

Orange City's May Festival

Each May, when the sun is warm on the clipped lawns and tulips are in bloom around the white houses of Orange City, the local citizens doff their everyday clothes and don the costumes of a distant homeland. They walk stiff-legged in wooden shoes to where the music is the loudest — down to the business district, where more and more visitors are crowding the sidewalks and the city park. It's the day of the annual May Festival.

Practically all Orange Citians are immigrants from the Netherlands or descendants of Dutch people who came from the Old Country. The handful of residents who constitute the "foreign element" cannot be distinguished from the true Dutchmen at festival time. They might appear more awkward in their wooden shoes, but their costumes are just as genuine.

For years before a tulip celebration was ever contemplated, most Orange City yards had tulips, bought from H. Geselschap, druggist. But attention was not centered on the tulip until some years after Edward Bolluyt, who had been intimately associated with tulip culture in Holland, came to Orange City in September, 1924.

Mr. Bolluyt was born in Lisse, Zuid Holland,

the Netherlands, and started work at the age of twelve for H. De Graaff & Sons, bulb growers and exporters at Lisse. When he came to America he brought a few bulbs with him and eventually planted them in the front yard of the lumber yard he managed. The bed was made larger with excess stock from the druggist *Geselschap*. Year after year more tulips were added until the flowers extended for one full block, and half around the lumber yard.

In May, 1935, Dr. Edward Fisher, Orange City veterinarian, walked into Bolluyt's office with a Tulip Time edition of the *Pella Chronicle* in his hand. "Why can't we do something like that?" he asked. "We've got lots of tulips."

Dr. Fisher took Bolluyt to a noon meeting of the Orange City Lions Club, and before the session was over, club members had purchased 20,000 bulbs at three cents each. Before fall, 50,000 bulbs had been purchased by the townspeople, and the tulip boom was on in Orange City.

The first official mention of a tulip celebration in Orange City is to be found in the minutes of the Chamber of Commerce for February 24, 1936. The record reads: "Mr. Bolluyt then gave a short talk regarding a Tulip Day some time in May and requested the Chamber get behind and push it" — a suggestion the organization approved.

But snow was drifted to the eaves that season, and for most of February the temperature was

around seventeen degrees below zero. Floods held everyone's attention during March, and Tulip Day plans were shoved aside until April 8, when the director of the Chamber arranged a program, officially named the proposed celebration the "May Festival," and announced the date for May 14.

A better day could not have been picked for the festival. The sun was bright, the tulips were long stemmed, big, and beautiful; 3,500 camera-happy visitors descended on the town and ate all the hamburgers and drank all the pop before the celebration had officially started.

The program for this first May Festival began at one o'clock with a parade of forty floats for which prizes of twenty-five, fifteen, and ten dollars were awarded later in the afternoon. After the parade came a costume contest sponsored by the Woman's Club, followed by drills presented by the Le Mars Drum and Bugle Corps. A strong man "Tom Tom" act offered light entertainment for the mid-afternoon crowd. A sing by the Friesian Society and concerts by the Northwestern Junior College and Orange City High School bands concluded the afternoon's event. In the evening the Sioux City Symphony Orchestra presented a concert at the Town Hall for which 700 high school students received free tickets.

The success of the first May Festival was reflected in the number of tulips planted in the fall

of 1936 — at least 70,000 — all of them number one Darwin bulbs of from ten to thirteen centimeters in size. Practically all of Orange City's tulips have come from H. De Graaff & Sons of Lisse, the Netherlands.

The second May Festival, held May 21, 1937, pretty well set the pattern for the years to come. Added to the previous program were several events: a Tulip Queen and six attendants were elected by popular vote from a group of contestants, twenty-six that year. Miss Elizabeth Top was the first queen. Before the parade two blocks of the main street were scrubbed by costumed "vrouwen," pushing coarse brooms, with members of the Lions Club carrying the water. Floats were elaborately decorated; advertising was subdued. Holland antiques and keepsakes were exhibited in the Town Hall under the supervision of the Woman's Club. The evening program in the Town Hall was presented by home talent. The official register for the 1937 festival recorded 2,313 visitors from 140 towns in 15 states.

Orange Citians ordered 100,000 bulbs from the Netherlands in 1937. These came direct from the port of New York in a semitrailer truck which arrived at the Bolluyt house at two o'clock one morning. When the truck was unloaded at the lumber yard the next day, bulbs in perforated paper sacks packed in yard-square boxes of rough wooden slats filled one of the lumber sheds.

