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Overbeek, Larry Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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

Interview #8
Mr. Larry Overbeek
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
22, June 1995
Oral History of Tulip Time
Interview #8

- Interview with Larry Overbeek @ his office in The Phoenix Building
- 3530 Elderwood Drive / Holland, MI 49423
- 22 June, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason V. Upchurch

Begin Tape 5 : Side B

LO: My name is Larry Overbeek. I was born in Holland, Michigan on [date removed], 1932.

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

LO: My association with Tulip Time goes back to my grade school days, starting in the kindergarten, first grade, and being in the parades, and then going up through being president of the Tulip Time board at the fiftieth Tulip Time, which I believe was 1979, and being chairman of the Wednesday parade for eighteen years.

JVU: And those eighteen years were during what years?

LO: Those eighteen years ended two years ago, so that would have ended in 1993, so if we go back, it must have started in '75. The highlight of those eighteen years was I never got rained out. Eighteen years without being rained out.

JVU: You were the president of the board for the fiftieth anniversary of Tulip Time. What was that like? Was there anything special that happened during that year.

LO: Yes, there was a lot of specials, and a lot of new things that year. That was the first year for the Stars of the Lawrence Welk Show. Tulip Time had--years before that--tried big name entertainment and had lost a lot of money on it, and so they didn't do it for years, and at the fiftieth once again tried nationally known entertainers, and the entertainment was the Stars of the Lawrence Welk Show and it went over real good that year. It was a big hit. In fact they've been here every year
since.

JVU: How did that movement towards big name celebrities and entertainment compare to the [1930’s] when Holland Furnace was bringing in celebrities from Hollywood?

LO: Well, the big difference was that the Holland Furnace Company brought in some stars like Dorothy LaMoore--and I think George Raft--not to provide entertainment, [but] just to be here. So the Furnace Co. paid for them to come--paid their expenses anyway--but they were sort of just on display; they didn’t do any entertaining, where as the Welk Show, the people put on a performance and it was entertainment for the crowds. That was the big difference.

JVU: I’d like you to describe, if you could, any changes that you’ve noticed in the festival over the years. I know there’s been quite a few, but the ones that stand out to you.

LO: Sure. I guess the biggest changes have been in the area of things like corporate sponsorship which allows Tulip Time to do things they couldn’t do on a more limited budget. It’s progress, I’m sure, sometimes I think the old small town flavor wasn’t all bad that the Tulip Time had, the non-commercial. I understand there was a hundred vendors for example, a hundred wagons in town this year, and that’s becoming more and more of a . . . oh, it’s taken on a little bit more of a carnival atmosphere, although it certainly is not a carnival at this point--and I hope it doesn’t ever become a carnival. But there’s a little bit more of that flavor each year. On the other hand, some of the things that have happened, have been real good. I think the Friday night show at Kollen Park is an excellent addition.

JVU: And that’s the fireworks display?

LO: Yes, fireworks. And the Klompen dancers and the water show, and that sort of thing. I guess, and I have mixed emotions about going to ten days for the festival. At one time it was ten, and then it was shortened, and now it’s back to ten days, and I have real mixed emotions about that. I think if you sell it as a ten-day festival but you really have all the activities in the last
four days, then maybe all the people that come the first six days are short changed a little. I think if Tulip Time can find a way to provide some entertainment and some things on that weekend, on that first weekend, they need to really . . . if they're going to sell it as a ten-day festival they need to have something going on for ten days.

And then of course the other thing that I've seen over the years when I was a little youngster, was all automobile. The people who came from out of town all came by automobiles; today there's hundreds of tour buses, and certainly one of the changes is the bus tours as opposed to individual automobiles.

JLVU: To get back to the idea of Tulip Time starting to seem more and more like a carnival each year. How do you think that holds with the initial intent of the festival? Do you think it can stand along the same lines as the festival was initially meant to be, as a community . . . sort of community pride event, or do you think that takes away from that?

LO: Oh I think it takes away from it. That's why I said, 'I hope it never becomes a carnival.' The worst thing [that] could happen, would be to have carnival type rides and that sort of thing like some of the festivals have. I think some of that is inevitable. I don't think you can market it today as an outstanding festival, and have it still be a small community event. So I guess some of that sort of thing is inevitable. I don't know that that's a desirable change as far as the quality of the festival, and certainly it's something that the board should do it's best to control.

JLVU: Some of these changes that you've mentioned, do see them as positive or negative for the festival?

