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Karsten, John Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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

Interview #5
Mr. John Karsten
The Oral History of Tulip Time

 Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
19, June 1995
Oral History of Tulip Time
Interview #5

- Interview with John Karsten @ The Kletz [Hope College]
- 4271 M-40 / Holland, MI 49423
- June 19, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason V. Upchurch

Begin Tape Three: Side B

JVU: If I could get you to repeat your name and date and place of birth.

JK: Okay. My name is John Karsten, and in Dutch it's Jan Karsten. I was born in the Netherlands near the German border, [date removed], 1936. So that was before the second World War. In the Netherlands, the province of Overijssel, the town of Oldenzaal. My dad was a preacher, so we moved around from Oldenzaal--which is in the province of Overijssel--I lived for a couple of years in the province of Drenthe, and then I moved to the province of Groningen. My mother is a Fries, so with all these backgrounds, and having lived in these varied places, I can understand quite a few of the Dutch dialects--which in the Netherlands is kind of nice.

JVU: My first question is... How are you associated exactly with Tulip Time?

JK: In 1967 I moved from Chicago to Holland. Meanwhile of course, born and raised in the Netherlands, I immigrated to the United States, and that is a short story where I had this girl in the Netherlands--she was cute, she was really nice--but I started going steady with her. So the minute we went for two or three dates, she says, 'I'm going to America with my Mom and Dad.' So she left for America and I followed her, and that's how I ended up over here.

And then we moved around here a little bit, ended up in Chicago, and then we didn't like it because her mom and dad lived here, and in 1967, I moved back to Holland, Michigan. And then I
was right away approached by Harry Hoekstra and Mary Ellen Mrok—or Mary Ellen Stevenson—whether I wanted to help them with the Dutch Heritage Group, with their Dutch Heritage Show. That was then, spring, 1967. That’s how I got involved.

**JVU:** What area, or what areas of the Tulip Time festival are you involved with directly?

**JK:** Since that time I have been involved deeply with the Dutch Heritage show, and I ended up emceeing the program. But in the last couple of years it’s been hard because I was switched to second shift at Prince [Corporation], so I’ve been kind of bowing out of being with the Dutch Heritage Group, although my daughter is deeply involved, my mother-in-law is deeply involved, and I helped with the stage set-up this year yet. But as far as involvement that I had in the past, no.

But also through these years, probably in the early eighties, maybe late seventies, I was approached by Larry Overbeek. [He asked me,] ‘Will you do the Town Crier act?’ And I’m much more known for that part than the Dutch Heritage show. So the Town Crier act, I really don’t know for sure whether that was 1980, 81, or 1979, I’ve been doing that. And that’s an... of course, an annual... and that’s a much more visible type of thing than being involved with the Dutch Heritage.

**JVU:** The position of Town Crier—does that go way back in Tulip Time, or were you the original?

**JK:** No. We have history as far as Town Crier, as far back as the first or second Tulip Time after the Second World War. During the Second World War they held off a little bit. Have you seen that video by the way? [Tulip Time: A Colorful History, Leben Productions of Saugatuck]

**JVU:** Sure, yes.

**JK:** Well then you see during the Second World War they held off, because that really was not a time to celebrate, and right away after the Second World War, we have... that’s where I saw the first proof of where they had a Town Crier. Whether that was the first time, whether they introduced this Town Crier thing, that I
don’t know. The fellow who was the Town Crier, or the gentleman rather, was Clarence Jalving, who ended up being a vice president at what was then People’s State Bank—or now the Old Kent Bank. I don’t know... he was at the time a vice president, so what shall I say? A well known man in the community—Clarence Jalving.

In fact, before I came here, I went upstairs in the attic in my house and I was going to get you the picture, because I have a picture of him in an old 1946, 47, 48 Sentinel, where he was standing in the very same outfit that I’m wearing now. I couldn’t find the picture. I thought, ‘I must have let somebody use that.’ You know how that goes, you know... ‘oh you want it? Okay.’ Some other interview or some other person, or some other event where I needed that picture, and I couldn’t find it. It might be in my file. So that’s 1946, 47, 48, with the Town Crier part.

JYQ: I was wondering if you could describe any changes that you’ve noticed in the festival through the years that you’ve been involved? Maybe in the Dutch Heritage aspect of the festival since you’ve been involved with that.

