Spring 2018

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 28.01: Spring 2018

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Published in: Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 28, Issue 1, Spring April 1, 2018. Copyright © 2018 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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Sometime around 1891, a girl named Gertrude “Gertie” Dobbin moved from Michigan to Roseland, Chicago, where she would soon marry her husband, Dirk Jellema. Back in Michigan, her younger sister, Lillie, kept in faithful contact with her from their family farm in East Saugatuck through letters sent during the week. Lillie’s letters contain mundane information like weather observations and farm updates, but they also provide a very complete picture of the personal life of a young woman at that time. That insight would not have been possible over 120 years later, if not for the Jellema family’s careful preservation of the letters.

I highly doubt that Lillie Dobbin assumed that her sisterly ramblings and small-town gossip would endure more than a century to be read by the world. How could she have known that the letters she eagerly sent would be scanned onto a computer and shared on the internet by a college student if her world was based on farms and ferry rides?

Lillie’s letters cover from 1891 to 1896 in local and personal news. Five years’ worth of letters between sisters hardly reveals the universe’s secrets, but the wealth of small-scale information to be found within Lillie’s pages is surprising. Exhibiting the knowledge that comes from living in a Dutch farming community closely entwined with those around it, Lillie reported births, deaths, and marriages more accurately than most U.S. records of the time. The completeness of the collection of letters allows a reader to follow those five years’ events with very few breaks and create a vivid picture of the life Lillie was living.

The years of Lillie’s life covered by the series of letters are actually the five leading up to her marriage to Perry Boersma. Before her marriage, information beyond her birth certificate was difficult to find. Patriarchal modes of record-keeping mostly resulted in a lack of information about women until they were married, and Lillie Boersma, née Dobbin, was no exception. Most of the information I have been able to collect about the life of Lillie Dobbin does not actually start until she became Lillie Boersma, but the letters are a testament to the fact that her life was very much started before her marriage.

Most of Lillie’s letters follow the same format. Addressed to her dear or loving brother and sister, they detailed in no particular order events that had occurred

(continued on page 2)
since Lillie had last written or seen them, and then closed
with well-wishes from the whole family. Each letter was
then sealed and sent to Roseland, and Lillie began her
wait for the next one from her sister. Most of the letters
are written on stationery just a bit smaller than today’s
printer paper, and a few even have ink-stamped
decorations. Almost all of them are written in pen,
except for one or two that apologize for the use of pencil
as someone else in the household was using the pen. A
few of the earlier letters also apologize for the presence
of ink blots, which suggest Lillie’s lack of practice with
pen and ink. This information may seem mundane, and
even may well be, but the fact remains that even
something as simple as the pen and paper she used are
vastly different from what might be used today. In most
cases of those who still write letters, stationery is a thing
of the past, and the struggle of finding a suitable writing
utensil is non-existent.

During the span of time represented in Lillie’s letters, the
United States Postal Service began implementing Rural
Free Delivery (RFD) service to farms. Rather than those
living on farmland needing to travel to the nearest post
office for their mail, a vehicle would bring it to them. It
seems that Lillie and the Dobbin family did not benefit
from this service, though, as many of her letters mention
multiple trips to town to check the mail in hopes of a
response from Gertie. I assumed that if sending a letter
from one sister to the other presented that much of a
hassle, then travel between the two places and the chance
for the sisters to see each other again would have been
difficult as well. Instead, with a surprising regularity,
there are weeks-long gaps in the letter timeline where
Lillie travelled on the then-popular passenger ferry or
train to stay with her family in Roseland. Later in the
series of letters, there are gaps during which Gertie and
her oldest son would likewise visit back in East
Saugatuck. Between those gaps are mentions of many
other visits by family and friends, though rather than the
type of visits that we often see today, of a long weekend
or just overnight, the visits would last weeks or more.

Friends, family, and community visitors would stay at
each others’ houses frequently and for long stretches of
time, which spoke to the trust and familiarity within the
local communities at the time. Much like the way
today’s old Dutch communities still function on a system
of trust, with commonly unlocked doors and constant
neighborhood-wide church functions, it seems that
Lillie’s Dutch towns of the 1890s followed a similar
pattern. Lillie’s East Saugatuck reminded me in many
ways of my native Hudsonville. Small, Dutch, quiet, and
originally merely farms as far as the eye could see, it was
beginning to grow throughout her letters just as she was.
Her world expanded as her knowledge of it did. Where
her first letters are untidy and full of errors and inkblots,
they also simply report schoolhouse gossip and recent lessons learned. As time progressed, so too did her writing. Even further than a maturing of subject matter, her growth is also apparent in her improved handwriting legibility.

