

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

Interview #16  
Mr. Steve Zwiep  
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:  
Jason Valere Upchurch  
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- Interview w/ Steve Zwiep @ The Joint Archives of Holland
- 94 East 30th Street / Holland, MI 49423
- July 14, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

Begin Tape 12 : Side A

SZ: Steve Zwiep, [date removed], 1953, right here in Holland, Michigan in Holland hospital.

JVU: What is the nature of your association with the Tulip Time festival?

SZ: I work for the city of Holland, and my title for the city of Holland, is City Gardener, and in the fall, me and my partner plant the tulips that are in downtown Holland and the downtown Holland area, including the transportation center, all main street parking lots, and a few other places that we do. My foreman is mainly in charge of it. We have a set thing where bulbs are planted every year, and we try and follow that same color scheme every year.

JVU: You've also been involved with the festival beyond your work with the city?

SZ: Well, being born in Holland, ever since I was five years old in the school systems, they had us march in the Children's Parade until I was about maybe twelve I guess, I marched in the parades. I wasn't in the High School band or anything like that, so I didn't go beyond that. I remember marching, carrying paintings down the street, copies of Rembrandt, paintings of Rembrandt and I don't know who else, Van Gogh and things like that.

JVU: As far as your work for the city goes, has that gone through any changes through the years, or has that throughout [your] history of Tulip Time remained the same?

SZ: I'm not quite sure when Tulip Time started. It started with some lady, and I forget her name, and that's terrible thing, but it was back in the 1930's when she started it, and the city got

involved. Since the city got involved, they expanded the tulip lanes. Right now there's about eight miles of tulip lanes, and that's been constant for maybe the last ten, fifteen years or so. They've changed some of the routes where the tulip lanes went through. One tulip lane used to go down through Columbia Avenue, and they dropped that route, and they added other places further along Twenty-eighth Street, Central Avenue, and Van Raalte Avenue. Every other year, the tulip lanes get changed, the bulbs along the streets get changed.

Certain areas, like most of our parks, I said downtown Holland, the high visibility areas, the tulips are planted every year so that the bulbs are fresh, so we have a good showing of color.

JVU: So, has it gone through that many changes over the years?

SZ: They used to dig up the tulip lanes every fall. We still dig them up every fall. The big difference is that we buy the bulbs in from the Netherlands, but what they do used to do, is they would dig them, throw the dirt into a truck, take it to a central area, and put them in big screens, shake the dirt off, and sort the bulbs; what good bulbs they could find. Some of the bulbs would be cut in digging, so those bulbs would be discarded. One problem with that is you had to know exactly where one variety started, and the next one stopped, so that you wouldn't mix colors. I think what they finally found out was that it was very time consuming to sort those bulbs. Right now, I think the city, they put the bulb order out, the bid goes to the lowest bidder, and I think it costs them about fifteen cents a bulb is what we pay, roughly. Back when they stopped this . . . they could probably get bulbs for eight or nine cents, and they finally figured out that it was a lot cheaper, and--adding the amount of tulip lanes they did--that they could go faster by buying them from the Netherlands and just take the dirt, discard the dirt and bulbs, and put in fresh bulbs wherever they had to plant them. That was one thing that changed.

JVU: [Lida Rogers] started the festival as sort of a community, Civic Beautification program, and also something that could create

a sense of community in Holland; something everybody could do together. How does the work that you do now, sort of reflect the old ways of Tulip Time? Does it?

SZ: Probably what happened, and this is just conjecture on my part, is when she started this thing, City Hall at one point and time thought and saw that they had a good thing going when tourists started coming in, so they wanted to expand it, and the city, the street department, the park department probably took over some of the functions that were done by volunteers back then. In that aspect, we're continuing that that certain essential things for Tulip Time are done on time. The week that Tulip Time comes, or the prior two weeks actually when Tulip Time comes, we're busy taking potted tulips that we put on the floats, running them into coolers so they don't advance any further so that they're nice and fresh on the floats; running tulip bouquets here. I've got to cut for the floats, the people that ride the floats, the grand marshals and celebrities that come to Holland and other functions for the city of Holland. I've got to cut about fifteen to eighteen hundred tulips every year, that we store in our cooler and we wrap up in bouquets, and we pass those out to people on the parade route or whatever. I don't know how that all got started, but somebody thought, "Hey, wouldn't it be nice to have a bouquet of flowers." Well, one person sees it, and says, "Well why didn't I get one?" So the next year they've got to have one, and the whole thing snowballs, and the more and more people get involved wanting those things.

