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Rogers, Bill Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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

Interview #23
Mr. Bill Rogers
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
22, July 1995

The Oral History of Tulip Time

Interview #23

- Interview w/ Bill Rogers @ The Frauenthal Center for the Performing Arts
- P.O. Box 4446 / Muskegon, MI 49444
- July 23, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

Begin Tape 16 : Side A

BR: Hi, I'm Bill Rogers. I was born in Muskegon, Michigan, and I am a direct descendent of Lida Rogers. My grandfather and Lida Rogers were brother and sister, and I can remember as a young boy--growing up in Oceana County, which is the next county up from Muskegon County--the fond memories that I had of my dear aunt Lida Rogers spending her summers at our farm. She and my grandfather, Edward Rogers, were very close. In fact, they came from a family of six--three boys, and three girls--and I would have to say that Lida and Ed Rogers were the two closest of the children of my great-grandparents, William Rogers and his wife.

The early-on years of my experience with my great aunt Lida, was one of love and concern. Even though she never married, she apparently took to me. I took to her at a young age, and she and I traveled together. She had a sister that married a Methodist minister who had retired up near Traverse City, and aunt Lida and I would go up there and see her; see my great aunt Leena, who was aunt Lida's sister. I realized at a young age, that my aunt Lida was very unique, and something out of the ordinary, even though she was a humble lady. She was not an extravagant, out-going lady. She was very shy--painfully shy--but she would go in a car--she was well into her sixties before she learned to drive. She would take me in her car, and we would see beauty along the roadside. She liked wild flowers. She liked Queen Anne's lace, and on these trips up to Traverse City to see her sister, we would stop along the way; my mother would pack a picnic lunch.

I guess I realized at a young age, that she saw beauty in the out of doors, and I never realized till I got older, that the reason she chose to become a biology teacher, was that my great-grandparents were unable to finance her education to become a doctor, which was one of her goals, and she never made it because there wasn't enough money to provide her with that education. Anyway, she, in her own way, chose what she felt was the next best field, which was biology. I have no idea why she chose Holland, Michigan, but anyway, she did, and it was shortly after her move there that she had traveled to the Netherlands. It was during that time that she observed, again with her love of beauty, she observed the tulips growing in Holland in the Netherlands. So, when she returned to Holland, Michigan, she had made a suggestion to--I believe it was--The Woman's Literary Club that she felt it would be a nice way, because of the large Dutch settlement in Holland, Michigan, to beautify the city of Holland by planting tulip beds in, first of all, the downtown city park--which I think to this day have adhered to her way of doing things when that was instigated back in the late twenties, early thirties.

I believe she even volunteered to be the liaison between the city of Holland, and the Netherlands, to get these tulip bulbs shipped to Holland. So that's how it all started, and then the rest is all part of history. How she made this suggestion, through a talk, and then it somehow--several years I guess, before it--got under way. But I think the main thing that she wanted to see happen to the city of Holland, not that she was against music, not that she was against having a windmill sent here from Holland--I don't think that would be against her wishes--but basically what she wanted was to preserve the natural beauty, and bring out natural beauty in the city. Now, I have no idea if Tulip Lane was part of her brainchild, I have no idea. If that was something she instigated, I don't have any idea about that, but I do know that the one thing that she wanted to make sure was of lasting quality, was the fact that she wanted to recognize Holland, Michigan as being a unique place in the state, and in the world.

I don't believe that as she grew older--because I spent time with her; I lived in Grand Rapids after I went to college, and graduated, and worked for Old Kent Bank, and I used to drive back and forth from my home in Grand Rapids, to spend time with my aunt, my great aunt. She and I, as I said, bonded at a very early age, and I had the utmost respect for her. In fact I was very happy to serve as a pall bearer at her funeral, and was a recipient of some beautiful antiques of hers that she passed down to me, which I still cherish. She was a very quiet person, and I don't think, when I did talk to her about the magnitude of what had happened with her suggestion--how it had managed to grow, and I believe that it still maintains the third largest ranking public attraction in the United States, exceeded only by the Rose Bowl Parade in California, and Mardi Gras--I don't think that in her infinite wisdom--she was an exceedingly bright woman, and as I think I told you, Jason, she was far ahead of her time; probably wrote the book on E.R.A., but didn't want any credit for it, she was very low key--I don't believe, when I asked her one time, that she had any idea that it would have mushroomed, and had gone to the extent that it had.