LO: I think some, like the bus tours, is very positive. I think it brings a lot of people in, particularly older people who wouldn't be able to drive the distances that some of the buses come. I see that as very positive. As a general sort of rule, I think the changes have been good. It's being marketed far more effectively than it was at one time, and certainly sold on a
broader scale, and that’s good.

JVU: Where do you think that first began, the expanded marketing?
LO: I think that that really took a quantum leap if you will, when Kristi Van Howe was the manager. I think Krisi did a good job of promoting, and I think she had a little broader view of the marketing possibilities. I think that Kristi Van Howe is really the one that was a big influence behind the broader marketing.

JVU: I’d like to talk now just a little bit about the Dutch heritage of Holland and the Tulip Time festival. The first question is, do you think that Dutch pride has affected Tulip Time, or do you think Tulip Time has been sort of the catalyst for what’s brought on a rise in Dutch pride in Holland?
LO: Well, I’m not sure there is a rise in Dutch pride in Holland. I would hope that there was, but I’m not sure that there is. Holland is not the Dutch community that it was when Tulip Time started. That’s just a fact of life. Sometimes I think the non-Dutch people who come to Holland get more out of it, put more into Tulip Time than some of the Dutch people do, so I guess I’m not sure that the Dutch Pride is maybe where it sometimes should be. The Dutch immigrants I think, have tended to be more Americanized faster than maybe many immigrants. They want to be Americans, they didn’t want to be Dutchman. So I guess maybe the festival was better for Dutch pride, than vice versa.

JVU: You just mentioned that Holland isn’t the Dutch community that it used to be, and that is the next question actually. Holland has become more ethnically diverse . . .
LO: Very much so.

JVU: and how do you think that has effected the festival?
LO: It’s a hard question for me to answer without sounding like a bigot. I don’t think the diversity has had a positive impact on the festival. I see nothing wrong with having a totally Dutch flavor to a Tulip Time festival, and the diversity I know is there, but if we get away from the idea that it is a Dutch cultural festival, then I think we miss something. It’s not a
United Nations festival, it’s a Dutch festival, and I see nothing wrong with that. If you lose that sense of direction with it, you lose something.

JVU: Just to clarify, because this is going to be transcribed just as it comes out on the tape, you’re not saying that the ethnic diversity in Holland is a negative factor.

LO: Not for the community, no. I’m just saying for the festival maybe. No, certainly not for the community. I think Holland is a better place, by far, than it was. But, for the festival, I don’t know that that’s a good thing.

JVU: Is there anything else you want to say about that?

LO: No...

JVU: Is that something that you think should be taken up by the Tulip Time committee?

LO: No, I don’t think that they need to address it directly, but I think it’s something that we all need to keep in mind. It is still supposed to be a Dutch festival.

JVU: What specific memories do you have of past Tulip Times that stand out as particularly special or memorable?

LO: Well, certainly my early memories of Tulip Time are very, very good, and very favorable. When I was in the first grade, the kindergarten teacher was Margaret Van Vyven, and she had a kindergarten band in the Tulip Time, and she asked me to be the drum major of the kindergarten band. Certainly I didn’t have any musical talent, or drum major talents, but it was quite a highlight to march in the parade as the drum major of the kindergarten band.

But all my early memories of Tulip Time—the crowds, the people, the tulips, the festival parades—are all very favorable. It was a fun time, and a good time. I think maybe that everybody, because it was new, enjoyed it more in those days. There are some people in Holland who don’t enjoy Tulip Time today, they think it’s just a hassle. I think those early years were... the community spirit of fun and ‘boy this is great,’ was a little better than it is today, but certainly my early
memories are very favorable. All the traffic and things were not... we didn’t see it as a negative, we saw it as just a fun time.

For a number of years I was not involved, and then when I was in the Jaycees as a parade marshal for the Wednesday parade, and I’ve always enjoyed that part of it. I think the street scrubbing is a uniquely Dutch aspect of the parade, and so I guess the Wednesday parade for me has always been a fun time. Full of good memories. I can’t even begin to, off the top of my head, select one or two that are good. There have been all sorts of things.

I remember one year, a lady came, [and] instead of bringing her broom, she brought a vacuum cleaner on wheels, and pulled her vacuum in the parade instead of having a broom to clean the streets. All sorts of interesting things like that have happened. Certainly it’s been fun to meet and say hello to the governors over the years, and some of the dignitaries that have been here. I remember presenting Gerald Ford a Tulip Time poster when he was president. That was a highlight.