Right now, in the city of Holland, I guess there's over seven thousand volunteers--the Dutch dancers and other people--that are involved with Tulip Time, to help it go smoothly. The tour guides and everything else, and it is quite a community event.

[Brief discussion of the actions of  
Holland Area Beautiful group.]

JVU: Does the city, since they pay so much attention to color

scheme and that sort of thing when they plant the tulips, does the city . . .

SZ: My foreman, Cal DeBoer, he's mainly in charge of . . . every Tulip Time, or week of Tulip Time, or just right after Tulip Time, he and my superintendent, Bernie Hibma, they drive around the tulip panes, and they see what needs to be replaced, and they order the colors what they think they need, according to the placement, and . . . he looks at the color, and says, "Oh, we have this and we have this," and he goes down the street and . . . he tries to keep them fairly color coordinated, but . . . there's so many colors, and you start using one variety and you'll get long on another variety that you haven't used a lot, and you rush in there . . . and you throw these in. Sometimes it's just a hodge-podge and sometimes it's colorful.

[Brief discussion of tulip breeds.]

JVU: The Willard Wichers tulip: is that just something recognized by Holland, Michigan, or is that . . .

SZ: I think what happens there--well, they have the Hillary Clinton tulip, for the first lady--what they do, is the breeders over there, they take the tulips that go for certain characteristics, and they say, "Okay, this is what we want," and they try to develop a tulip in that way. That's how Willard Wichers developed, is that they went to the breeders, or went to their supplier and said, "We'd like a tulip in honor of Willard Wichers," and so they went and developed a tulip in the name of Willard Wichers. I don't think it's a world-wide phenomenon or in the Netherlands, but it's probably just more in honor of Willard Wichers who had a lot to do with the Tulip Time festivities, and instrumental in getting the DeZwaan windmill over here.

JVU: Does the city park department . . . do anything over at Windmill Island?

SZ: Well, we're under one roof so to speak. Our manager, our boss, is Curtis Wright, and when he came--he came here five years ago--

they combined Windmill Island and the Rec Department, Cemetery and Park Department under one roof, and that was all under Curtis Wright's control. And, with looking at how Windmill Island operates . . . I think, they'll probably--the grounds/maintenance will probably--be under the Park Department. Right now, Windmill Island is self-sufficient. They more or less have their own management infrastructure over there, that they take care of their own.

JVU: How has the involvement of the tulip farms here changed?

SZ: Tulip farms like Veldheer, Nelis? We haven't done a whole lot with them, except the last years, Nelis tulip farm put a bid in [on] the tulips that we get to plant in the streets and boulevards and stuff. They were awarded that bid I think the last two years, but most of the bulbs they get come from the Netherlands, because Mr. Nelis--the man who owns Nelis Tulip Farm right now--has relatives in the Netherlands who have big tulip farms in the Netherlands, and they work on a deal and he can get his bulbs cheaper from the Netherlands, and that's how he gets the bid. That's really all we have to do with them. We really don't as far as I know, go over there. Maybe my boss, Bernie, maybe goes over there and contacts them, but I don't think he does that much. We don't have much to do with them. I know they're big and they get a lot of tourists over there buying their bulbs.

JVU: So you'd say their involvement hasn't changed much? They've always been more of a tourist attraction?

SZ: Yeah, they have more of a tourist attraction. Well, they're a business, so their motivation is profit, which it should be . . . Tulip Time business in Holland, helped their business grow, because their tulips bloom the same time as ours.

[Brief discussion of tulip farms.]

SZ: For the city of Holland alone, we probably have four hundred thousand tulips, estimated, that come up every year.

JVU: And has that number grown steadily since the beginning of

Tulip Time?

SZ: I think it has. Since I've been working with the Park Department, which has been six years, that number has been roughly the same. With the addition of the Padnos Transportation Center--they put in new flower beds there--and they wanted a bunch of tulips, they wanted tulips in those beds there. That has added about ten thousand tulips to the total. We plant about eighteen thousand tulips around the Padnos Transportation Center alone, which is quite a few tulips. Downtown Holland area gets about twenty-five thousand tulips.