JK: The big change is that when we took over the Dutch Heritage Group, it was a costume show. Back in the early 60’s, late 50’s, and it was losing its momentum—the costume show. And it was basically... it became a little bit of a, almost a dull presentation of, ‘This is [Province name?]... next. This is Utrecht... next costume. This is Friesland.’ So with the Dutch Heritage group, we tried to liven it up and Mary Ellen Mrk—who was at the time a journalist for the Holland Sentinel, at that time it was the Holland Evening Sentinel; she worked for what we called the Butler bunch, because Butler at the time used to own it—and she did a lot of research. That was then in the early 60’s, and then they started to revive this Dutch Heritage group and made it much more of a variety show, which is what it is today.

During those early years—and I got involved in 67—we did a
lot more Dutch things. Because after all we thought we had to do as much Dutch stuff as possible. But we found out it wasn’t accepted. You have to adjust it to the crowd that was there, and we did a lot of things that people... you know, Dutch singing, Dutch talking, and we got away from that real soon, because the people didn’t understand it. So even though we were as Dutch as possible, a Dutchman that would have come, they say, 'That ain’t Dutch at all.' You know, 'You do it way too American like.' But we had to, in order to make the show understandable and entertaining.

JVU: And that was when again?
JK: That was... I was involved in 1967 when I started with them. And in those years, and even before that when my mother-in-law who is still in it was involved, we did too much Dutch, and we kind of got away from this Dutch stuff. So now we have the very same songs that we sing, and the very same dances that we do, but it’s all translated and expressed in English. American English.

JVU: Do you see those changes as positive or negative?
JK: Oh yeah!

JVU: Positive?
JK: Oh yeah, it was good. And I think through out the years, we’ve kept that same format, as much English as possible, but also as educational as possible, and I think it’s been a well accepted group, well accepted show.

JVU: I’ve found it very interesting since I’ve been studying Tulip Time, the progression that the Dutch Heritage has taken in the festival, and I didn’t realize that you had been so involved in that. Is there anything else that you’d like to add about that. I know they went as in depth as checking the costumes for authenticity even?

JK: Oh yeah. Well, yeah the Klompen dancers are much more seriously involved with that, but we in the Dutch Heritage group... in fact my mother-in-law has an original Friesland costume. In fact at the time she bought that, she didn’t dare to tell her
husband what she paid for it. We’re talking four, five, six hundred dollars. Now that was expensive. She had her own, and when he asked her—in fact it was kind of like a secret in the family—she really never did say how much. It was a very expensive costume, and she still wears that original Frisian costume with a genuine Oorijzer still. That costume by the way, if I may continue with that one, my wife wore once at a costume show, or a costume contest that I went to as a Town Crier, and there were various costumes there from the various periods of the United States, and this costume won first prize. And that was in Decatur, Illinois, and that was 1989, 88, 90, something like that. So it’s now, what shall I say, a prize-winning costume. But the other costumes are all as authentic as possible.

I wear an Urk costume. U-R-K, Urk. U-R-K. And Urk used to be an island, part of the province of Overijssel—oh wow you get all involved—no longer it’s Overijssel, because now they reclaimed so much land in that area, that all this reclaimed land now together forms the twelfth province of the Netherlands called Flevoland. Okay, Urk and my costume that I wear in the Dutch Heritage show in the late eighties, was used by the costume coordinators of the Tulip Time Dutch dance bunch, and they use that then as a sample to introduce a new costume to the Klompen dancers, and I went to Urk itself and got parts—especially the Urker’s stripe—of the costume, in Urk. So that’s also an original.

We have another girl that wears a Volendam costume, and that is very colorful. She paid a good price for it, and she herself bought it in Volendam. So in the Dutch Heritage group, I think we have quite a few what we would say, original costumes, rather than bought at Field’s Fabric, who says, ‘Okay, this is as close as possible to the original fabrics.’

**JVVU:** So the Dutch Heritage Group has been very involved in going to the Netherlands and bringing back . . .

**JK:** Well, because most of the members are from the Netherlands. Harry Hoekstra, born and raised in the Netherlands . . . Now
Harry Hoekstra is another story. He was probably born in Indonesia, which was at the time part of the Netherlands as a colony, and from Indonesia he went to the Netherlands, and from the Netherlands he immigrated to here. So he has an Indonesian connection. And there are several others that are Dutch born, although the more and more we progress, us Dutch people get out, and old, and feeble, and the Americans will take over, I think it will stay.

JVU: Regarding the Dutch heritage of the festival, do you feel that Dutch pride is what brought on Tulip Time, or do you feel that Tulip Time has brought on an increase in Dutch Pride in Holland?

