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de Blecourt, Jaap R Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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Interview #3
Mr. Jaap deBlecourt
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
5, June 1995
Begin Tape Two, Side A

JVU: If I could get you to repeat your name for me.

JD: My name is Jaap de Blecourt, born in the Netherlands [date removed], 1930 in a small little town called Garnwerd, in the province of Groningen.

JVU: Now my first question is, what is the nature of your association with Tulip Time?

JD: For thirty years and six months I was connected with the city of Holland being the director of Windmill Island, and therefore have worked very closely with Tulip Time; the Tulip Time employees, the ladies in charge of Tulip Time, the Tulip Time board and so forth.

JVU: What areas of the festival is Windmill Island involved with? What actually goes on there?

JD: Well, maybe [before we talk about] Tulip Time, we should go maybe a little further backwards. Lida Rogers, years ago, started the Tulip Time celebration in a very small way. And she kind of copied it from what the Netherlands already had. While I was living in the Netherlands, I went to the Tulip Time parades which were held in the tulip district. So I was very well aware of it, even thirty years or so ago. Well, I'm sixty-four now, but even when I was a small child, I remember the parades [that] we had in the tulip district. So, she kind of followed that same pattern; first in a very small way; later on it became bigger and bigger. Then it seems like after thirty years or so, Tulip Time was slowing down, so . . .

JVU: This would be in the sixties then?
JD: I would say the middle fifties. And everyone kind of felt this, but didn’t know what to do. So some enterprising people, business people here in town like Mr. Carter-Brown from Castle Park, Henry Mentz in charge of First National Bank, Henry Steffens who was connected with Hope College, Bill Wichers—he was director of the Netherlands Information Service—Seymour Padnos, owner of Padnos Scrap Yards near Lake Macatawa. So, they said, ‘What we actually should do, let us do a study. Let us see if it is feasible to have an attraction in the city of Holland called any name, but where it would reflect the history of the Netherlands, as the people who were living in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century.

So feasibility study was done and it looked like that it would be quite feasible. And so then they sent Mr. Wichers to the Netherlands and with the help of the Dutch Windmill Society, the city was able to acquire a windmill. And this was all meant as a shot in the arm for Tulip Time, because what had happened in the North end of town, was two tulip farms—the Nellis Tulip Farm, and the VanBragt Tulip Farm on Ottawa Beach Road—and long stretches, big fields of tulips which was very nice for Tulip Time visitors to come to. But the VanBragt people went slowly out of business, the children did not take over, the Nellis tulip farm became smaller because they concentrated more on the Dutch Village tourist attraction going on US-31 North. So, they said that we would have something like what we have now, Windmill Island, that would help Tulip Time, and bring in more people; which it very much did so in the beginning.

Tulip Time was kind of the earliest festival in the spring, a flower festival, quite colorful, and they brought a lot of people. I remember that on a Saturday we might get from 13 to 15 thousand visitors. Well, then Tulip Time put on some more shows, more Lawrence Welk show and so forth. So, that is what was actually meant as a shot in the arm for Tulip Time.

Now you can say, ‘Well, where is Tulip Time going?’ and that might be in one of your questions. What do you think? When I
came thirty years ago, Tulip Time was very much a family celebration. People from the immediate area--Grand Rapids, Lansing and so forth--used to come to Tulip Time, sit along the parade route and enjoy Tulip Time. Well, slowly on, this became less and less. Tulip Time realized that less families came. So, let us put on more shows for senior citizens. Well, that is when I got on the band wagon, and it is now twenty-five years or so ago that I said, 'Well, every ten or fifteen years or so, you have a change. The change is now, that everything is based more for senior citizens. The 1950's, the 1960's, the 1970's were good years--man and wife in the family both working, both getting social security when they retire, both getting factory pensions--so they are the group of people who had the money to spare to go on long vacations. Not families any more.

So I worked extremely hard in . . . used to be gone two and three weeks at a time in the winter by going to the touring companies in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, Wisconsin, and all over. So I kept right on going. So, now we have all of a sudden, with the fall down in the economy, where the interest rates went down quite a bit, all of a sudden the senior citizens find themselves in the predicament that he don't . . . when you are a hundred thousand dollars in the bank at ten percent, or invested at ten percent, he would have ten thousand dollars a year for travel. All of a sudden, that dropped to three and four thousand a year, or three thousand a year. So what happened, people used to come in droves by busses from New York, and from Pennsylvania and so forth. So the senior citizens decided they are so much better off with instead of taking three long trips or a week each time, let us take three trips of two days. Half a day to get some where, see the sights, drive round a little bit and see all the tourist attractions. So they did not come far away from home any more. So the traffic from New York and Pennsylvania slowed down considerable, until maybe the interest rate goes up again. Then we have, of course--that Tulip Time has --a tremendous competition.
For instance, Branson, Missouri. When I go to the conventions in November and December, they would say, 'Oh Jaap, we are not coming now this May, but I am going to take this year my senior citizens to Branson, Missouri.' And I do not even have to come out with a booklet, just a little letter saying, 'On that day, that day, and that day, we are going to Branson, Missouri,' and the busses all fill up, and I do not have to advertise, I do not have to go with slide presentation or films to show what Tulip Time is as a whole. So there's much less cost involved. He says, 'We are bored maybe with Branson, Missouri, but we are in business to transport people, and that's what we are doing.'