JVU: What are some changes that you have seen in the festival since you've been--well, you've lived in Holland all your life I guess.

SZ: The changes? I think what I see, is that . . . well, one change is that we have Tulip Time Incorporated, which runs the Tulip Time show, and they're the ones that set up events and get the parades organized and everything else, and organize bus tours, The Lawrence Welk Show. I'm not sure who ran it before, who did all that before, but that's one thing. They try to put it in their hands, and let them run it so that the city involvement isn't as much. The city cooperates with them, helps them out because there are city officials sitting on the Tulip Time board; Roger Stroh, who is the Environmental Health Director, he sits on the Tulip Time board. Bernie Hibma--he's Parks Superintendent--he sits on the Tulip Time board, and I don't know if there's anybody else, but I know those two city officials do.

There's other prominent people that sit on the board that help out, and from what I've seen when I was a kid, I remember the old steam engines rolling down the streets. I mean those, you know the great big steel wheels going down, and that usually signaled the end of the parade, and those guys would blast their horn. You don't see that anymore, and what you see is they try to get more corporate, or business type, floats in the parade, and involved. For instance; Belmar, Gentecs, and they all have a float in there, and I've got a feeling that they would like to work towards that end f more corporate sponsors and getting more floats; more

corporate big name type floats. That's my feeling, and I don't know if that's true or not.

JVU: Holland, over the years, has become more and more ethnically diverse. I'm wondering if you have any feelings about . . .how you have seen that effect the festival.

SZ: Well, I have some personal feelings about that; I don't know if you want personal feelings or not. A few years ago, in a letter to the editor in the Holland Sentinel, there was a lady--a tourist; she was from west of here, I think [she] was from Kansas, I'm not sure--anyway, she saw, I think they were Hispanic kids--they may have been Oriental kids--dressed up in Dutch costume, and she wrote a letter into the editor, saying, "Why don't you keep this festival pure?" And I thought now wait a minute here, you know . . .Tulip Time comes from the Netherlands, the Dutch took tulips and they made it a big thing, but a flower's a flower, and everybody from any ethnic origin can enjoy a flower no matter where it comes from. And it's a festival, and if the kids want to get dressed up in a Dutch costume, I don't care, let them.

But then there's a flip-side to the coin too, that kind of bothers me a little bit, is that--I'm not sure if this is true or not, but I think it's a policy--when Tulip Time comes, all the kids have to get dressed up and where a Dutch costume regardless of their ethnic background, and I have a problem with that because if you're Hispanic or Oriental, and don't want to do it, why should you be forced to participate in something that's not even of their background? By the same token, we have a Cinco de Mayo festival here, which is the Fifth of May Festival, which starts with Tulip Time, and I guess myself personally would like to see Tulip Time board incorporate that into the festival. Holland is what, thirteen to fifteen percent Hispanic people, and why not let them have a part. The Rose Bowl Parade, you see all kinds of things down there now, but the Rose Bowl isn't called Dutch heritage or anything like that. But by the same token, the Hispanics who have come to Holland have a story, they have a story to tell too, from settling here and moving away from their homeland, so why can't we

recognize that as well, I guess?

JVU: Your seeing the flower, the tulip itself, as the focal point for the festival, rather than some of the Dutch heritage, which the other people I've interviewed.

SZ: If you didn't have--my feeling is--if you didn't have the tulips here . . . I can see the tourist busses when I'm out on the streets working, and stuff like this. The first bus starts rolling in about two weeks prior to the parades and stuff like, and there's nothing going on, and the only reason they're there, is to see the tulips. They go to Veldheers, and go to Dutch Village up on the Highway, and they're there looking at the tulips. Whenever I see a tourist bus going by, they're gawking at the tulips; they're looking, and if you didn't have the tulips here in Holland, this festival would not be as near as big as what it was.

Another case in point, the Cherry Festival up in Traverse City. What they do, is they celebrate the . . .well, the Cherry Festival is the harvest of the cherries, but if they didn't have the cherries up there, that festival wouldn't be as big as what it is either. So, there's a focal point to everything, and the tulips in Holland are the focal point; take that away and the festival wouldn't have near as many people in here as you would if you just had a parade or something like that. Now, with all those things combined, you can get a lot of people in here.