She, as I said, was a person who enjoyed nature, but I don't think she had any idea that there'd be the band day, and the parades and everything, that finally was a result of the planning that had gone into this. She wanted to keep it simple, and again, to play up the fact that the city of Holland was very near and dear to her heart, and she obviously thought so, because she wouldn't have continued to stay there. She retired as a teacher in the Holland High School. I can't barely remember how many years she taught, it's probably part of your records, but she even, on into her seventies, had maintained a tutorship of some of the students.

What pleases me, when I worked here for the Frauenthal Center for the Performing Arts: Freedom Village would bring a lot of people here to the Frauenthal for Cherry County Playhouse--the professional theater group--and the bus driver, people would come

here who have resided in the Holland area. The lives that she's touched, the many students that she's had in her classes on down through the years, it amazes me. There's no way of knowing how many students she had down through the years that she taught in Holland. She, in her own quiet way--and you know, Jason, you and I talked about the School Forest, which was near and dear to her heart--she wanted to preserve the natural beauty. I haven't been down there for a while, but I believe there is a plaque down there on some tree, that says Lida Rogers, and the date that this all happened. But the thing too that I'm always amused about, is that the students who are now much older than I, most of them are anyway, say that she didn't expect them to do any more than she would do, because she would be right out there with them, with the dirt flying and the spade, and hoe, or whatever she was doing; she worked right along side of her students, and she didn't delegate the work, she actually did the work herself. She was very much a part of the natural beauty of making that a better place to live.

JVU: What was it about your aunt Lida's personality, that is reflected in the sense of community of the Tulip Time festival today?

BR: Again, I don't mean to beat this into the ground, Jason, but I think it was the simpleness of it. Not that she objected to the bands and the scrubbing of the streets, because she knew that was part of the history--the Klompen dance and everything else that went along with it--but I think that her infinite wisdom of doing the right thing for that particular city in Michigan. I mean, she wanted it to be the best, and I think she achieved that in her lifetime. I think she was proud of the fact, even though we're not Dutch, I think she was proud of the fact of what she achieved. I think she felt a sense of accomplishment, even though she was not flag-waving.

She was of course, a very staunch Republican, and I think it was near the Twenty-fifth anniversary of the Holland tulip festival, that she had been a State Delegate to Washington, D.C., where she had met and spent time with President and Mrs. Eisenhower,

and she was very proud of her affiliation with the Daughters of the American Revolution. She researched this many summers, when she would come out to our farm and then she would leave, and--we are basically, the Rogers are from the New England states--so she'd gone back on both the paternal side, and maternal side of the family; the Rogers side, and the Wells side, to qualify to be a Daughter of the American Revolution. She was exceedingly proud of the fact that, again, this is p[art of her heritage and her pride in being an American citizen, and she passed this on to me. I have never done anything with it, but I could qualify to be a Son of the American Revolution. I have al the documents, leading up to my generation. She gave that to me.

JVU: Do you think there's anything in the festival now days, that still reflects what your aunt wanted for the festival way back in the beginning?

BR: Probably, Jason--again, I don't mean to keep beating this--but it's still the beauty; the natural beauty. I mean the flowers, I mean the main emphasis again, would be on what she did for the park down town, and how she did achieve a goal to beautify the city of Holland, and that was her basic premise. I think, and I don't know how, because I've been to Holland many times--I was there as a child, and I've been there since her death--and it gives me a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that she did it. She started it, she planted the seed, she planted the idea, and it was because of that idea, because of that suggestion, that we now have this beautiful celebration of the city. It makes me feel good to know that I came from that kind of heritage, and I'm proud of that, and I feel a sense of pride when I go there. I realize that she, in her small little way--by just making this suggestion--was the one that started this whole thing, and that's why we enjoy it today. I think that the people in Holland, I'm sure, are very proud of that fact; they should be. Even as I said, we are not of Dutch descent.

JVU: Did [Lida] ever share any specific stories or ideas that she had for Tulip Time?

BR: No. I think what she really felt good about, Jason, was the fact that she lived there--I believe her address was a hundred forty-eighth West Fourteenth Street . . .

[Brief interruption]

JVU: Okay, you were talking about specific ideas.

BR: If you'd go to her home, and I did, she took great pride in the way her home looked, and I think that--and I don't know how she did this--she wanted other people who lived in Holland to feel a sense of pride in the way they kept their homes, the way they made sure to beautify their yards, kept flowers growing, and again, it was the naturalness of all of it. Being a biology teacher, she stressed the natural beauty of it, and not the fact that things had to be of any great size. I think that when we talked about it, she was painfully shy, a very humble lady, and she was a person that I liked to spend time with. She was an excellent cook, even though she lived alone. She would say to me, when I talked to her from Grand Rapids, I'd say, "We'll go out for dinner, we'll go out for lunch."