Lillie’s cursive handwriting was difficult to analyze in the first few letters of the series, but my familiarity with it grew over time, as did her fluidity with the pen. The true challenge came from the scattered Dutch words and phrases throughout the letters, as Dutch was her family and community language, but not something I myself am familiar with. Plodding along and hoping for the best seemed to work for my transcriptions, until I arrived at the 22nd undated letter in the collection (Undated #22), completely in Dutch and not even written in Lillie’s handwriting. I spent multiple days scouring the physical page, enhancing the scans I had made, and consulting Dutch dictionaries to make sure that the words I was coming up with were indeed actual words. The transcription I ended up with might not make grammatical sense, but it stands finished nonetheless. I can only hope that a Dutch speaker or scholar might be able to read some part of it and even share its translation. I believe it to be of the same style of news as Lillie’s letters, but the context suggests it was written by their father. Transcribing Undated #22 frustrated me in the best of ways, but I was decidedly relieved to find that there were no more all-Dutch pages within the collection.

As a distant observer, I found that the most entertaining episodes to transcribe were those mentioning suitors that Lillie turned down. In particular, Lillie’s dealings with Ed Jager, found in multiple letters, stand out as a particular example of a blunt and truthful side of a lady’s personality. Where society most likely would not have allowed her to fully express her thoughts on his advances, no such restraints were placed on a private letter between sisters. In Undated #8, which I believe to have been written in early December 1893, Lillie expresses her shock at the fact that Ed Jager and Carrie have “come to quit,” which presumably means that they were ending a previous relationship. Almost a year later, in #31, Lillie says:

“Ed. [sic] Jager must think he is right in it with me but I tell you it is far from that; I never answered his letter, think I’ll have to do it some time yet; but am not in a hurry as J. wrote to him a week ago; he told him that I would very likely go to Chicago the latter part of August or the first part of Sept. now I just bet he will try to go home that time too; if he does, but that can’t be helped then.”

True to her prediction, a month later in #34, she mentions that Ed Jager offered to take her to Chicago, but admits her distaste. In that same letter, a short few sentences later, she mentions yet another man with intentions after her, a Mr. Sterken. She turned him down as well, much to my amusement, and presumably Gertie’s as well.

Continuing in the vein of interest in Lillie’s beaus, a mysterious figure emerges in the forefront at a surprising time. In Undated #19, which I guessed to have been part of letter #40, from August 1895, a simple announcement is tucked between mentions of farm animals and visiting friends. “It was Mon. night that the cord which bound H. & me to-gether for nearly a year was unstrung. We parted as friends.” For something to have happened nearly a year earlier would have meant that an understanding had to have been made right around the time she wrote to her sister of spurning both Ed Jager and Mr. Sterken. Such a simple and matter-of-fact announcement made me doubt my first assessment that Lillie was referring to an engagement or courtship. No other letter hints at a romantic relationship or “understanding” between Lillie and another, except for
his relationship with him during the long visit. The final letter does not mention any sort of relationship between Lillie and Perry beside that of detailing his travelling with her on the ferry and also joining her father in going to Holland a few days later.

Letter #44 contains perhaps the most dissatisfying ending of all of the letters in the collection; it leaves off not only in the middle of a sentence, but the middle of a word. The disappointment may also come from the fact that it signifies the end of the collection itself. Leading up to my transcribing of the final letter, I found myself more and more invested in Lillie’s life, talking about her notes as if I had received a letter from a dear friend myself. Spending days reading over scans of yellowed paper seemed to erase the fact that Lillie and I were separated by more than a century. She became more than a signature at the bottom of each lovingly-written page. Instead, she was a life I was able to observe closely, with her letters as my time machine. Little challenges of transcription stood in my way as a reminder that I was here viewing her life and thoughts through a two-way mirror. A missing page here, a corner ripped there; all taunted me with the fact that Gertie knew what had been said, but time had taken that ability away from anyone else in the world. I felt that realization strongly when I came to the last lines of #44 to find that there would be no closing page to the letter, no “Your loving sister, Lillie” and no “Best regards of all, to all.”

