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A PARADE OF TULIPS

Celebrate Dutch traditions and enjoy the spring flowers at the Orange City Tulip Festival

Photography by Brian Abeling

Text by Avery Gregurich



It seems too risky: planning a multi-day festival with a name contingent upon the blooming of an unpredictable flower amid equally uncertain Iowa weather. But for over 80 years, the town of Orange City has been hosting the Orange City Tulip Festival, a spring celebration of both blooming tulips and Dutch traditions.

Nobody knows more about the history of the Orange City Tulip Festival than Bill Kalsbeek. He's an Orange City native whose family has been participating in the festival nearly since its beginning. His father served as the Town Crier of the festival for 28 years, and Bill wrote a book about the festival's history. "Celebrating Our Dutch Heritage: The Story of the Orange City Tulip Festival" was published in 2015 in commemoration of the 75th year of the festival.

Volksparade, held twice daily during the Orange City Tulip Festival, features marching bands, themed floats, and costumed participants.



Above: Tulips, such as these located at Windmill Park in the heart of Orange City, take center stage at the annual event.



Above: During the festival, a carnival midway lures visitors for rides and entertainment into the evening.



Above: For just a few dollars, a horse-drawn trolley will lead you on a 20-minute guided tour through downtown Orange City.



Above: Just before the midday Volksparade, costumed participants scrub the streets just prior to the entrance of the Tulip Queen and Court.

The origins of the festival came with the settling of Orange City late in the 19th century. Kalsbeek says that the Dutch farm economy was struggling in the late 1800s. Aided by the Homestead Act, signed into law in 1862 by President Lincoln, many young Dutch farmers landed in the middle of the country. Kalsbeek says that the festival began like many cultural festivals do: as a celebration of the many Dutch traditions that immigrants had brought with them to a new place far from their homeland.

“When you are an immigrant and you leave the country, you often leave it because you have to, not because you want to. You also leave with memories that don’t leave you, and when you get settled into a new place and you get sort of established those memories don’t go away,” Kalsbeek says. “I think the origin of a festival like the Tulip Festival in Orange City and other ethnic festivals that you find is derived from the fact that there were a lot of good memories of the places from whence they came.”

Insert the tulip. By the 1930s, Pella had begun its Tulip Time celebration, and many residents of Orange City decided to organize and buy tulip bulbs from the Netherlands for their own celebration. Kalsbeek says that the town gathered enough money to purchase 40 bulbs, and in 1935 Orange City organized its first special planting of tulips. After an especially harsh Iowa winter, on May 14, 1936, Orange City held its first official Tulip Festival. Kalsbeek estimates that about 3,500 people showed up to the event. In 1950, Orange City

expanded the festival to three days, and attendance grew accordingly. In the decades since, the festival’s attendance has averaged well over 100,000 people for the duration of the event.

Today’s three-day festival combines all the modern attractions of a county fair with the historical traditions of a cultural festival. Visitors to Orange City will enjoy displays of Dutch folk dancing, nightly musical theater, a carnival midway, the crowning of the Tulip Queen and Court, and the

famous twice daily parades through the streets of Orange City known as the Volksparade. Kalsbeek says that making the costumes worn in the parade authentic and accurate has been a longstanding goal for the organizers of the festival.

“There was a big movement in the 1970s with women actually from the town going to the Netherlands and studying what authentic dress looked like back in the 1800s,” Kalsbeek says. “Some Dutch people from the Netherlands visited one of

the festivals several years ago, and they commented how they thought that Orange City did a better job of depicting the way the Netherlands was in the 1800s than the Dutch were doing themselves at their festivals, which I thought was a big compliment.”

Along with the traditional costumes and parade, authentic Dutch recipes are an integral part of the festival’s attractions. There’s *smert*, a Dutch pea soup, and almond patties, a baked dessert similar to banket or



Above: Young people participate in the Straat Feest, which takes place before the midday parade. Wearing period costumes and wooden shoes, they demonstrate Dutch dances.



Above: The Pride of the Dutchmen march with wooden shoes, creating a unique clomping sound as they blow their horns.



Above and below: The largest assemblage of tulips is found at Windmill Park in downtown Orange City. The park also boasts six replica windmills and a canal.



Above: During Straat Feest, children and adults fill the streets decorated in a variety of Dutch costumes as they welcome visitors to the festival.



Above: De Klompenmaker shows how wooden shoes (or clogs) are created by hand. This takes place at Straatmarkt, a market held in the streets that features Dutch food and crafts.



Above: The Klompen Wagen, loaded with wooden shoes, makes its way down the street during the daily Volksparade.

Dutch kringle. There's also *poëffertjes*, which Kalsbeek call "a real delicacy." "It's a small sort of pancake made of buckwheat flour and yeast. Once it's cooked, you sprinkle it with powdered sugar and put a little butter on it," he says. But his favorite? *Saucijsjes*, the Dutch equivalent of pigs in a blanket.

"Some people say that you don't put anything with it. Some people eat them with ketchup, but I like it with a little Heinz 57 steak sauce," he says.

When he's asked why the festival has continued for so many years and remained as popular as it has, Kalsbeek says that it's due to three factors. First, the festival has always had a compelling purpose: to celebrate its Dutch heritage. It's also had consistent local support from Orange City's businesses and citizens over the decades. Finally, he says, it's always been planned with everyone in mind.

"If you sort of look at what the festival is, it's everything I think you'd want in a festival. It's good, clean fun, and it's very colorful with tulips of various varieties. The costuming is exceptional," Kalsbeek says. "It's just a wonderful, wholesome family event to attend, and I think a lot of people like that."

This year's festival is scheduled for May 19–21. For more information, visit octulipfestival.com.





Throughout the festival, Central Avenue is closed to vehicle traffic. During the evening, it's a gathering space for locals and tourists who meander through the business district and to the carnival and midway.