

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

Interview #19
Mrs. Sharon Koops
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
17, July 1995

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- Interview w/ Sharon Koops @ her cottage
- 18 East 12th Street / Holland, Michigan 49423
- July 17, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

Begin Tape 13 : Side A

SK: My name is Sharon Koops, I was born right here in Ottawa County and I was born on [date removed], 1942. Puts me over the hill. [laughs]

JVU: Not now days. What is the nature of your association with Tulip Time?

SK: It's related in several ways. Number one: I am a Receptive Operator, meaning that I bring motor coaches into Michigan and the majority of this business is of course done during Tulip Time festival. So I bring motor coaches into Michigan and a receptive operator means that I take care of their hotels, I take care of their meals, I take care of their attractions, their activities, they get maps, et cetera, everything that will make their trip into Holland smooth. I also take care of the guide program for the tulip festival, meaning I have fifty to a hundred guides that are trained to hop on a motor coach and lead a group through the downtown area, through the Holland area, and give them some history and background on the tulip festival, as well as Holland area in general.

I also take care of the Trolley guides, which mean the guides that go during the festival--it's strictly a ten-day period for those--they go on the trolleys and they're basically the HASP people; let's see, Hope Association of Retired Professors, something to that effect anyway . . .

JVU: Senior Professionals?

SK: Yeah. Okay, so I also work with them and get them organized to go on the trolley. Then we have the cruises that go out of

Kollen Park, and I work with the forensics students from Holland High and get that organized, and help do some training and some planning on that. Now that is just a new thing to my part of working with tulip festival, but with the guides, I've been with them for eighteen--give or take--years. I took two years off and now I'm back helping, doing that program again.

JVU: What other areas of the festival . . . have you been involved with?

SK: As a participant, I've been in the parades all my life because I've lived in Holland all my life. Kindergarten, we had to hold sticks and walk in the parade, and then as you got bigger, you got to make your own thing, which is typical of the Children's Parade; making the things that go in the parade, so I've made my own pinwheels and I've made my own everything.

[Brief discussion about parade, that is not directly related to the Oral History of Tulip Time.]

SK: So I've been in the parades all my life. I've lived in . . . well I lived just past the hospital as a kid growing up, and at that time, the hospital hill--as we called it--which is now part of the new hospital, was a great big planting, similar to the planting behind the library. It was a big planting on the side of the hill, and they used to have stands going up where . . . oh it was just as popular as the Herrick planting [is]. And so as a kid, my sisters and I would go and sit there in our Dutch costumes, we always managed to make enough money to get an ice cream cone or maybe a new pair of wooden shoes or something. It was kind of like I started child labor a little early. [laughs]

So yeah, I go way back. Then, I had an uncle that was with Jaycees--I think it was--and they had the Nelis Tulip farms out here on Lakewood Boulevard, so as I got a little older, I would go and help in their booth and help sell novelties and stuff, so I guess I go quite a ways back with Tulip Time.

JVU: How do you feel about the tourists that come into Holland,

Michigan during Tulip Time?

SK: I think it's fantastic. I think it's a great education for the kids, in particular the High School kids. I think it's wonderful. I think it's neat that we've got this festival, that we've got a town that's beautiful. I really think it's neat. I guess if it was like some of the things like Branson that goes on day after day after day, I'd probably talk different, but it's ten days, it's wonderful.

The people that you get to meet, having your homes open--oh that's back as a kid, something else, my folks used to open up the home for tourists coming in, and we always had a family or one or two bedrooms that we have people coming in. I've had pen pals for years from some of these things. I guess I get a little frustrated with people that say, "Well, Tulip [Time] is coming up, I'm going out of town." I don't think they realize what they're missing as far as the parades, the shows that go on, the meeting of the people; just the socialization that goes with it. I love it, and you haven't seen where I live, but I live right next to where the old museum used to be, so I'm right in the heart of the mess. [laughs]

You don't take your car out on Saturday morning after ten o'clock in the morning; you walk, this type of thing. It's wonderful, and you know it's approximately ten days--give or take. It's wonderful, I really like it.

JVU: So you've seen tourism in Holland for a long time, and now you deal directly with the tourists. What sort of changes have you seen in the tourist scene at Tulip Time? How does it compare then to now?