Being involved, on the board and the parade and things, I think it’s been very interesting to see some of the things behind the scenes. Got to know some of the Lawrence Welk people for example, who were just absolutely delightfully nice people as well as good entertainers.. They’re just really nice, nice people to know, and I think that’s true of many of the people who have been here as dignitaries or elected officials or well-known people. They’re just nice people, just been fun to know.

JVU: You touched on when you were a child marching in the Tulip Time parade, and in recent years, especially, there’s been the emphasis on children in the festival. Do you remember there being a sense of the importance of the children in the festival back then?

LO: I sure do. Yeah, the children were a big part of the parades. The kids are a real attraction, particularly for the people from out of town; for the parents and the people who come
from out of town, the kids are great. So, yes, the kids have always been an important part of Tulip Time, and a very... you know they are the "cute" part of Tulip Time, and they really are; they look delightful.

JYU: I guess you may have answered this already, but I have a feeling there’s other answers to the question. Are there any specific people you associate with Tulip Time, and why?

LO: Yes, there certainly are, because of their long, long years of involvement. Going back to Margaret Van Vyven, who was my kindergarten teacher, who’s always been a supporter. I had a biology teacher in High School [who was] Lida Rogers, who was the gal who initially suggested Tulip Time. Certainly I remember her. She was a little older by the time I got into High School, but I remember her involvement. And then I guess, the parades... people like Henry Vander Linde, who, goodness, I don’t know how many Tulip Time parades Henry was in with his band, but certainly people like that, who were there for just years and years.

Some of the Tulip Time staff at the office. Over the years there’s been a turn-over of course, but some of the gals that worked in the office—Pauline Vander Kooi was the office manager for years, and certainly I associate her with Tulip Time. Bill Vande Water I didn’t know real well, but Bill Vande Water was involved for years, I think was the Tulip Time manager for a number of years. So over the years, there’s people who stand out in my mind because of their involvement over a long period of time.

JYU: Let’s talk about Lida Rogers for a little bit. Do you remember any of her early involvement with the festival? Any of the proposals she made?

LO: No, I don’t that was before really I was... that was before my time.

JYU: That was very early on...

LO: Yes. By the time I knew her, and was in high school, she was a biology teacher, and a very good one, but was quite... I
wouldn’t want to guess how old she was, but she was quite elderly. Teachers taught beyond sixty and sixty-five in those days, and so she was quite elderly. So, no, I don’t remember her early suggestions regarding Tulip Time.

**JVU:** Did she ever make mention of them?

**LO:** Oh yes. She was very proud of Tulip Time, she was very proud of her involvement in the initiation of it, and yes, she talked about it. Sure, she mentioned it.

**JVU:** Do you remember any stories she told about it?

**LO:** No, I really don’t. No.

**JVU:** You’ve been involved with all different aspects of the festival for so long, what has Tulip Time meant to you year after year?

**LO:** I think Tulip Time has meant a couple of things to me. First of all, obviously, it is a tremendous boost to the city of Holland, both financially, and for the reputation of Holland; making Holland widely known. I don’t think the financial impact can even really be totally appreciated by anybody. I think Tulip Time obviously has an impact on Holland fifty-two weeks a year financially. The other thing that I’ve always thought is one of the real strengths of Tulip Time, one of the things that made it great for the city, was it’s really the only project, if you will, or event where everybody in the city comes together to work towards one goal. The Christian schools, the Catholic schools, the Public schools, what other event do they all work on together? I think it’s the only one. West Ottawa, Holland, all the surrounding . . . Zeeland. Because of the involvement of the schools, the bands, the people, the Dutch dancers, I think it’s the only event where all of those groups all come together working towards a common goal. I think that’s been excellent for the city.

**JVU:** Speaking of the city, my next set of questions deals with the tourists that come to the city throughout the festival. How do you feel personally about all the guests that Holland draws during the festival?
LO: Oh I think it's wonderful. I think that people that don't
like the tourists, don't understand the situation. They're isn't
a community in the United States of this size that wouldn't give
anything to have a festival like that, that draws the number of
people that Tulip Time draws. I think it's wonderful. I think
the tourists are great, and I think it's fun to see them. So
it's a little busy for a couple of days. Go to some big city and
face that every day, you might get sick of it, but you do it for
three or four days in Holland and it's just fun. I think the
tourists are great.

JVU: How does it compare now? You mentioned the difference
between cars and buses. How [does] the tourist situation now
compare to, say, thirty years ago?