Unlike someone kept in suspense for the next letter, like Gertie would have been, I as an observer had the privilege of knowing the future. While Gertie and Lillie would not have known it at the time of those letters, I and the world know that Lillie married Perry and became Lillie Boersma. She went on to have a large and loving family of seven children, twelve grandchildren, and twenty-one great-grandchildren. Her sister, Gertie, followed a similar story of success. The Dobbin sisters’ successes were perhaps not groundbreaking, their lives not made into action-packed movies, but each word shared between them was well worth preserving for future generations. That duty was first fulfilled by Gertie’s family, and has now been gladly taken up by the Joint Archives of Holland.

Once the mysterious “H.” leaves her life, Lillie is conspicuously silent on the topic of men. At this point, she would have been around 18 years old. By 20, Lillie married Perry Boersma in 1898; but the stretch of letters ends in 1896 with barely a mention of him. The final letter of the collection, #44, is the only one that mentions him by name and perhaps first initial, though the mention of him is familiar, as if they had known each other for a while. Dated in August 1896, the final letter is preceded by a letter ten months earlier detailing a possible visit. While it is possible that Lillie stayed with Gertie and Dirk for nearly a year, I find it a more believable scenario that there be missing letters from the timeline. That said, if she had stayed with her sister for nearly a year with no need for correspondence between the two if they were only separated by a few rooms, the possibility remains that she met Perry and even entered into a relationship with him during the long visit.

Who, then, was the mysterious “H.” from whom she parted? Lillie uses “H.” to refer to Harry, Gertie’s firstborn son, most often. She also uses it to refer to Holland. Aside from those two, “H.” could refer to any one of at least a dozen other people. My suspicion is that “H.” is short for Henry, of which there are three specifically named throughout her letters whose marital status was not specified. Could one of them be the mysterious “H.” that may have had a romantic understanding with Lillie? Henry Roelofs is only mentioned once in the letter series. A childhood acquaintance, he had sent a letter to Lillie from Roseland near the beginning of the correspondence in 1891. Perhaps not him, then. Another possibility, Henry Van Der Werf, is also only mentioned once, when he was accepted into the theological school. If that rules him out, the remaining Henry, Henry Deters, could be it. Unfortunately, his full name is only given in the time after their understanding would have ended. It seems that the mysterious “H.” will remain a mystery, though undoubtedly Gertie would have known who was on her sister’s mind.

About the author:
Rebecca Palomino is graduating from Hope College with a double major in English and Classical Studies. After graduation, she will be traveling with the Hope College Chapel Choir to South Africa, and then plans to attend graduate school in Aberdeen, Scotland, to receive degrees in Manuscript Studies and Folklore.
The People Behind Tulip Time

By Laurel Post

Tulip Time is a time-honored tradition in Holland, Michigan, an event that has occurred for nearly 90 years. Because of the popularity of Tulip Time, Windmill Island was created, a place to celebrate and honor the Dutch heritage. But these attractions would not have gotten their start if not for the ingenious Lida Rogers or the talented Jaap de Blecourt.

Lida Rogers was a biology teacher at Holland High School. According to Don Postma, “Lida Rogers was the person who was most closely identified with being the founder of Tulip Time and a very active environmentalist in the area.”1 Bill Rogers stated, “She simply wanted to leave this Earth better and this world better than she found it.”2 The movement towards Tulip Time began in 1927 when Rogers made a speech on civic beauty at the Woman’s Literary Club, ending with the following poem:

“Come down to Holland in tulip-time, in tulip-time; Come down to Holland in tulip-time, (it isn’t far to go!) And you shall wander hand-in-hand with friends in summer’s wonderland, Come down to Holland in tulip-time (it isn’t far to go!)”3

Marie Zingle stated that Rogers “had been toying with the idea that everyone should plant tulips in their yard, and that once a year we would have what she called ‘Tulip Day.’”4 Thus, a beautification project for the city was created “because she wanted the students to have a project...for the students to donate or to give, or to contribute to their citizens.”5 The project was implemented in the fall of 1928, when Rogers and her students planted 2,000 tulip bulbs around the high school. The tulips were all paid for and planted by the students.

Lida Rogers’ vision for Tulip Time was first and foremost a way to beautify the city. Next, she wanted the project to help develop more civic pride. “She felt that it would foster a spirit of unity and cooperation in the community...it should be a festival to promote greater appreciation of the heritage of the people of this community.”6 Rogers wanted the community to take pride in their town with help from this beautification project. In addition, even though she was not Dutch, “she felt everyone here should appreciate the heritage of the people who founded Holland... She was very proud of the Dutch heritage even though she wasn’t Dutch.”7 Randy Vande Water furthers this idea by stating, “It has provided the community with that pride; a pride of its heritage.”8 According to Don Postma, “Tulip Time developed into a life of its own, and it was one of the things that helped pull this community out of the Depression, without question. It provided a means of income, it provided an incentive, it gave people in this town some hope, and it was a great thing to see.”9 It is pretty clear that through Tulip Time, Rogers has been able to not only beautify the town, but also bring the community together to celebrate the history and heritage of the town.