So every ten or fifteen years you have kind of a change for Tulip Time. Well ... we have the kinderplatz, you know, near the Macatawa River down over there, at the end of Columbia Avenue at Freedom Village, and I think that Tulip Time themself have to recognize the fact that they have to get something more than shows. So, where is Tulip Time going to go? Where is Branson, Missouri going to go? Soon, when this age group is gone, when you ask my kids—who ages are from 26 to 32 years old—they could care less about Lawrence Welk Show. But they, in twenty years time, may be ready to retire, so they have to fall back on what was important to them in their youths. Maybe rock n' roll or whatever, or some performers still alive that they well knew in the thirties and were impressed by.

JVU: So maybe a rock n' roll Tulip Time one of these years?
JD: I don't know [laughs].
JVU: Okay, let's see. You were talking [about] how Tulip Time needs to change to survive, and I've also noticed in the studying that I've been doing that Tulip Time has gone through a lot of changes just naturally over the years. I was wondering if you could describe for me any of the changes you've noticed in the festival since you've been involved.
JD: Well, the funniest thing, I was so much involved with Windmill Island itself, by drawing the tourists to the city and to Windmill Island. When they came for two or three days, then
they would go down to each tourist attraction. When they would come only from, let me say from Toledo, Ohio, and you would leave early in the morning, and come to Tulip Time, have lunch somewhere, see the Tulip Time parades and go back home again, so it is just a short amount of time they have. Now, when I came thirty years ago, Tulip Time was really quite simple, at that time. But there were not many festivals. Now you have the Zeeland Petunia Festival, you have an Asparagus festival, a Potato festival, a Cabbage Festival, so people are so terrible busy now days with their own little festivals, they have no time to go anywhere else. They have the city, the Cherry Festival, they have on Mackinaw Island, the Lilac festival, the Antique Car festival. So there is so much more competition everywhere, and people have only so much money to spare you know of course, I feel that life has become so much more tension filled to make a living.

When I look at my children’s friends, over the weekend we visited a couple who have a small child, they have just moved in to a new home. The man and wife hardly see one another. I mean to say that she works during the day, one of her sisters takes care of their baby girl, he—last week—was gone three nights and four days. So, these people, this generation from the age of thirty to forty does not have that much money, and they are more thinking in terms of what is a big thing for them; go maybe for a night on the lake, with the boat. The one fellow sitting next to me said, ‘What I am so afraid of, that before you know, the summer is gone and I’ve had two invitations to go with the boat on Lake Michigan, and I haven’t had a chance yet. I just came back yesterday with his work, and he drove six hundred and sixty miles. Three and a half hours or longer to get there, then three or four hours back, and in the meeting of all of about three or four hours, the fellow was bushed. So it is much harder to make a living, and therefore there is much less money to spare in what people, I think, invest in the [backyard or in the music equipment], and that is more of the relaxation I think.
But what to do for Tulip Time? Tulip Time has really, I feel, has become a senior citizen festival. And what you see in terms of families, and maybe people coming to the parade route who sit there and do not spend any money or anything else, would come from Muskegon, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and sit along the parade route, and get maybe some food out, and sit maybe behind one of those little tents on 8th street. So are people looking for as much in terms of education? Like what the city is trying to create in Windmill Island, a seventeenth century Dutch landscape? Are they looking for culture? A great number of people are not. I stand in the bus when you come out. I explain what [Windmill Island has], and when you would like to see as much as possible at Windmill Island, go and view the movie first. And then from there on, go over to the Windmill, the guides are waiting over there to give you a guided tour. All of a sudden, 'Oh, there are the shops?' [laughs] It happened only one time, one woman says, 'I was ready to slug that fellow because all what I want to do is shop.' So the average person is not looking to learn much any more. Maybe the father and mother are thirty years old, and come with two or three children and find it important to learn as much about the Dutch culture. Maybe the average senior citizen is not any more, and it has become a senior citizen festival.

JVU: You would say that's the most major change that you've noticed then?

JD: That it has become from a family festival from like twenty years ago, to very much a senior citizen festival. I feel that Tulip Time is trying to turn this around, and it might take a while again.

Now Windmill Island just got--I retired in March--but Windmill Island got hundreds, maybe almost thousands of school children. But there again, what you have in your own home town, you never appreciate it. You are not on vacation in your own hometown. So, to most people here, Tulip Time is a bother. When you have kids in the parade, you go, but afterwards you never go
any more; you try to avoid it. You will ask--people say . . . many people say, 'I was never at Windmill Island.' And I say shame on them. But who's on vacation in his own hometown? No one is!

Maybe . . . I lived from 1958 through 1964 on Mackinaw Island. I think it was at least two or three years before I went to the fort. Because there will always be some time to go to the fort. Now, when we go to Mackinaw Island, I take all of the guests we have with us to the fort, and view life down over there. So, that's the same down over in here. Now, the city . . . how are you going to change people to be more interested in Tulip Time--the citizen down over in here? I don't know. Because it is a phenomenon [that] I have seen everywhere. Some friends from New York moved here to Holland, Michigan. He lived there for several years. The last two weeks he went quick around to all the attractions [that] he thought were important--what he should see--because the ten years that he was living there, he didn't see it. The museums and . . .

JVU: Do you think that the change from a family festival to a senior citizens festival, do you think that's been good or bad, or neither?

JD: What is the festival going to be when the senior citizens die off? Or, what I see--my son is like, he's getting married in two weeks, and he is 31 years old--he's fortunate that he has a good income. Now there are so many people working now days who have a very decent income, but the fringe benefits are being cut down and down and down. All of the sudden, at the age of fifty-five, when they are maybe not as useful anymore in the job, through changes, computer changes, technology what so ever, so they are placed on a pension kind of early. Now, so many of these kids have gotten married late in life--my son is 31 going on 32--he might wait a couple of years before he has a family. He finds himself maybe with kids in college, when he is fifty-five, sixty years old. And I see so many people being pensioned off before that. And this is also a group of people who have to
pay their college debts off too. So they don't have much time for vacations.