Another reason I say that, is Tulip Time Incorporated expanded the festival to ten days instead of the normal five I think, and there's another change I guess. The reason they did that is they found out a lot of people wanted to come just to look at the tulips, just to walk around and look at the tulips, and every year, more and more people come and they look at the tulips, and they beat the crowd so to speak--it's not so crowded--and they're just there almost for the specific purpose of seeing the tulips, and then anything else is extra.

JVU: Do you have any contact with any of the tourists that come into town, if you're out working in the beds?

SZ: Not loads and loads like the walk-on tour guides, but when I

work on the street, they see a city truck and they stop and they ask us questions. Most of it is directions; how do you get from point A to point B. Most of it is directions, but sometimes they do ask about the tulips; the variety of tulips, when to plant them, what do we do with them, how do we care for them, how long has Holland been doing this, all kinds of questions.

JVU: Have any of the tourists . . . ever paid you any compliments?

SZ: Oh yeah.

JVU: What are some of the sentiments they've expressed to you?

SZ: "Looks so beautiful," you know, "How can the city do this?"

"How many tulips do you have here?" We tell them and they're totally amazed. It is unique, you know, there's not very many cities in the United States that have a tulip festival like what we do, on the scale that we do. There are--I think there's--two other cities in America that have a tulip festival. One of them is out in [Pella], Iowa, and they have a tulip festival, and their tulip festival starts about a week or two before we do. But, they don't plant as many tulips as we do. We just have, like I said, we have eight miles of tulip lanes, where tour busses are just tooling and they just are awestruck, and they just love it.

JVU: One obvious question is: do you plant tulips in your yard, or are you sick of them by the time you get home? [laughs]

SZ: I have. If I have time I do it. [laughs]

[Brief discussion of Mr. Zwiep's own, personal, garden.]

JVU: Would it be safe to assume then that tulips are your favorite part of the Tulip Time festival?

SZ: [laughter] Oh, safe to say that? Yeah, for the festival, I would say that. You work with them and stuff like that, and I guess you become familiar with them, and so after a while you just don't appreciate the beauty of them all. When you see some people come in and they look at that, and they say, "Oh man, this is really something." There's certain varieties of tulips that if it were up to me, I wouldn't even plant them because to me they're not

attractive, but that's why we put a variety out, because people--tourists and the public--what's ugly in some people's eyes, is beauty in another person's eyes, and that's why we plant a variety of them.

JVU: What do you think Tulip Time has meant to the city of Holland over the years?

SZ: It's funny, you hear different comments about that. I guess it depends on the involvement of people at Tulip Time, what they're doing for Tulip Time; from, all the way from, "this is a pain in the neck,"--they use other descriptive adjectives--and, to "this is really something." If you stop to figure out the dollars that come into Holland at Tulip Time, the taxes that are paid out in Tulip Time, the money spent and stuff like that, then it helps keep our tax base lower in Holland. People don't look at it that way. All they do is they see the clogged streets you know, and you can't get around; Saturday they block the roads off right up to Twenty-eighth Street from Van Raalte, so in order to get through the town, you've got to go down Thirty-second Street to get way around, if you want to get from one end to the other.

But that's just for one day. It really isn't that bad. For a couple hours on three days out of the year, I guess you learn to live with it. The people who live in those areas, they get . . . I've seen some people that are really steamed because they can't get in and out of their street. One gentleman this year, he lived down the street and it was blocked off, and the police officer wouldn't even let him go down his own street to his own house. I could see the look of disgust on his face. I guess if you don't like it there, I guess you move.

That's one of the hazards of Tulip Time, but if you look at some of the benefits that they do have, it does employ a lot of people. I wouldn't be working my job if it weren't for Tulip Time in Holland, Michigan. My job wouldn't be there. There's a lot of jobs around Holland that wouldn't be there if it wasn't for Tulip Time. If you look at it historically, the reason Holland has grown the way it has grown in the last seven or eight years, is a direct

result of Tulip Time. People kept coming here, they kept coming back, finally the developers saw it and they put up malls and what have you, and because it's a tourist [attraction]. People came here, they saw West Michigan, they saw it was a nice place to live, and a lot of people retired here, built their homes here, the whole thing built on each other and that's why Holland is as big as it is.

-End of Interview-