SK: I think originally, the tulip festival was individual traveler; your family, my family taking us kids out for a day, maybe over night, not much with staying overnight in hotels. I think a lot of it was done camping, maybe at a State Park type thing. But it was a day in, maybe two days in, and it was done by individual car, the individual travelers we call it. Today's world, so much more is done by motor coach. Especially over 55,

over 60; they tend to go by motor coach, travel by motor coach. We had some motor coaches in that day and age, but not a lot. I mean, when I started doing the guide program, if I had guides on maybe--I probably had five guides--so that gives you an indication of what the need was even, you know.

Now, we have forty-five, fifty guides to a hundred guides that I have available during that time. We're servicing probably, maybe . . . in the area of five hundred coaches, and we're still not touching all the coaches. At that time--eighteen years ago, give or take--when I had five guides available, they were probably servicing forty-five, maybe fifty max, coaches. So, I think motor coaches have come on the scene, and bring masses of tourists in, where before it was more congestion with the individual cars coming in.

JVU: Has it always been a volunteer program, the guides that you use?

SK: It's volunteer as such that the pay is not minimum wage, but it's the next thing to it. I feel very strongly on paying the guide. If that guide wants to take those wages and turn them back to the Tulip festival, or give them to their favorite charity, that's fine. But I feel very strongly to give them some self-esteem and some self-satisfaction, that they have to be paid. It's a tough job. It sounds like peaches and cream, it sounds like a lot of fun, but it's a hard job. You have to be a nurse maid, you have to know first aid, you have to have the patience of Job. You know, there's a lot that goes with it.

[Brief discussion of guide duties, i.e. directions home.

Not directly related to Tulip Time.]

JVU: What kind of experience do you think the tourists have that come here? Not just whether they have a pleasant or unpleasant experience, but as far as the cultural side of Tulip Time goes, the Dutch experience?

SK: I think they are extremely pleased. I think they just really--oh I can't think of the word I'd like to use. They're very, very impressed with the cleanliness of Holland. They're sure that we cleaned up just for this

festival, and we tell them about clean-up week in the spring and in the fall. "You do this just because we're coming right?" No, you can come in June, you can come in July, and you're going to see Holland looking the same way. Maybe not the same amount of tulips, but you're going to see Holland looking the same way.

They're very impressed with the young people. Very impressed with the young people. The Dutch dancers, the bands, Tulip Time Salute, the different programs that the kids are involved in. Living End singers up at "I Believe in America" up at Central Wesleyan. They're just extremely impressed, and I've got a letter . . . from people that say this. I had a lady this year that sent a letter to me stating how impressed she was with the organization that I had done, as well as with the organization of the festival, and in that was four envelopes--sealed envelopes--and she asked if I would take care of putting addresses on these. There were stamps on them, they were sealed, and one had West Ottawa High School, one had Holland High, one had Holland Christian, and one had Zeeland. She was so impressed with Tulip Time Salute, and what the young people had done in Tulip Time Salute, that she wanted me to see to it that they got to each of the High Schools.

I think that they see their grandchildren, who are living in some of the areas and some of the larger towns, that are running pretty wild, and I think they're just extremely impressed with our young people. You know, Holland's not perfect. I know that, I'm not naive, but they still see a lot of fantastic young people. I think they're very impressed. I think they're very impressed with the organization, that a town of this size can pull off a festival like this. The churches that serve meals, the schools that serve meals, how much of this is--I make a pan of brownies and donate it to the church, so that the church can make the profits to have some other program going on. Same thing in Holland Christian Schools. You know, I think they're very impressed with the togetherness of the festival, the community effort.

JVU: Can you describe some of the sentiments that the tourists express to you?

SK: Well, I think they're extremely impressed with the people being so sensitive to senior needs. They're impressed with the fact that we have parking for them. I know the motor coach drivers in particular love coming to Holland, as far as that goes, because they can bring their seniors right up to the bleachers. They can drop them right off in front of the Dutch dancers. They get to Washington, D.C., and they can barely get into the town. Our police: they love our police.

[Brief discussion of Holland Police force.

Not directly related to Tulip Time.]

SK: They love the tulip lanes. They can't believe that vandalism doesn't just wipe out all the tulips. "How can you keep them looking so good? so clean? so neat? Our town would never . . . last through the growth of the tulips." So, I think, overall, they're just very impressed, and of course Dutch cleanliness has a lot to do with it.

JVU: What are some of the areas of the festival, that you specifically make sure your groups see? Does it change for each group?