So, now you can say, but in another twenty-five years, that age group will be senior citizens; they will be traveling. But when the fringe benefits are cut down so much, they all of a sudden found themself that they had a fairly decent income during the working years, but when they are retiring, and Social Security—which may be very little pension. And that is . . . but I don't want to be negative, because always some people have [got a way with money] and this and that. But where Windmill Island opened, I mean you got 15--25 years, of course it was a new tourist attraction—that you got like 15 or 16 thousand people on a Saturday of Tulip Time. And there was very little doings twenty or twenty-five years ago. Sure, you had a little bit of a show, and stuff like that, but when Kristi VanHowe came on the helm—who was there before Mary Duistermars—she put on more Lawrence Welk shows, and Mary Duistermars has put on more shows too. Well, shows people are sure of. Whatever the weather is going to be, they are inside, and busses very much like to take them down over there. That means there is less time for tourist attractions. When you come for a week, fine, but when you are just coming for one day travelling, seeing a little bit and going back home.

JVU: How do you see that as a change from the past? The people being less interested in the tourist attractions. Other than the age and the money, what were people interested in doing in the past? Were they going to the tourists attractions more?

JD: Yeah, because Tulip Time had less to offer. Tulip Time has more to offer now, and . . . When I came thirty years ago, the city of Holland was more or less closed up on Sunday. The man who was the owner of the Wooden Shoe factory, when they would have in the early beginnings, a little bit of a Tulip Time celebration—and he was still on River Avenue in the North end of town—he decided to open it one Sunday. Boy, he was almost booed out of town. people lined up in front of his door, because on
Sunday they came down to see the tulips, and there was no where else to go, so he opened up. It was the first festival, more or less, in the spring, and there was nothing else to go to. I mean to say, the Dandelion festival; who can come up with the biggest dandelion stem, you know. Or the Asparagus Festival. So therefore, these people who would otherwise come in the spring to Tulip Time, think, 'Well, we better think about our own festival, and put more energy in our own festival, and decorate our own wagons better, and stuff like that. And, it is more difficult now days to make a living.

What I have seen too, and especially in the Netherlands, where the home became more important. The little . . . in the garden became more important. To have a nice, round, little table there with three or four chairs, and sit there on weekends, and read or listen to music instead of what their parents did, always being on the go. What was a drastic change, what I have noticed too, the automobile industry in Detroit, when it went down and down, and in Flint, so many of the people when it was in its hey day, they had a house in town and a cottage at the lake. Well, that has dropped down to nil almost. Many older families here in town who I knew, who had a house, even where we live--we live on Lawndale Court; we moved in as a young couple there twenty-eight years ago--that were more or less retired people. They almost all had a cottage on the lake, but their children don’t. When a professional moves in--let me see, like a doctor, dentist and so forth--well then sooner or later they might get a little cottage. But years ago when, around Detroit the average factory worker had their own cottage, and would go over there on weekends and so forth. Their children don’t have that any more.

So there is a complete change from . . . it does not mean that people do not want to come to Tulip Time, there doesn’t seem to be that much time. Before, it was so . . . thirty years ago there were maybe still mothers at home, planning their next vacation. Now it is, and I hear this all the time, 'Yeah, we would like to go on vacation, but my wife has to work and I
cannot put up with the kids and go on vacation; take care of the kids all by myself. So with two working in the family, father and mother both working, that of course made Tulip Time attract less people too, because these people don’t have the time.  

**JVU:** I have sort of a different question now. It’s about the Dutch heritage of Holland. Do you think that Dutch pride is what brought Tulip Time on, or do you think that Tulip Time has caused a rise in the people’s Dutch pride here in the area?  

**JD:** No, I think it was Dutch pride what brought Tulip Time on. Like Frankenmuth being of German background. Of course now your next question will be, when they brought Tulip Time on, what do you think of all the segments what have moved into town. [laughs] And who want to have their . . . where before the tulip was the queen you know, of the festival, and now many people have come in from Texas, and from all over. Do I expect, will Tulip Time continue with what it is now? The Dutch people left behind are of Dutch background down over here, have a pride in the background and supporting the museum quite a bit, or give things to the museum what was in the family. But I think the city is open enough. The councilmen have to be, but even our mayor in town too, is open enough that the other segment in society have a culture too.  

Will that lead into problems eventually? Sometimes it will. I can see that. But I have heard so many people, senior citizens, talk about when they come to Tulip Time and we expect to see all blonde, blue-eyed little children in the parade, and half of them are not. [laughs] Well, how can you . . . I can see where these little children who are in the Tulip Time parade, grow up and say--more than ever--‘We have a culture too, and we should uphold that too.’ So therefore there could be a strife eventually. I think City Council up to this point has it well in hand, that they do foresee some problems, and therefore try to avoid it.  

**JVU:** Can you remember any time in past years at the festivals, where you actually began to notice the shift towards Holland
being more ethnically diverse, or has it just been very recently?
JD: Well it already . . . when I noticed it very much was when
the government said, 'Well, you have to employ minorities.' So,
the city of Holland has to have a certain percentage of
minorities, and then they would lower even the standards by
hiring some of the minority, which of course created--especially
in the police department and fire department--some difficulties.
Windmill Island never had a problem. When a girl used to come to
Windmill Island to apply for a job as a guide at the windmill,
when she had learned to Klompen dance, and it looked like she
could speak well, or uphold herself in front of groups of people,
then she was being hired. When Vietnamese boys came, and wanted
to work in the garden, and were very willing when they were maybe
in their last year or two in high school, very willing to come
after school to the greenhouse, and do in the spring, the
transplanting of the little seedlings and so forth. Their
fingers are generally very small, and that worked very well too.
I always made it a point, that when you were willing to work,
they'd be hired, and then we often kept them on through the
summer too. So when it came down, percentage-wise of important
minority, then Windmill Island did do well for the city.

