everything looks so good. Many make the remark that they see so many churches in this town, and those kind of things. Then again, I can give the answer: there are eighty-seven, eighty-eight churches in this town, twenty-four, twenty-five denominations or something like that. That's close, and I can give them some kind of answer. You have to know your town, and be a little proud of it to tell them about the town.

I tell them about the accomplishments of several of our people, like Ed Prince, and the Padnos family, and so on, and what they have accomplished.

JVU: Do you have any memories of past Tulip Times that stand out as particularly memorable, or maybe special events?

HH: Not really.

[Brief anecdote of Mr. Hoekstra being mistaken for Don Knotts by a Tulip Time visitor.]

JVU: Are there any specific people that you associate with the history of Tulip Time?

HH: Yes. Lida Rogers, the lady who got the idea, and Sharon Koops for instance. Certain people that have been very active: Mary Ellen Mrock. We had the greatest fun working together, and later on she became Mary Ellen Stevenson when she got married, and she worked for a little while yet, and then she had to move out of town. Afterwards for a couple years, she came back.

[Brief discussion not related to the history of Tulip Time.]

HH: (continuing on with names of those Mr. Hoekstra associates with Tulip Time) Those are the kind of things that stand by. Some people that we worked together with; John Karsten himself. He's a great guy.

JVU: What about Bill Wichers? Did you ever have any . . .

HH: Oh, yeah! Bill Wichers did a lot for Tulip Time. Yes, and I have great respect for Bill Wichers, especially for what he has done for the museum and so on. There on, I am a [guide] at the museum, so I see what he has accomplished, and all the things that he has collected over the years for the museum and so on. Bill Wichers [was] a terrific, great guy.

JVU: Just to get back to Lida Rogers for a moment. Do you think the ideas she had initially, do you think they were in line with some of the ideas of Tulip Time--I don't if Tulip Time is called Tulip Time in the Netherlands or not--but do you think the ideas that she had, are similar to the ideas that people in the Netherlands share with this type of program; a community program?

HH: See, the Netherlands, they raise tulips, and the whole idea is to sell tulips, and to export tulips. So, there's Keukenhof. There's a beautiful park, and when you go there, you'd just amazed how beautiful it is, and all those tulips are blooming and they have rock gardens with real tiny daffodils and tulips and all those things. If you look good, you see that every bed--you

know and the beautiful trees, and you have ponds, and streaming water, and all those things. You have swans in them, and fish, all things to make it beautiful; different kinds of ducks. Very interesting to wander there, and everywhere you see and you see a whole bunch of tulips, and they plant them always in groups, in large groups because that's the most attractive. That's one thing of Tulip Time here in Holland. They just put little line of tulips along the street. That is not as effective as if you have big groups of tulips together you know, in beds. Anyway, but if you see in the Netherlands, and then you see suddenly a little marker there, and it says for instance, "Nelis," and that's the grower. They advertise, "These are my tulips." and they are in the park, and this is a combination of growers, and they have this park, and there you see the name of so and so, and there you see the name of so and so. They want these names to stick with you, so that when you go home, and you want to have tulips, and you get a catalog with that company that you say, "Oh yeah, I've seen those tulips, they were beautiful," so I order from those guys. This is the whole purpose of the tulip festival in the Netherlands. There is no parades or actually no nothing, or shows, or anything, it's just the tulips that they show. So, this is not a festival, it's just showing their flowers.

JVU: What would be something that you would be able to tell me about the history of Tulip Time, that possibly nobody else would be able to tell me?

-End side A-

Interview with Harry Hoekstra (cont'd)Begin Tape #8 : Side B

HH: (discussing his personal take on Tulip Time) I said, I am over there [The Queen's Inn], and you get menu or something, and there is a sign, and it's wrong, I mean it's spelled wrong. Why? Why not double check, and there are so many people here of Dutch descent, or people that have been to the Netherlands, that grew up in the Netherlands, they know what the correct spelling is, or they know how things are done; why not take advantage of that?

You have things in the Netherlands for instance on a building, or make sure that there is an article in the paper, or you know some labels or something there that explains what it means and what it is for.

JVU: What has Tulip Time meant to you year after year? What do you see Tulip Time as standing for in Holland, Michigan?

HH: Tulip Time, to me, is the merchants of Holland trying to make a lot of money, and in the second place, kids having lot of fun. Kids doing a lot of stuff, and a lot of entertainment. Also, I think a lot of people are having a good time.

JVU: What is your personal favorite part of the Tulip Time festival?

HH: My favorite part is . . . I like the business of it. There are many, many people, and I like talking to people. You meet a guy from California, you meet a guy from Canada, and you meet a guy from Texas, and I always ask them: first I like to know where they are from, what makes them tick, what kind of job they have, what kind of an apartment they come from, what kind of town they live in--tell me something. I like to pick up where they come from, and I kind of enjoy seeing these people from all over, and all different dresses, all different races, all different colors, all different people, and just enjoying themselves, taking pictures of the most pretty things. I kind of like that.

I like to be, for instance--if I don't have a tour--I just like to walk through Eighth Street and if I see people

asking each other questions, I say, "Maybe I can help you?" and you know, give them the information that they want. I like just all these strangers come in, and being entertained.

JVU: That's all the questions I have for you. If there's anything else you'd like to talk about or share . . .

HH: No, I don't think so. Like I said, I'm a stickler for certain things, and windmills have to go counter-clockwise, Dutch songs should be sung this way because that was the melody. But then again, why sing it in Dutch if you can do it in English so other people can understand the meaning of it.

One thing that happened to me one time: I walked in my Dutch costume in Centennial park, and there were a couple Canadians--Dutch-Canadians--and they saw me and they said, "There goes another Volendammer that cannot speak a word of Dutch." and I just turned around and started to speak the most fluent Dutch I know. So that made them stand flabbergasted for a minute. They didn't know that there would be an American guy who could speak a little Dutch.

-End of Interview-