JK: It’s probably a combination of both. I think the original idea was the tulips, the connection with the Netherlands, and [people thought], ‘let’s use it.’ And I think especially for us original Dutchmen, we have a certain pride in that, and like that. In fact I say to my brothers and sisters who still live in the Netherlands, ‘You ought to come some time, see Tulip Time.’

JVU: What do they say?

JK: Well, it’s a bad time for them to come, because they’re all in the teaching profession--teachers and so forth. So they can’t leave just like that. The only time they come here, and they’ve been here several times, is July and August. So they can’t just like that come Tulip Time. They don’t get off for Tulip Time there you know [laughs].

JVU: Their schools don’t close? [laughter]

JK: Not for our Tulip Time, no.

JVU: How does Tulip Time here, compare to . . . I don’t know if there’s a Tulip Time there, or just the tulip festivals over there . . .

JK: I don’t think as such there is a tulip festival, but there is a Tulip Time where obviously the tulips are in full bloom, and you see hundreds of acres in the Netherlands, and you can drive for miles and see all these fields of tulips, which are awesome. Now we were there again this spring. We go every other year. We
usually get there a little too early because I try to go when I can still go on a winter ticket, and then you got to either buy your ticket or complete your flight before March thirty-one. But we were there again this year, and we saw the famous Keukenhof, which is awesome.

But I think a Tulip Time compare with us and there, it's on a lot larger scale, but not so compact. Where we compact it all in now ten days--originally as short as four days--there it's during the whole period that the tulips bloom. Keukenhof which is, what shall I say, the headquarters, if you want to say it, of the gardens, is open I think from late March to the end of May. And that is, what shall I say, the nucleus in the Netherlands, of the tulip event. And that is awesome.

Keukenhof, in comparison to us, they take advantage of the local growers, and they have . . . it's probably let's say a fifty acre sight, and all the growers in the area--let's say a couple hundred--can have a little section, and they show off their own little landscape patch tulips. It's unbelievable, all these growers competing, and that's Tulip Time in the Netherlands.

JVU: That sounds almost like how Tulip Time started here, with people planting their own beds, and . . . very similar.

JK: Yes, same type of an idea.

JVU: My next question I guess also deals with ethnic heritage. Holland has become more ethnically diverse in the last few years . . .

JK: Positive.

JVU: How do you think that has affected the festival? If at all?

JK: I think it's good. You know, it makes you more diversified, it makes you more . . . it's awful cute to see a black person in a Dutch costume. Not that in the Netherlands there are no blacks. In fact the Netherlands has the islands of Curacao and Aruba, and if you come there, you see totally dark people talking perfectly Dutch, because they were part of the Dutch colonies. So it is cute to see that. I think it's nice.
JVU: My next set of questions deals with some more personal memories of the festival, and as a matter of fact that is the first question. What specific memories do you have of past Tulip Times that stand out to you as particularly special or just memorable?

JK: It was always neat, when I was with the Dutch Heritage group, that we participated in that time in the early years—and I'm talking now again 67, 68, 69, and so forth—that we were allowed, and we are still allowed to do it, but it's always a matter of does anybody have time to do it, and we participated in the Wednesday Volks Parade. That was before I was the Town Crier. So I participated quite a few years in the Volks parade, and we were always...we didn't ask for permission because we knew we wouldn't have a problem, but we were always able to give the governor a herring. And then I demonstrated it to the governor, how you had to eat the herring, and that's a specific Dutch...I mean you can go anywhere in the world, but only in the Netherlands you can see people by a fish stand, get a herring, lift it way up above their head, and slide it right in. And I have actually a picture of governor Romney, so this dates back quite a ways, eating a herring like that. That was always unique, with the herring cart, and then along the way, I'm pretty sure Roger [Stroh] would probably [have] objected if we had officially asked him, we handed out sample herring, which was a typical of course Dutch thing, the herring see. And those were the unique things that we did in the early days.

JVU: About what year was that?

JK: I would really have to go into it exactly, but we started that again in 1967, 68, 69, and as far as I can recall, I've met every governor that way on a personal basis so to speak.

JVU: Feeding them herring.

JK: Feeding them herring, [laughs] and after that of course with the fact that I was a Town Crier. So that was unique, that was neat.

JVU: Are there any specific people here in Holland, or anywhere,
that you associate with Tulip Time directly?

**JK:** Yeah, the people that got me involved in Tulip Time. So again, it was Harry Hoekstra. I don’t know if you’ve interviewed Harry.