SK: It changes for each group, but in my particular business, as well as with the tour guides, my little spiel--which I'll give you--is: Where else in the United States can you see a two hundred and twenty-five year [old], plus windmill, as well as go up into it and tour it? Where else in the United States can you watch them make and paint blue delft? And only one other place in the United States, can you watch them make wooden shoes. Now doesn't that sound like a place you'd like to visit?

So those are a couple of the things; Windmill Island I feel is extremely important. I think it's got a lot of history. I think the tulip gardens are fantastic; acres and acres, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty acres of tulips. The delft factory . . . is fantastic. I'd just give my eye teeth if I could just sit there and visit at the same time I'm painting, and socializing with the people, and just make it look like something. [laughs]

Then, we usually . . . take them on a tour of the town, which takes you downtown--where else do you see "street melt" working? I mean there's only one other town that's really got street melt, let alone the working part of it, and otherwise you've got to go to other countries like Sweden to see that. So that's a real big note for the people.

JVU: Do you think that Dutch pride is what brought on Tulip Time, or do you think that Tulip Time has sort of recreated a sense of Dutch pride in the people of Holland?

SK: Well, Lida Rogers started the tulip festival, and she did it because she wanted the students to have a project--a beautification project--for the students to donate or to give, or to contribute to their citizens. Then, I think it just blossomed on, and the pride of the people, and I guess at that time, the majority were Dutch. I don't think it has anything to do with being Dutch, I think it was community pride. I don't think it has anything to do with being Dutch or Spanish or anything, I think it's just community pride that started it out. It just happened to be the Dutchmen that did it. I think it's just a community pride type thing more than anything.

JVU: Well, the Holland community has become more ethnically diverse in recent years. How have you seen that effect the festival, and also, the tourist trade?

SK: I don't really think it's effected the tourist trade or made a lot of

difference there. I think if you're going to come in for a festival, whether you're red, blue, green, or purple, you're going to come in for a festival. I think it makes a little difference on the participants, because I think we've tried hard to include all ethnic groups in the festival. But I don't think it makes a big difference whether what race or color, or where I'm from, as to whether I'm going to go to that festival or not.

[Brief discussion of ethnicity and festivals.
Not directly related to history of Tulip Time.]

JVU: What about the situation of ethnic diversity in Holland; a lot of minorities moving into the area. Do you think that's effected the Tulip Time festival?

SK: I guess I haven't seen it making a big impact. I have heard from some of the groups that have been in, that they would like to see strictly the blonde Dutch people participating, but I don't think Holland will ever let that happen. I hope not. I don't think you have to be Dutch to participate in Tulip Time. I think it's an open festival. I guess I'd like to see it stay as a Dutch festival, as a tulip festival. I think the Dutch part of it is what's the uniqueness of it.

I mean you can go see tulips in Indiana. Canada has a tulip festival. You could go see tulips a lot of places, but to get the Dutch Heritage show, you know the people that are so devoted, they just donate their time to put this show on. To get Dutch food. Some of the programs, some of the shows, the parade--I mean where else can you go and see a parade where they put these crazy costumes on and scrub the streets? You don't get a parade like that very often, and I think that is more important than worrying who can be involved in it. If you want to--as my husband would say--if you want to be silly enough to put on a Dutch costume and go in the parade, and scrub those streets, more power to you. Who cares what color you are, or what your nationality is.

I guess I don't have a problem with that. I'm sure there's people in town that do, but I don't have a problem with that as long as you can keep it a community project, the way it started out to be.

JVU: Do you have any specific memories of Tulip Time, or Tulip Times past, that stand out as particularly special, that might shed some light on what the history of Tulip Time is all about?

SK: I don't know if it's historic, but about fifteen years ago, we had a stem festival.

JVU: A stem festival?

SK: A stem festival! The tulips were all, all, all gone by the time Tulip

Time came. Oh my goodness. It was about fifteen years ago.

If you could ever be a guide on a motor coach, and the hardest thing ever is to walk on and be positive about nothing but stems anymore. We had had real hot weather, and it was windy--it was like we had last week, with eighty, ninety degrees--and on top of it, we had wind, and the rain that we did get--which was very little--came when the heat was there, and of course rain, when the tulips are open in full bud, just takes those leaves right off. The only tulips that were left around, were what Dutch Village had picked when they realized what was starting to happen and Veldheer's had a few, and they picked and refrigerated them, and they'd bring them out at like ten o'clock in the morning when the major crowds came, and they set them in the shade, in a refrigerated area, or in a cooler type thing, and you could see them. That's my nightmare of Tulip Time.