The third May Festival, May 19 and 20, 1938, is recalled by most visitors for a musical comedy, *In Dutch*, written and produced, music and all, by attorney A. J. Kolyn. The cast consisted of seventy-five businessmen, who performed as chorines and soloists under blonde wigs. One of the songs was this spirited bit of verse.

The wooden shoes are out again,
The Dutchmen strut about again,
Depression's put to rout again,
You can't beat the Dutch!

The folks are here from Amsterdam,
And pretty girls from Rotterdam,
The grandmamas from Vollandam,
You can't beat the Dutch!

We're proud of Holland's history,
It isn't any mystery,
When they need land they drain the sea,
You can't beat the Dutch!

Orange City's hospitality,
And Dutch conviviality,
You're all as welcome as can be,
You can't beat the Dutch!

Mr. Kolyn wrote and produced a completely new musical comedy, *Katrina*, for the 1939 festival and this, too, was very well received.

By 1941, some outside talent had infiltrated the entertainment in the city park. Folk dances were

performed by Greeks from Sioux Falls and by Czechs from Tabor and Tyndall, South Dakota. Dutch folk dances and drills, however, were a feature of the afternoon program, performed by Orange City girls dressed as Dutch boys and girls. The crowds now averaged about 6,000 a day in good weather.

During the war years, the festival was dropped, but a unique relationship developed with the Army Air Technical School at Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which was to mark community observance of May events in 1943 and 1944. Many young men from the Dutch East Indies were in training at Sioux Falls, and it was not long until dark-skinned young airmen were speaking the Holland tongue in Orange City homes, spending most of their leave time there. Orange Citians often drove their automobiles to take the guests back to duty, and became actively interested in the Army base. They sent truckloads of shrubs and bulbs to landscape the base hospital on the bare and dusty prairie. Victory Days on May 21, 1943, and May 26, 1944, were celebrated jointly, with the Army Air Technical School bringing its band and a truck convoy of equipment to Orange City. Added to the Army entertainment were drills by the Brewster (Minnesota) Girls Drum and Bugle Corps and the Iowa State Guard unit from Sheldon. War bonds and stamps were sold in the city park.

The May Festival was revived on May 15 and

16, 1947, with the second day devoted to war veterans and featuring the marching and music of the Monahan Post Band from Sioux City. It had been impossible, of course, to import tulip bulbs during the war years, but in the fall of 1946, 50,000 new bulbs had been imported and planted in anticipation of the 1947 festival. Unfortunately, a bad storm on the day before the celebration ruined many of the flowers.

The Netherlands Bulb Growers Association sent 10,000 bulbs as a gift in October, 1949. The town purchased 10,000 tulips for planting on city property, and Sioux County bought 10,000, which were put in four big round beds on the courthouse lawn, each bed a solid color. Irises and peonies were planted with tulips in curb-side lanes.

Orange City has the only Netherlands vice-consulate in the prairie states. The first vice-consul, attorney Gerrit Klay, was knighted by Queen Wilhelmina for his work. On his death, his son, attorney T. E. Klay, assumed the duties.

The Netherlands ambassador, Elco N. Van Kleffens, was an honored guest of the 1950 festival held at Orange City on May 11, 12, 13. The ambassador crowned the Tulip Queen and gave her an official kiss on the brow, a gesture Vice-consul T. E. Klay, who usually crowns the queen, had overlooked to his regret. The oversight has subsequently been corrected.

The Orange City Chamber of Commerce ac-

quired a cherished possession in the summer of 1950, a Dutch street organ built by Jac and Martin Minning Orgel Bouwers of Rotterdam. It was purchased, complete with music, from the Netherlands Trade Fair at Philadelphia. One of two such instruments in the United States, the organ attracts much attention at the festival.

From all over northwestern Iowa and adjacent counties in South Dakota visitors come to the Orange City festival in Sioux County, where about half the Hollanders in Iowa live. Not only these descendants of the early settlers enjoy the festival, but hundreds of non-Dutch visitors come to watch the colorful events.

The May festival is a big event for a town of 2,100. It takes the combined efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, Woman's Club, the American Legion, Northwestern Junior College, and Orange City High School to stage the celebration. Of course, a small, hard-working group of businessmen and women do much of the planning and the work, but when May comes around, almost everybody in town is saying, "breng onz een bezoek" — pay us a visit.

JAMES TRENEMAN