**JVU:** No I haven’t.

**JK:** Have you heard of him?

**JVU:** I’ve heard of him.

**JK:** Harry Hoekstra; very capable, very nice fellow, and he was the emcee, along with Mary Ellen, for years of the Dutch Heritage group, and he’s very knowledgeable. I talk a lot, but he’s got the brains [taps forehead], you know. He’s worth while talking to, and he’s the one who got me involved. Harry Hoekstra.

[Brief exchange of phone numbers for Harry & Corrie Hoekstra]

**JK** At the time of course, there was Mary Ellen, who was very deeply involved with the show, and then she got married to I think to a fellow by the name of Stevenson, and then she moved out of town. He worked for the CIA, and I think he was involved even in Viet Nam and stuff, and she moved to Washington, D.C. She did move back to town, and I would say about five, six years ago, she actually came and saw the show. And I think at that time she wanted to get involved again, but it wouldn’t work. I don’t know quite what happened. Mary Ellen Stevenson

Larry Overbeek of course was the one that asked me . . .

**JVU:** I sent a letter to him. I’m supposed to get in touch with him . . .

**JK:** Yeah, Larry I think is . . . I don’t know whether he’s still involved or not, but again, if you saw the tape then you know Larry’s involvement. That dates back to when he was a little kid. My involvement only is from the day that I came, or shall I say moved in to town, in 1967.

**JVU:** My next question is, what has Tulip Time meant to you, what do you see as Tulip Time standing for?

**JK:** Fun. It’s just fun to do it. Of course being involved, and
then see all these crowds . . . for instance, to do the show. In a way we almost get, what shall I say, sick of it by the time Saturday rolls around. 'Aah, we’re done with it!' [rolls his head] But every time you do the show, and it’s the same show . . . it’s like doing "Hello, Dolly!" twenty, thirty years--I can’t imagine you know. But you do the show, and you have rehearsals starting in February, March and you do the show five, six times, then by the time Saturday rolls around you’re sick of it. But every time you do the show, you see these four, five, eight hundred people comes, and they like it, and they sing along and it makes you feel good. Then you know that we have something that is . . . what shall I say . . . now you know why people come. Because it’s unusual.

JVU: What do you think it means specifically for the Dutch population in Holland?

JK: Oh, I think it’s good for them. Of course you have always this side of the group of people that . . . 'Tulip Time, I’ll get out of town.' You know, all these crazy tourists. But I think the majority people think it is good. But I work with a fellow for instance . . . 'Oh no, Tulip Time, I hate it. All these crazy tourists, we can’t wait to get out of town.' You know, and he never saw anything of it. That way you don’t know what you’re missing. 'Oh I don’t want to see all that stuff.'

JVU: That leads into my next set of questions, that is about the people who come here for Tulip Time. How do you feel about the guests that come to Holland during Tulip Time?

JK: Oh, I think it’s nice to see all these people come, and especially if you realize what, all the various states? You know Pennsylvania’s far, sometimes Texas. You know, when we’re in the show, we do the same thing that a lot of these shows do, ‘Where you from?’ You know. ‘California!’ [waves hand] ‘Texas, Wyoming!’ Because the majority come from what? Indiana probably. Illinois, and it’s nice to see that.

JVU: What’s the farthest away that you’ve ever experienced somebody coming from to see Tulip Time?
JK: Oh I’m pretty sure we’ve had several times that we’ve had people actually from the Netherlands. Because then they’re here visiting relatives, and then they are . . . and that happens many times. Quite often we talk to them, and we have quite often Canadians. You know, they immigrated to Canada, come here, and then we do the Dutch things, and sometimes they critique us. ‘That’s not the way it was in the Netherlands.’

‘Yeah, we know, but we kind of made it fit in.’

And we sing the Dutch anthem for instance, during the Dutch Heritage group, and then you see quite a few people, ‘Hmmm . . . must be from the old country,’ they sing it along you know. We get them from all over.

JVU: What kind of experience do you think the people have that come here?

JK: Oh I think there again, depends on the people; what they expect. I think that most of them would say, ‘That was neat, I ought to go there again some time.’ or, ‘I ought to tell so and so about that.’ I think the majority of people, and that’s why I think we’re so successful, the majority of the people love it.

JVU: What about on a cultural level? Do you think they get an authentic Dutch experience?