In 1928, Holland’s Common Council purchased 100,000 tulip bulbs from the Netherlands and sold them to citizens for a penny a piece.10 For Rogers, this event was successful, even though it did not draw much attention outside of the town. But the event went as Rogers had envisioned, “people did get out and stroll about the city, looking at each others tulip beds, talking, and enjoying the new sense of community that was being forged. In the eyes of the city, the small celebration was not unsuccessful and showed some promise.”11 It was not until 1929 that the festival started gaining attention and showed an uptick in attendance. The town decided to take the idea of Tulip Day and extend it into a five day festival called Tulip Week and eventually it transformed into Tulip Time. According to Jason Upchurch, “Unofficially called ‘Tulip Time’ by the Holland Sentinel, the name caught on.”12

Following the 1929 festival, the Tulip Time committee was formed and then in the fall of 1930, the first official annual Tulip Time festival was held which “kept the focus on the people and sites of Holland, and didn’t yield its loyalty to the community in favor of tending to tourists. The organizers kept the focus on the culture and people of Holland in three ways: the flowers remained queen of the festival, local talent was showcased, and the religious facet of Holland was never compromised.”13 Despite this drive to keep these three ideas in mind, the first festival focused more on the horticultural aspect of the festival than the cultural side. It was noted that many of the costumes were not authentic Dutch costumes and the traditional street scrubbing did not come into effect until the next year.
One of the main features of the first Tulip Time festival, besides the flowers, was the music. An operetta titled "Tulip Time Operetta" was even written expressly for this festival. High school bands from all over Michigan have always been included in the parades. In addition, in 1947, Amsterdam sent a barrel organ to Holland on a special Dutch ship that sailed into the Holland Harbor. The organ had played during many events and parades during Tulip Time. In the 1990s, after many repairs and renovation, it was retired to Windmill Island where it continues to play. As now, Tulip Time offered a variety of parades for spectators, featuring the Volksparade, the Kinderparade, and the Muziekparade.

By 1931, Tulip Time was more authentic and accurate with their Dutch traditions. Not only did the festival kick off with street scrubbing, but the Woman’s Literary Club also gave a demonstration on how to wash a house, all which demonstrated the tradition of Dutch cleanliness. Hearing of these plans, Old Dutch Cleanser donated the soap to be used for the street scrubbing. This plan backfired. The cleanser caused a fog to rise off of the street, and left a white residue on the asphalt. Soap was never used again. In 1947, Michigan governor Kim Sigler joined the Dutch burghers for the street scrubbing ceremony. Thus a tradition was born, where Michigan governors donned Dutch costumes and helped scrub the streets. Governor George Romney was even featured in Time magazine scrubbing streets. It was not until the late ‘30s that Klompen dancing was integrated into the festival. Klompen dancing was taught in Holland High School girls’ gym classes. By the early ‘40s, there were over thirteen hundred Klompen dancers in Holland. By the 1940s, Tulip Time was booming. Unfortunately, between 1943 and 1945, the festival was canceled due to the war, but “the spirit of the event was kept alive with an annual flower show at the Masonic Temple.”

It was not until the ‘60s that the idea of erecting an authentic Dutch windmill in Holland, Michigan, became a feasible idea. It had been brought up earlier in 1931, but was put on hold. In 1965, the De Zwaan windmill was unveiled during Tulip Time. Purchased by Willard Wichers, also known as “Mr. Holland,” De Zwaan was the last windmill to leave the Netherlands before they were pronounced national landmarks.

Along with Windmill Island came the expansive grounds that needed constant upkeep. Fortunately for the town, Jaap de Blecourt was just the man for this job. From oral history interview transcripts kept at the Joint Archives of Holland, one can learn a lot about de Blecourt. He grew up in the Netherlands and attended the College of Horticulture in Boskoop and the College for Floriculture (growing flowers in greenhouses and outdoors), where he was the only man in 80 years to have graduated from both schools. He also attended a college in arboriculture (growing shrubs and trees and landscape and design). Needless to say, de Blecourt had an extensive background, which also included practical experience in England, Versailles, Switzerland, and eventually Mackinac Island in Michigan.