We plant early tulips, late tulips, and regular tulips, so I've had that there's strictly early tulips in bloom, or there's strictly the late tulips left--which are sporadic--but that was the worst year that we had no tulips. There were no tulips, so we just very positively got on the coaches and said, "Welcome to the stem festival." You might as well make light of it right away, because there isn't a thing we can do about it. The people were so wonderful, so wonderful. They would all come and kind of give you a hug, and say, "Look, we've been to the Cherry Blossom festival, and we've never seen cherry blossoms yet, and we've been there years and years and years. We live just a little way away, so don't worry about it, you know. There's nothing you can do about it."

So the people were wonderful, but it was just a nightmare. That was the hardest Tulip Time; I'll never forget it, ever.

JVU: Are there any specific people that through the years, you associate with Tulip Time?

SK: Oh, yeah. Betty Dick with the Dutch dancers, and she's just a goal post for the Dutch dancers. Now Barb Appledorn is going to be having that same image. My neighbor, Nels Bosman--passed away a couple of years ago--but he was involved, and he was not only Mayor of Holland, but we lived right by Nels, and for years he took care of the speaker system in Centennial Park; getting the speakers set up in the park, and listening to them practice and rehearsal. He would always take his little truck and drive into the center of the park, and make sure that the sound systems were just perfect. Yeah, he stands out in my mind pretty heavily.

Oh, for years, Jim DeGraaf. I've worked with Jim DeGraaf on the board, and Jim DeGraaf has been a pretty stable sight for Tulip Time, and of course his dad, Jake DeGraaf, who was with the Parks Department. There again, living where we did, right by Centennial Park and the museum, Jake was always

walking around making sure all the tulips were literally tucked fine, and looking good, and all the weeds were out of the beds. Jake stands out pretty much in my mind, making sure that Centennial Park and all the lanes were just groomed to perfection.

There's a lot more I'm sure, if I just set my mind to it. Those are some of the ones. Well, Pauline Vander Kooi for years was with the Tulip Time office. That's when I started out, when she was there, and she ran the business office, pretty much so herself year round, and then she had about five of us that helped her part time; one with housing, I was doing the guides, one with ticketing, but we came on kind of part time throughout the year, and helped out a little more when it got closer to Tulip Time. Now, it's grown so much that Tulip Time has--what do they have? One, two, three full time employees, and then some that are like three fourths of the year employees, compared to when Pauline did it, when she was by herself in the office year round and then a few of us just came on. That's another good growth point. I mean it's really come a long way. I guess those are some of the people. Like I say, I know there's some I'm sure I'm missing because . . . Andy Van Slot is another one that's just been an old timer there that just keeps coming back. Just loves it, and last year he started out being a festival guide. Once it gets in your blood, you're hooked.

[Brief discussion of family involvement.

Not directly related to the history of Tulip Time.]

JVU: What is your favorite part of Tulip Time?

SK: The last night. [laughs] No. I don't know, there's so many things I like. The hype of it all. I like meeting people. I like organizing the things that go with it. I like seeing the self-satisfaction of pulling these things off. When you work for months and months, getting all the little behind the scene things, and then to say, "YES! I did it! Oh wow, look, it turned out better than what I ever dreamed."

I don't know, I don't think there's any one thing that's my favorite. I'll have to give that a little thought. After you leave, I'm sure I'll say, "Oh, that was dumb, why didn't you think of that?" Probably the beauty of it. There's just nothing prettier than a Tulip Time that's perfect, and this year was one of them. The flowering trees were in bloom, the tulips, the early tulips were out, the regular tulips were out, and the late tulips were out. The flowering trees were just gorgeous. We'd had enough rain that the grass was green. And then that pride of saying, "Yeah, come on into town and see it. I don't care if you don't spend a dime, just come and enjoy it

with me. It's gorgeous."

I guess I feel like I don't have time to take time to smell the flowers as they say, because I'm so busy, but every once in a while I'll be riding around and say, "Okay just take a little ride; enjoy it; forget all the busyness; just take a half hour off and look around. Probably that's the best part of it. The cheapest part of it is probably the best part. It's Centennial Park when they get all the pots in, and like I say, we've lived there for thirty-some years looking out over the park, and when it's in its finery, hey, Holland is . . . there's just not words to describe it. If it's not a stem festival.

-End of Interview-