LO: I think what has happened with tour buses promoting it with
the senior citizen type groups, has made the age of the average
tourist a little higher. I think thirty years ago--particularly
like for example on Saturday--a lot of families used to drive in
from the area. Maybe they still do, but maybe we don't see quite
so much of them because there's so many older people coming on
buses. So I think the effect of the buses has been to make it a
more mature group of tourists.

Part of the reason of course for that, is it's held at a
time of year when school is still on. It's hard for young
families to get away when school's on. It's not hard, it's
impossible. So if there was a way to promote the festival to
younger families, I think it would be wonderful, but I don't know
that that's feasible because of the time of year that the tulips
bloom. You have to have it when the tulips are in bloom, and
that's in May, and that's when school is still on.

JVU: The tourists that come here--what kind of experience do you
think they have? Experiencing our community, and also on a
cultural level, the Dutch experience here.

LO: Oh, I think it's very favorable. I have seldom talked with
tourists--and I used to make it a point to talk to some of them,
particularly on the Wednesday parade day--and I very seldom
talked with tourists that did not have a very favorable impression of both the festival and the community. I think the general feeling of the tourists who come here, and I guess maybe the best way to do that would be to ride at the end of the parade as we did each year as parade marshals, and go past the bleachers where it was almost all tourists rather than local people in the bleachers, and to hear the things that those people would call out to you, and hear the applause, and see the smiles, and there's no doubt in your mind that they're enjoying it. They're having a good time.

JVU: What are some of the things they would call out?
LO: Oh, they'd say, 'Nice parade!' and 'Great job!' and all sorts of things. Now, I will say that if the weather was overcast or a little cool—we didn't get rained out in eighteen years, but we did have some cloudy cool days—the smiles tend to be a little smaller, particularly if it was cold, and people were more subdued. But if you get a beautiful warm sunny day, they were just absolutely, thoroughly enjoying it.

JVU: What about on a cultural level? Do you think it's an authentic Dutch experience that they have when they come here, and see the windmill, or Wooden Shoe Factory?
LO: You know, I've not spent enough time in the Netherlands to know whether it's authentic, or how authentic it is, but certainly the windmill is authentic, and I think... I don't know that they have wooden shoe carvers on a regular basis in the Netherlands anymore, but I'm sure they did at one time. So I think it's pretty much a good authentic experience for the people. I think it's something that you don't see elsewhere, and so I think from a cultural viewpoint, the festival does a good job.

JVU: I sort of asked this before, because you had mentioned the crowds calling out from the bleachers, but could you describe any other of the sentiments that the tourists and guests have expressed to you over the years regarding Tulip Time?
LO: Well, I think the tourists, and any visitor to Holland, one
of the things that impresses them is how clean Holland is, and that’s one of the things the tourists commented on; how clean and neat the city of Holland is. I think if you travel, you do see that. You go elsewhere, particularly in the South, and you don’t see the neatly trimmed lawns and all the things that Holland is justly proud of in their Dutch cleanliness if you will. So, I think the tourists have an impression of a very clean, neat, well-kept city. I think by and large the tourists think the natives are very friendly at Tulip Time. I think that they see the Holland Community as being friendly, helpful; glad to have them here.

JVU: Do you think that view of Holland that the tourists have, has changed at all over the years?
LO: I would suppose so. That’s a hard one for me to answer. I don’t know what the tourist viewpoint is, but I think they’re probably seeing some changes. As Holland becomes more cosmopolitan, bigger city, we face big city problems, and I think that certainly those are all negatives. A big city tends not to be as friendly for example as a small town, and Holland is still relatively small, but certainly growing and getting bigger. So I think you lose some of that small town, friendly atmosphere. I would suppose they notice it. I think that the citizens of Holland still put their best foot forward during Tulip Time. I think you might find less of an impact of the growth during Tulip Time than you would some of the other times of the year.

JVU: Do you think that the sense of community that started Tulip Time has suffered in the [65 years of Tulip Time]?
LO: No, I think if anything, Tulip Time has helped to preserve that sense of community. It might not be as strong as it was when it started, but certainly I believe that Tulip Time has helped in a large way to preserve that sense of community, and encourage it.

JVU: What do you see as a--if you see any--as a major problem with Tulip Time, or a minor one?
LO: Oh my. Major or minor problem with Tulip Time?
JVU: Even problems that have arisen in the past that have already been taken care of.

JVU: Well, I think one of the problems is something I alluded to earlier, and that is: if you extend the length of the festival, you have to extend the amount of things that are available for people to do. I'm not sure that you can have a ten day festival, with the quality of attractions that you can with a four day festival. It could be very difficult to have ten days of the amount and quality attractions you have at a four day festival. So I see that as a problem for the board of directors to face, and I think they are addressing that. I think they aren't so sure that maybe ten days is exactly the right way to go.