Jaap de Blecourt immigrated to America in 1958, where he had a job already lined up at the Grand Hotel in charge of the gardens and grounds on Mackinac Island. He worked there until 1964 when he took the job in Holland to develop a seventeenth century Dutch rural landscape, with a focal point, a windmill from the Netherlands.

The island that is now known to everyone as Windmill Island was originally called Hyma Island, belonging to the Hyma sisters. When de Blecourt first arrived, he said, “All that was here of the island was a little bit of water and a lot of cattails and swamp grass, and around the edges, dead elm trees which had to be all cut down.” Needless to say, de Blecourt had his work cut out for him but he was up for the challenge. When asked what kept him at Windmill Island for so long, he answered, “the challenge, very much the challenge, to build up something from nothing.”

Jaap de Blecourt has many stories from the first several years working on the island, all of which can be found in the transcripts from his interviews. One of the stories described is when the island first opened in 1965, Prince Bernard came from the Netherlands to dedicate the windmill. The De Zwaan windmill, which means swan or graceful bird, was bought for $2,800 from miller M.M. van Schayk. The windmill was dismantled in Vinkel, North Brabant, the Netherlands, by the Dutch millwright Jan Diederik Mendendorp. Seventy tons of dismantled windmill parts arrived by ship to the Muskegon harbor in 1964 before being trucked to Holland.
Both Mendendorp and de Blecourt began working on reconstructing not only the windmill but an authentic “seventeenth century Dutch rural landscape.” Del Schrotenboer helped build the brick tower on which the windmill sits, and his brother Maynard would train under Mendendorp to become the first American miller of De Zwaan. The current miller, Alisa Crawford, who is the first Dutch-certified miller in America, was able to meet Medendorp in the Netherlands in 2007. She was able to “thank him and reassure him that De Zwaan is still loved, used and enjoyed 40 plus years after his work.” The windmill was not the only thing to have traveled from the Netherlands to Holland, Michigan. In 1972, an antique Dutch carousel was found in Groningen, the Netherlands, by Mendendorp and found a permanent home at Windmill Island, and is still in use today. Windmill Island was officially opened on May 8, 1965, and has remained open to this day, a popular attraction for many during Tulip Time.

Jaap de Blecourt worked at Windmill Island, managing the grounds up until 1995, when he retired after thirty years. When describing his work at Windmill Island, de Blecourt stated, “It has been kind of my life’s work since I came to America.” Similarly to de Blecourt, Lida Rogers also devoted her time to the success of Tulip Time. “Lida Rogers envisioned a Tulip Time that was for the citizens…to be a civic family…come together in a display of beauty not only through gardening but through character.” Both de Blecourt and Rogers dedicated a part of their lives to Tulip Time to help it thrive. Through them, as well as many others, Tulip Time is still a time-honored tradition enjoyed by many today.

Endnotes

2Jason V. Upchurch, Oral history interview with Bill Rogers, 23 July 1995, H88-0234, JAH.
4Upchurch, Oral history interview with Marie Zingle, 25 July 1995, H88-0234, JAH.
5Upchurch, Oral history interview with Sharon Koops, 17 July 1995, H88-0234, JAH.
6Upchurch, Oral history interview with Sharon Koops, 17 July 1995, H88-0234, JAH.
7Ibid.
11Ibid.
12Ibid, 3.
13Ibid, 4.
16Holland Evening Sentinel, May 15, 1931, p. 2
20Ibid, 10.
21Ibid, 11.
24Ibid.
25Ibid.
26Ibid.
32Ibid.

About the author:

Laurel Post, from Downers Grove, Illinois, is an alumna of Hope College where she majored in communication. Currently she is a first-year masters student in Library & Information Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Reader comment:

After reading our last issue, Hope College alumna Sharon Blom asked us to add one more Fraternal Society member/athlete to the record. Jim “Spider” Vanderhill was undoubtedly one of the greatest Hope College basketball players of all time, as well as a member of the Fraternal Society. The 1959-60 MIAA championship team, Vanderhill’s first year on varsity, was led by fellow Fraters Ray Ritsema and John Oosterbaan. Although the Hope team achieved less success the following season, Vanderhill was named first team All-MIAA in 1960-61 and first team All-MIAA honors for the 1961-62 season. Vanderhill ended his Hope career as the MIAA MVP and member of the 1962-63 MIAA championship team.
Perry and Lillie Boersma and family, ca. 1908
Joint Archives of Holland
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