But where will we end up when we . . . when more Vietnamese
people come to town, and more Korean people come to town, and
they all want to have their own festival for a little town. Now
when you have a big town like Grand Rapids, where they can have
the Polish festival, the German festival, there are enough people
living down over there of Polish or German background, that you
can do these things. Are there enough down over in here? Well,
do the Vietnamese people, or some people from Cuba not feel
excluded? I don't know. The City Council needs to continue to
be quite broad minded, and try to extend . . . and I think they
are trying very hard. But, could there be difficulties? I think
the City Council, as well as the Police department, has it well
in hand. That they are open minded enough, that they are willing
to talk about it.
JVU: Those were really the only two questions I had about the ethnic diversity of Holland, but one other question that that makes me think of, is what were the obvious changes that Tulip Time went through in the periods of the ... like the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s rights movement, Women’s equality, any social movements like that--how did they change the festival?  
JD: I have not noticed it as much. Well, I shouldn’t say that. It seems like there are so many more female teachers in the schools, and so they became a bigger voice. But then, when I look back, there are so many of the people who went to work in the industry, who would years ago have been mothers or grandmothers [who] stayed home and took care of the family, and who was very much involved with the children, with the parade, with making the costumes and stuff like that, now these mothers have no other choice. [They didn’t have] enough income, and had to work outside the home. I cannot ... when I look at the Tulip Time Board it was not that we had so many female members in the Tulip Time Board. The biggest change I felt ... we had one lady for many years--18 or 20 years--a little, short little brochure and it was almost every year the same, until finally she didn’t want to do it anymore, and found another job. Then you had kind of, a couple of change over. One fellow who is working for Hope College now, was in charge of Tulip Time for a while.  

The biggest change, I would say, came with things added to it--to Tulip Time. It was seven, eight to ten years ago. Kristi Van Howe I think was with Tulip Time for about seven years. She was a very dynamic person, had worked formerly in a job almost identical to what Tulip Time was. And what we have too, here in the city, we never had a Convention and Visitors Bureau. And of course the city would like to start drawing more conventions, to the city of Holland. The big draw, of course we don’t have a big convention hall. It will come eventually. So Kristi Van Howe, [when she] first became in charge of Tulip Time--she came along of course with her husband Tom Van Howe, who is with channel 8--and she found this job down over in here, then they thought she
also became in charge of Convention and Visitors Bureau. But she
was the one who I would say starting ten years ago, or ten or
eleven years ago, that is when the biggest change came, by adding
more things to Tulip Time. In terms of, well . . . even helping
to have the little boat on Lake Macatawa, Winkin' and Blinkin'
you know. It was something added to Tulip Time that people would
take advantage of. The man who started it has passed away now,
he was one of the former windmill committee members, and was
retired. But Kristi Van Howe should be given a lot of credit,
and Mary Dusitermars who is now in charge of Tulip Time I think
will do well in this sort of thing too. What direction should we
go to draw more people? There again, it is very difficult
because the competition is so great.

JVU: We'll move on to the next set of questions that I have, that
I guess are a little more personal. What specific memories do
you have of past Tulip Times and . . . any memories that stand
out in particular?

JD: You see, being in charge of Windmill Island, I really did not
see as much of Tulip Time or the parades. When my three children
were in the parade, I could just about figure out what time they
would come down the parade route so I would go quick from the
ticket booth at Windmill Island, walk up to the corner of
Columbia and Eighth and be there, and the kids would know I would
be there, and when they came around the corner I would wave at
them you see. And when they came by, I went back.

It is true that I was maybe a little spoiled, because the
Netherlands had just an abundance of flowers, so their parade
wagons were decorated with not just artificial flowers, but their
greenhouses produce such an abundance of flowers. And these
green houses all ship their cut flowers to the flower auction
place, and maybe . . . who knows . . . only sixty percent get
sold. Well, then they get minimum price for what they have
brought to the auction place. Now, all these flowers left, you
know, can be all used to decorate beautiful wagons with. [It's]
fairy tale-like, amazing. It would be too expensive and to do it
down here, so you have to work more with paper roses and everything artificial.

JVU: Were there any years that stand out as really spectacular years even at Windmill Island, that you can . . .

JD: The first few years at Windmill Island, since it was a new attraction, and since the area did not know as many, or have as many festivals. For many, many years, Tulip Time was the third largest festival in the United States. But then, when you have Ottawa, Canada—the city of Ottawa, Canada where the [Dutch] Royal Family stayed during the second World War—and the Royal Family or the Dutch government gives the city of Ottawa in Canada like 300,000 or 400,000 tulips free of charge every year. I mean to say that is already a tremendous amount of money, so they have started a tulip festival. Pella, Iowa has a tulip festival. They copied it all from the Holland one because it all came into being after the Holland tulip festival. Orange City, Iowa has a tulip festival. Someone tells me there is a little town in Ohio by name of Holland, who is supposed to have a festival bigger than what we have. Someone told me that. I never heard about it, so I doubt.

JVU: So you say the first few years right after Windmill [Island] opened were the best years?