I don't know that I would see any major problems. Again, a minor problem is something I mentioned earlier, and that's the carnival atmosphere. They have to constantly be on guard against the carnival, commercial sort of flavor that Tulip Time has, I think, traditionally fought against; tried to stay away from. I don't see any major problems.

JVU: What about challenges that the festival might face in the future?

LO: A challenge would be to try to find a way to attract a younger crowd. Like I said, I don't know if that's possible but that would certainly be a challenge. Another challenge, is to provide quality entertainment that I think people have come to sort of expect. I think the Stars of the [Lawrence] Welk Show was an excellent attraction, and did a great job. But, I think they've come here now for over fifteen years, and I think there's a limit to how often you can do that same thing. It was great, because they started to attract a different age group, but I think they need to look towards something new and different.

Now this year was the Smothers Brothers, which I think was a good show. After that, Tammy Wynette, country and western music always seems to be fairly popular, particularly with older people. But I think one of the major challenges is to present quality entertainment that will provide the kind of entertainment
these people deserve when they come as far as they do to come to Holland.

JYU: What is, personally, your favorite part of Tulip Time?
LO: The Wednesday parade [Volks Parade], no doubt. The Wednesday parade. And that’s because of my involvement with it for so many years. I think that the Wednesday parade is certainly my highlight.

JYU: How did you first become a part of that parade?
LO: When I was in the Jaycees, the Jaycees provided . . . were asked to furnish parade marshals for the parade, and so a number of us volunteered to act as parade marshals, and that’s how my involvement with that parade started.

JYU: So, through a community . . .
LO: Organization.

JYU: That’s also been a big part of the festival. The community organizations have been almost as much a part of the festival as the children.

LO: Sure. You get things like all the churches involved. Many, many churches prepare meals for tourists and that sort of thing. And again, it’s the only event where you get the Christian Reformed, and the Reformed, and the Presbyterians, and all the different denominations involved in the same project.

LO: How would you say the involvement of groups like the Jaycees and the Woman’s Literary Club who have been involved with the festival for a long period of time, how would you say their involvement progressed? Have they become more involved over the years, less involved, about the same?

JYU: I think the involvement has changed. When I started as a Jaycee, we did it strictly as a volunteer project. We did it to help out Tulip Time as volunteers. I think the involvement today of almost all the groups, I can’t think of one that doesn’t do it as a profit-making venture. The Literary Club serves lunches, and I think has a quilt show or something. The Lion’s Club serves chicken dinners, and I think all the involvement today of all the organizations involves making money. That’s not
necessarily all bad, that's just the way it is today.

JVU: How does that differ from the early days of the festival, or earlier days.

LO: I don't think there's as much volunteerism as there was at one time. When I first got involved, you know, the Tulip Time was run by a part time staff of three or four girls working out of a little office in the Civic Center, and a part time manager that was paid very little and worked for the festival for a few months. It's grown from that to, and then in those days a lot . .. more volunteers than there are today. There still is volunteers, but not to the extent there was then. So it's grown from that to a full time staff, year round director. Again, that's not bad. I think as the festival grows and matures, it has to do that sort of thing. I don't think it could run today with a part time manager. But I think there's less . .. there's certainly less feeling of volunteerism. People get paid today for a lot of things that volunteers used to do.

JVU: How much of the decline in volunteerism and the rise in "Tulip capitalism" would you attribute to the new marketing machine that was created by Kristi Van Howe, and now continues to be worked on by Mary Duistermars?

LO: That had an impact. You know, the two went hand in hand. In order to market it they had to have money, they had to have a full time director, and in order to have a full time director and do that, they had to raise money, so the two went hand in hand.

JVU: Not to say that that's bad.

LO: No, I think if that hadn't happened, the festival would slowly die. I think you either go ahead, and progress, or you die, and I think that .. .. no, I'm not saying that that's bad, or being critical of that; it's just different. It's not bad, it's just different.

JVU: Just one last question I guess: When Tulip Time rolls around in the spring, do you plant tulips in your yard?

LO: [laughs] Well, we do have a few tulips in the yard, but I've sort of given up part of my job, and sort of semi-retired, and we
plan to spend the winter in Florida. [And] Last year we came back on the first of May, but next year we’re not coming back until the first of June, so I’m afraid I may miss Tulip Time next year.

-End of Interview-