JK: It depends on which shows they see. You know, I belong to the Central Wesleyan Church, and we put on--I think it used to be called "The Power and The Glory--now it’s "I Love America" Something. In a way, that has nothing to do with Dutch, but it’s a nice patriotic show, and of course if you see the Lawrence Welk people, that’s got nothing to do with the Dutch, but it’s a nice show. And I’ve been several times to the Barber Shop Quartets, you know, it’s a nice show but it doesn’t do nothing for the Dutch. But there’s a lot of shows, like our Dutch Heritage Group, and if you see the Dutch Windmill, if you see Dutch Village, The Wooden Shoe Factory [on 31], you know, that’s where they see all this Dutch stuff. And they do a nice job.

JVU: They think that’s an authentic experience then, the way [the Netherlands] been recreated?
JK: Oh yeah, and I know that the fellows from Veldheer, and from the Wooden Shoe, they go to the Netherlands themselves. I had lunch with one guy the other day, from Veldheer, and oh yeah . . . he goes every year. Every fall he goes to the Netherlands to try and pick up some Dutch stuff, and do some Dutch things. You know, do it as Dutchy as possible, and they do a good job.

JVU: Your position in Tulip Time, recently your public position as the Town Crier, you must get to deal with a lot of people from out of town.

JK: Oh yeah, I get a lot of comments.

JVU: What are some of the sentiments that people have expressed to you about the festival.

JK: Mostly the comments you get is about the weather. You know, the general type of thing. But otherwise, as far as personal things, not so much I think. Especially because as a Town Crier, as I do my Town Crying act, I really don’t have no time to talk. I just hoot and holler down the parade, and by the time I get to the end I got a headache. In other words, when I do my Town Crying thing--I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it, did you ever actually see the parade?--you know, then you see, oh boy, I’m tired by time you get to the end, and you really don’t have much time to talk.

JVU: So no tourists have ever spoken to you regarding how they feel about the festival really?

JK: Not that I can personally remember at this time, no.

JVU: What do you see, if any, as a major problem for Tulip Time right now, or in the past?

JK: Traffic. You know, for the locals as well as the you know. But I would say it’s a good problem, but it’s a problem, and you can’t overcome that. You can’t just like that for Tulip Time all of a sudden make everything a five lane road. If this was . . . it’s like a downtown Chicago, or a downtown Los Angeles for a couple of days, and they can adjust their traffic accordingly, and make it better, and make one ways here, and one way there. But here we are for three days, and we pack half a million in
town, you know, so traffic is probably the biggest problem. And not being able to control the weather, you know. But it’s a good problem, and I think that considering, they do really well. 

JVU: What about regarding the festival itself, the way it works, the events, any challenges they have there, any problems that sometimes arise?

JK: Well, I’ll tell you the trick of it is to keep it as attractive as possible, and I’m pretty sure that the board struggled with that every year, ‘What shall we do new? What shall we change? Shall we have another parade? Should we have a parade on Saturday before, and all the problems you had. I don’t know if you read that in the papers and stuff . . .

JVU: About the fourth parade?

JK: About the fourth parade that they were going to do, and I thought was a great idea. But then we had a problem with the Latino combination, the Latino people because they had their festival and they didn’t want to get crowded out.

JVU: The Cinco de Mayo festival?

JK: Yes, whatever they call it. And that is a good festival, and you don’t want to mess around with that either you know. So it’s a hard thing to do. I still like the idea, and I don’t know whether they could proceed and do that or not. Hard to say.

JVU: Do you see the festival facing any challenges for the future, or is that it basically?

JK: Yeah, I think that’s . . . yeah, to keep it alive is a struggle you know, but they’re doing well, and I think they continually . . . and over the years you see all these changes you know, and I’m pretty sure we’re going to see changes in the future that at this point . . . but that’s what the board is for.

JVU: Really, I only have one other question on the paper here; I always think of others along the way. What is your personal favorite part of Tulip Time?

JK: Klompen dancers and Tulip. I enjoy the tulip lanes. I am a runner, you know, so I like to run the tulip lanes. And the Klompen dancers. Of all things, those are two free things.
Don’t cost you a dime, maybe that’s why I’m Dutch [laughs], but I’ve seen just about all the shows too of course. But that is just amazing, to see . . . you know, go all the way down eighth street, all the way around Kollen Park to see these thousand, or sometimes fourteen hundred people dancing in step and doing an awesome job. To me that’s . . . Windmill Island is of course awesome. Every time I have visitors from the Netherlands, I try to take them to Windmill Island, you know. Veldheer, Wooden Shoe--they’re all good attractions.

-End of Interview-