JD: Yes, the best years. Yes.

JVU: And why is that?

JD: Well, do to the fact that the whole area had never seen a windmill either; you know, an operating windmill besides. And so plus all the advertising which was done you know . . . Prince Bernard came from the Netherlands to dedicate the windmill. So all the items in the paper, at all times in the immediate area brought of course a tremendous amount of people the first few years. After you have seen it, you will feel the same way after you have seen it, some attractions two or three times you will say, 'Well, this is enough for me.'

JVU: Did you ever have any repeat visitors?

JD: Oh yeah.
JVU: Mostly tourists, or local people?
JD: John Tunison and the task force felt that—that’s what they feel, I disagree with them—they says that the . . . the task force felt, at least one of the spokesmen for the task force said—the average person here in Holland never felt that Windmill Island did belong to the city. Because they charged a fee to get in. Well, anything that belongs to the city is free. That’s true, but Windmill Island, was kept self-supported all those years. It started with around 450,000 dollars to be paid off over the span of twenty years, and I worked very hard to pay that off. After then there was some profit left, add more things added to it. So, I kept it self-supporting. So therefore, anyone who came in had to pay the fee. So maybe it’s true. I think the average person here in Holland, doesn’t even realize that no tax money went into it.

When we have a little hole in the black top, and the street department would come and fix it up, Windmill Island can pay . . . would have to pay for it. When they came with the sweepers through it to sweep the streets, Windmill Island got the bill. When they came to the windmill to plow it out in the winter so you could get to the green houses, so one of my two or three helpers could do some maintenance work and stuff like that. Promptly, the day after, Windmill Island would get a bill, and Windmill Island paid for it, even when it was a city operation. So Windmill Island always has been self-supported. If they can continue that way? I don’t think so.

JVU: How do you think it will continue to . . .
JD: What I think what is going to happen [with the city’s approval, Windmill Island] will have to be supported with tax money, or when someone would come up, and they will give that person a free hand, so it would be a manager, a partner, manager, that might be something. But when the city will continue to have too much say into it, then it goes by city rules and regulations. And the thing is, here in the city of Holland, the city of Holland is in business to keep the city up, keep it nice and
clean and prosperous, so money has to be spent at that. So they are in business to spend money. Windmill Island is in business to earn money, and make the project grow. And I think that was always very difficult for them. To be at a council meeting and say we are going to spend so much money on this and that and that and that. Oh yeah, but Windmill Island has to be self-supporting, so when royalty comes from the Netherlands, or when we have a group of people coming, entertained by the city, we will take them to Windmill Island. We will have family day at Windmill Island. We have had five concerts at Windmill Island. All free of charge, so people can all come in and enjoy it. Windmill Island, for those five concerts, spent about 4,000 dollars. Between paying the players, and labor costs and all that. That four thousand dollars could have been spent for advertising. So Windmill Island has become a give-away.

In the paper I noticed that the task force had said that, 'Oh maybe Tulip Time should be involved with Windmill Island.' Now, two years ago when you had Lisa Perry doing the advertising for Convention Visitors Bureau, and for Tulip Time, the people of the immediate tourist attractions in the area every week or two weeks, would come together and would talk about... well, it was so spent this or that on billboards, on magazine advertising, AAA advertising, whatsoever. Tulip Time would pay part of it, the Visitor Bureau would pay part of it, the tourist attraction would pay part of it, and so I said to Lisa Perry, 'Lisa, I kind of was thinking among the windmill committee members that Tulip Time should get more involved.' She says, 'How can it get more involved? I cannot see it.' I can't see it either to tell you the truth, but it was a brainstorm among the council members, and then I thought, well, there again, he is not well informed how much we are... how much Windmill Island, all the tourist attractions are already working together with the Tulip Time and the Convention and Visitors Bureau. We put like a couple of thousand dollars each year in the kitty, each of us, each of the tourist attractions. And also, Chamber of Commerce a little bit,
Convention Visitor’s Bureau, Tulip Time, and then we decided to go to this outdoor show, let us go to this one and that one, let us in AAA Magazine advertise, let’s advertise this year maybe amongst the Amish in Indiana, because we get a lot of Amish people. So, I can’t see how they can think that Tulip Time could get more involved.

JVU: Well, speaking of getting involved, how did you first become involved with . . .

JD: Windmill Island? Well, my background has been in horticulture. So, I graduated from two different horticultural colleges; one specialized in floraculture--so that is the growing of flowers more or less, greenhouses, outdoors, outdoor plants--and after I graduated from this college in Aalsmeer . . .

-End side one-

Begin Tape Two, Side B

JVU: Okay.

JD: Boskooh has a college for horticulture which specializes in arboriculture the names of shrubs and trees, and the growing part of it, and landscaping and design. So it was a very broad education; growing of shrubs and trees, landscaping and design, on one part, and the other part was the growing of flowers which all pulls together into upkeep of parks and all that, so it was more . . . Just before I immigrated in spring of 1958, I had a couple of job offers to work for park departments in the Netherlands, but I was already . . . there was more adventure, let me go over three years, four years, five years you know, to America. My mother had an uncle and aunt who were living in America and my mother was named after her aunt. So there was always a good understanding, America was always . . . it seems like whenever a little gift came, it always came from America you know. It always sounded so sweet, what America was like. So
when I graduated from college, from both colleges, by the age of twenty-three, they told me--during the celebration what they had--the director of the college that 'some of you people who are not going directly into your father and mother's business, or going to work for a park department, or are going into the growing business of plants and shrubs and flowers, try to get as much experience as possible.' So I thought, well--adventure was always in me--so I worked for a year in England in a large nursery, then I worked in France in Versailles, in the gardens of Versailles for a year, and then I knew I was going to immigrate because a former neighbor came to visit my folks, and so I met up with them, and the former neighbors had two sons of my own age, I grew up with his two sons. So he says, 'I will be your sponsor then. But,' he says, 'it will take you a couple of years for the paper work to get ready and all that. So I thought, well I should go then, for the last two years, to a country what pays the most per hour. So I worked for two years in German Switzerland, at a big landscaping firm. That is how I immigrated. And about two or three weeks before I was ready to leave, a letter came from Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, and that they were looking for a head gardener down over there. They had a gardener for the last thirty years, and they would like a change. And so I sent my resumes in right away, and told them what date I would be arriving in New York, and would be staying for a week at a distant relative's home. And Mr. Woodfill, the owner of the Grand Hotel, wrote a letter down over there and that was how I came to work at Grand Hotel from 1958 through 1964.

Well, I met my wife on Mackinaw Island. She was a student and was working her way through college. So, in the year after she graduated from college with a teaching degree we got married on Mackinac Island. Had a lovely wedding at Grand Hotel, and that was in 1960, July of 1960. And in 1963, our oldest child was born--terribly allergic to horses and hay, and all that. So there was no other choice so we had to move. So I applied at the park department in Kalamazoo, and I think there was Holland, and
maybe Muskegon, and Battle Creek. And the first one I heard from, was from Holland, Michigan, and the city council knew [the] Grand Hotel quite well, because they used to go once a year, the city council members, to a convention on Mackinac Island at Grand Hotel. And two of the members came to our house for lunch, so I was hired in June of 1964, served out the season at Mackinac Island, and started October fifth, 1964.

JU: The last few questions I have, have to do with the tourists and the people who come from out of town. How do you feel, personally, about all the guests that Holland has during Tulip Time?

JD: Of course I started to work for Windmill Island in August, September, and by going to conventions, meeting with the touring companies, getting the advertising ready to be sent out in November, because I know that they needed the information in early January to get booklets together to send to the different customers. I always was very enthusiastic about it. I used to take the film along. I used to show it to employess in travel offices, and ... I think the job I had was just the right job for me. Working with people all the time, and working with all the people, and I mean to say, it would rain cats and dogs and I would be over at the windmill, and be inside the windmill, and says, 'Well, how are you doing? Is the rain bothering you?' [And the tourists would reply,] 'Oh no, we are away from home, and that's all [we] need. Nice enough.' And oh yeah, it is fun. It seems like the senior citizens ... it is that the senior citizen has become more sophisticated. Thirty years ago.

[Brief discussion about the vacation plans of senior citizens.]

JD: Windmill Island was members of the American Bus Association. And the National Tour Association, and that is ... they would have conventions in November and in December. That could be in Texas, or it could be in Florida, or Pennsylvania; places where you could hold three or four thousand people. And that is where
the tourist attractions or the restaurants would meet and sit across the table from the touring company owner, or his right hand from his office and you will answer questions that way, and state prices and what the entrance fee was, and show them some pictures. Some of them had never seen Windmill Island. That is one thing; when Windmill Island does not active continue with that, then it certainly will go down. And when the Island goes down, then Tulip Time goes down; it all goes together. But now, what the city is trying to do with Windmill Island, to make it as much 17th century. But to do that is quite expensive. When you build a seventeenth century Dutch building according to the drawings that the city got from the Netherlands, is very expensive. All the tourist attractions do the same thing, you put up a little step cable, make a little Dutch scene, and people don’t know the difference. What the city does do as authentic as possible is the step cable where the bricks are just laid the right way; cemented in the right way, with the nice roofing tile yet, instead of the 4x8 sheets plastic roofing tile.

JULU: What kind of experience do you think the tourists have that come here? Do you think it’s an authentic experience, as far as the Dutch culture goes I mean?

JD: As long as they see the things . . . as long as they go . . . well, they see Windmill Island which we have tried to keep as authentic as possible. Where the money is going to be made is in souvenirs. Well, Windmill Island never has put up many souvenirs shops, because we felt that it did not fit in the atmosphere. But there is where the money is being made. Now, when you go to the Netherlands Museum, or to the museum . . . Holland Museum, where they would see an awful lot of the Dutch artifacts with the descriptions underneath, or what a living room used to [look like] in the seventeenth century, then they would learn something.

Now, do senior citizens--and it depends very much on the touring company too . . . some touring companies will say we absolutely always come to Windmill Island. New Touring
companies, from which the son takes over from the father, who’s thirty years old, he himself is not looking that much for it. So, and he is getting a younger age group of senior citizens. Maybe it is the rock ‘n’ roll festival, or some going with it.

JVU: So then you think the tourists that come here, if they go to the correct places, they’re going to get a cultural experience?

JD: At least some of the Dutch flavor. When they go to the . . . to some of the older attractions down over in here, where everything is so terrible based on gift shops and so forth--nicely stalled out, nicely done--it is not as nice of an experience when you look for learning some of the Dutch culture. Nell Wichers will tell you the same thing . . .

JVU: Yes, I talked to her already.

JD: Then it comes down in terms of going to the museum where you can learn something.

JVU: Right, that’s what she was talking about.

JD: But the funniest thing is, when you have enough money to advertise, you draw. When you have not enough money to advertise, and you are not as in contact as much with the touring companies where you sit across the table from one another and explain what you have. And Windmill Island, ‘oh yeah, oh yeah, that fellow with the Dutch accent, you know. We don’t recognize your face any more, but we recognize your accent. So, when it comes down to the tourist business, I know of course hundreds of people after thirty years. The last one I went to was to Portland, Maine, to the Pennsylvania Bus Association--last year in June. My wife was with me, and we were sitting at some of the tables with many of our friends, people we have become friends with through the years, who are touring operators, and the last half an hour that we were there, I said, ‘by the way, this might be the last time you see me, because I plan to retire in the spring. That went as wild fire through that whole room, you know. Because there were many people in the touring business who were my own age group.

What does that do to Windmill Island? It could be very well
that many of them say that, 'year after year, we brought our senior citizens to Windmill Island, and we knew Jaap, and we knew what Windmill Island stood for, and we were able to say hi to him when we came at Tulip Time.' Will they continue to be loyal, and still come? I don’t know. But it is very important, that personal contact.

JVU: You’ll have to stay in contact with them once a year; keep them in line. [laughter] What does Windmill Island stand for? What would you say?

JD: Well, Windmill Island of course, is the focal point of the city. The city though, [would] never get rid of Windmill Island because they feel that it is the emblem, more or less. So, they might take in a partner to manage Windmill Island, but describe very well that after one year, [the city] expects [the partner] to [have] built maybe this, or do this, or that, or that, or that. But then, the city fathers know that they are not . . . they don’t know much about tourism, that’s the reason that the task force came into being. And it was wild, all the things what they suggested. Because it all comes down to money. When you realize how much tax money goes into the Holland Museum, or the VanRaalte Farm, and Windmill Island is owned by the city, have kept it self-supported for all these years. The city owned it, never a penny has gone into it of tax money. Now, all of a sudden they have to face up to it. The driving force behind it is gone. Now they are at a loss.

JVU: What do you see as a major problem, or the major problem with Tulip Time right now?

JD: You see, Tulip Time itself is forced to be self-supporting. The city helps by bringing the bleachers to the Civic Center, and keeps the streets clean, and puts the seats on 8th street on the cement blocks, so that is sort of the support what the city gives to Tulip Time. So, what is happening now, for instance . . . The Lawrence Welk show, they are sure that it can draw enough senior citizens. When you get other entertainers, they are not so sure about that, and many of them would say, ' We will be coming, but
first put down 50,000 dollars or 30,000 dollars. Now Tulip Time does not have that kind of money, and so . . . Tulip Time had a little bit of money. When we had a couple of good years we went and had some more bleachers built. Tulip Time will get bigger I am sure, when the city will give it more support.

JVU: So you think right now, the main problem is that right now it has to support itself, but sometimes can’t generate the money that it has to? Or the money that it would like to?

JD: Well, I mean to say there are so many that would very well say . . . well years ago with the Lawrence Welk Show, the pianist--I already forgot what his name was--he had some family trouble, and he was coming to Tulip Time, and everything was already in print, and everything had been sent out, and all of a sudden he was fired and what so ever. You see, [those are] things what can happen too, and so you expect good entertainers to come and all of a sudden . . . you see, you more or less have to already line up Tulip Time events, while in great measure you have to keep it in mind what it is three years ahead of time. And that is very difficult. And trying to get entertainers already in mind three years in advance, and then finally contact them maybe a year and a half before, and then they will say, 'on stage I will do this and that and that,' and to start out with, you have to guarantee us at least thirty or fifty dollars. And that is where the problem with Tulip Time is.

JVU: I guess another important question would be, are there any people that you can think of--specific people--in all the years that you’ve been involved with Tulip Time at Windmill Island, who have been a great help to you, or have been a great help to the festival?

JD: The person who always was the biggest helper and had the most understanding was Bill Wichers. Some people maybe disagree with him, but you see Bill Wichers was . . . they had this dream--35 years ago, 30, 35 years ago--of developing something of a Holland Village could be found in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, and the dream was there, and all of these windmill
committee people had the same dream. There’s maybe one or two left. The people who came after that, the flower children from the sixties, became windmill committee members. I was still there to help. Bill Wichers was gone, Henry Steffen was gone, Seymour Padnos after a while didn’t want to be a member anymore, then you had Russ Bouws became a member, he is gone now, Charles Conrad became a member, he is gone now, Ed Prince never got involved.

Mayor Nels Bosman was there when Windmill Island came into being; very supportive, and always there helping out with the loudspeaker system and so forth. But after a while, you had an awful lot of support from this part time type of people, but then all of a sudden, there was a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, or the fiftieth celebration of Windmill Island. One of the windmill committee members, says, ‘oh we should have this and that and this and that,’ so we thought that he would help us with that. Well when it became a little bit too much work, ‘oh you better hire someone now.’ So before you know, another couple of thousand dollars was spent on hiring someone else, of doing it, it turned out to be that day was just miserable cold weather, and it was a flop. So, people would say sit on the benches on 8th street and Nels Bosman would come by you know, and senior citizens would say, ‘Nels Bosman you should find something for us, or do something. We want to volunteer and do something.’ He said, ‘Why don’t you go to Tulip Time office, get a Dutch costume, and walk in the Tulip Gardens at Windmill Island.’ [They said] ‘That’s a good idea!’ They never did it, that was all big talk. It is with volunteers though . . . there are always two or three who work extra hard, and the other ones hang kind of on the side until two or three get overburdened. But with volunteers, I have learned that and seen that so often.

JVU: Were there any people who volunteered year after year, who really helped you out?

JD: You know, the first year . . . the second, third, fourth year was the Chamber of Commerce Jaycees helped by selling tickets at
Windmill Island. Well, finally it became more difficult [to get volunteers] so we hired our own help, and mostly Hope College Students. That has worked out well through the years. But there will come a time maybe that that is not going to work anymore either. I was always looking for so many ways, and be already weeks and months ahead of time, but since no one has—since I have not been replaced, that has come to a stand-still. So that will hurt Windmill Island, but that at the same time will hurt Tulip Time too. Some people will call in now, and say, 'oh we want you to advertise in this or that magazine. Can we make a proposal to you,' and so forth, and then the city will say, 'tell them it is on hold.' But when it is on hold, and the advertising is not visible around Battle Creek, or Lansing, or Muskegon, or Indianapolis, or Toledo, Ohio, our brochures are not distributed by distribution centers down there. Well, people won't know about it anymore then.

JVU: Before you were talking about Kristi Van Howe, and all the changes she made in the Tulip Time Festival. If you were to pick one thing that was added to the festival throughout the years that you've been involved that really changed things, what would it be?

JD: Well, I don't know how much it changed things, what did happen, she put on so many more shows. And what happened that there was those shows which were not there before, then there was no other way for the people to go [than] to the tourist attractions. Now, with all the extra shows what she did put on, this was good for Tulip Time but it was less time available to go to the tourist attractions.

JVU: So you think that's the biggest change you've seen in the years that you've been involved.

JD: I think it has . . . it brought less people to the tourist attractions, yes. Because the touring companies could be sure of sitting under a dry roof.

JVU: My last question from the paper that I had planned to ask, is what is your favorite part of the festival? If you were
coming from out of town to visit, what would you be sure to see?  

JQ: [This is] a joke. I would applaud the marshall [of the parade] as he came by in his car, because they chose this year for me to be the parade marshall in the Volks parade on Wednesday. You would say what is one of the nicest experiences? I would say that is one of those. I felt quite honored that Tulip Time chose me . . . chose me to be at the governor's luncheon. Sure I had invitations to go every year through those years to the governor's luncheon, but I never went because I always felt that my duty was Windmill Island. But this, in thirty years, was the first time I enjoyed Tulip Time. First time I went to a Lawrence Welk Show, which I enjoyed, and saw so many other thing in Tulip Time that . . .

It was a very dedicated life to Windmill Island. The first twelve years, it was on my own, from my own self, that I worked seven days a week, so Windmill Island would survive and would make a profit, and cut down on labor costs. In the last eighteen years, when I finally got a maintenance man . . . I mean to say to manage forty people all by yourself, that's not an easy. So finally I says, 'I can't do it anymore is all.' Well Windmill Island was doing so well, and we were able to add new buildings to it and so forth, and so then, yes I should have a maintenance man, who has worked for me for the last eighteen years. So I was able to take a Saturday off, because he worked Tuesday through Saturday. So, it was a very enjoyable job. I met so many people, but it was also a job with a lot of stress. I sleep so much better now, because I used to wake up at two or three o'clock in the morning, couldn't sleep anymore because I was very nervous that my mind became active, and this or that had to be done. I would already raring to go by seven o'clock or so, but then the stores were not open yet.

I do think so too, that the volunteers who do the Klompen Dancing at . . . around the park, and at Eighth street should be very much commended too. There is an awful lot of volunteers who are working very hard. I went on Thursday--the week before Tulip
Time--to the Civic Center, and says, 'I would like to buy a couple of tickets for the Lawrence Welk show. The first show on Thursday of Tulip Time.

[Brief discussion of encounter with tourist at ticket booth. Did not apply to Tulip Time.]

JD: I think that the street-scrubbing, and the dancing around the park, and having so many people involved in that--and that is not cheap now days to have a Dutch costume, like the Groningen costume made, it's like a couple hundred dollars . . .

JVU: And that's one of the styles of costumes?

JD: Well, Groningen is a province, and has its own costume style. But it was never introduced at Tulip Time, until one lady went to the Netherlands and visited some relatives and had one made down over there, and brought it over. Now they are trying to copy it as much as possible. She was the one who . . . I knew her parents in the Netherlands already. They were bakers in our hometown, and so they copied her costume quite a bit. It was all different materials, different colors, and all that, and the labor involved, yeah, a couple hundred dollars. So to be actually a Klompen dancer, this is not inexpensive.

JVU: Do you remember in the Tulip Time--I think it's been one of the Tulip Times since you have been involved--do you remember the Tulip Time when the costumes began becoming more authentic? When they were being checked for authenticity?

JD: I remember years ago too, maybe in the beginning when Tulip Time started out, pair of black pants, or all the kids had maybe a Dutch cotton hat on, and that was about it. So through the years, the costumes have become more authentic, and the lady who is in charge of the guides in Windmill Island, was also one in charge of costume inspection. And made a lot of costumes.

JVU: What was her name?

JD: Mrs. Musing. She's from Zeeland. There are more ladies too, who sewed costumes, but she is also one of the inspectors. Of
course, it is so that many girls have to choose a certain sport. They can choose in High School Klompen dancing as a sport. 

JVU: It is offered in the High Schools?
JD: So Klompen dancing is learned at the High Schools, and the boys think it's a sissy fight, so they don't want to learn it, and so they're mostly all girls. Now that was sometimes difficult for senior citizens to understand--for a girl to be in a boys costume. Because in the Netherlands, when you ever would go to a Volks fest around May fifth in the Netherlands, there is where the men and the women, mostly couples, have learned the old fashioned dances, and demonstrate that at certain holidays.

JVU: That's all the questions that I had written down here. If you can think of anything you'd like to add, any specific . . .
JD: Later on I will think about it maybe. [laughs]

-End of Interview-