"No, I'm going to fix you a good dinner. You live alone and you're single. Aunt Lida will fix you a good dinner," and she did. She was an excellent cook. She took great pride in what she did. She'd prepare a meal for just the two of us, but again, it was just the simpleness of it all. She came from humble beginnings, and I think she never forgot that; she never forgot where she came from. She liked to walk. We'd walk a lot around her neighborhood, and of course everyone would say, "Hello, Ms. Rogers," and of course she'd smile, and I'd say how proud I was of her, and she'd sort of pass it off. She liked to walk in the neighborhood, and see how all the people around her cared for their lawns, and their yards. She took a great deal of pride in just the simpleness of the way the place looked, the way the city looked.

JVU: Are there any other stories you'd like to share; any other feelings that you'd like to convey?

BR: The only thing, I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate what you're doing. I've told you this on the phone. I don't feel angry, I don't feel bitter, but I do feel that the city of Holland, owes my aunt a great deal. I feel that sometimes when I read about what has happened in the last several years, and I've read where they don't even mention Lida Rogers. They refer to the fact that it was a retired biology teacher, well, she wasn't retired, she was very much a part of Holland High School when she made the suggestion. I feel, now, that it's about time she be honored for what she did, and I appreciate what you're doing. I know it means a lot of extra time, and extra work, and even after this interview is over, if there's anything I can do for you, to help you, I'll be glad to help in any way. I want her to be honored, because I feel a very deep sense of admiration and respect for a lady that I loved a great deal, and who, loved the city of Holland. I feel that she should be honored in a way that's going to continue on for years to come, and I appreciate what you're doing. I told you this on the phone, and I'm telling you personally, that I am very grateful for what you're doing. I commend you for what you're doing, and [The Joint Archives] for what you're doing, because I want her to be honored in a way that I feel she deserves.

JVU: One last question. I think I already know the answer, but what would your aunt's favorite part of Tulip Time be?

BR: Again, Jason, I think it would be walking around the city; walking through the park, and downtown Holland, and seeing that things have been carried out the way she wanted them at the time she made these suggestions--having people working, and designing those tulip beds, and the way things are in downtown park in Holland. Again, she was a very simple person. She wanted things better. She wanted to leave this Earth better, and this world better than she found it, and I think that she did. I think it's a reflection on her ability to achieve what she wanted to achieve, in that she felt Holland was her home. She never wanted to move. She finally, because of a physical ailment, did have to go out to the Christian Nursing Home where she died. I believe, I've never

seen it, but I think there is a Lida Rogers tulip. Do you know the color of the tulip by the way?

JVU: [No]

BR: [I don't either], I'm embarrassed to say.

But it seems to me, that they did bring some Lida Rogers bulbs out to the nursing home, and she had a room with a view, so I believe that in her final days, that they did bloom one more time for her, before she died. She actually saw the Lida Rogers tulip. I guess what I'm saying, she didn't expect anything in return for what she did, and I think that it overwhelmed her. Anything that was done for her, whether it was a college degree that she was honored with--I believe she was give an honorary degree from Central Michigan University--but anything that came her way, in the way of trying to set her apart from anyone else that was on that committee to plan the Holland tulip festival as we know it today, it touched her. She never expected anything in return. She felt that what she did was her duty as a citizen of Holland, and she realized early on, when she moved there, that she liked the area, she was going to stay there, retire there, and die there, and she did.

So, I think that sort of says something about a woman, who was, again, far ahead of her time. But, again, was humble and shy, and was just a wonderful person.

[Knock at door. Tape interrupted.]

BR: I guess what I was saying to you, Jason, was that I was honored to be a pall bearer at her funeral. The thing that I want to bring home now, in wrapping this interview up, is that one of the final discussions that I had with my aunt when she was a resident at the Beacon Height Christian Home; our conversation about [Tulip Time]. It might have been relating to the Holland tulip festival committee, that come out and planted this Lida Rogers bulb, which I guess she saw before she died. She had said something to me which bothered me, bothered me a great deal, and that's why I guess

I can relate to what you're doing now, and how appreciative I am of what you're all about.

The fact that the Rogers family were not of Dutch origin, she had indicated to me, she said that she felt perhaps that somewhere in time, perhaps in twenty years, thirty years, after her death, that they would forget all about Lida Rogers; the people of Holland, the city of Holland, the tulip festival committee. I told her--I looked right at her, she was very bright, very sharp, and she was chronologically, I believe, was eighty-five--and I looked at her, and I said, "No, aunt Lida. That'll never happen, because I'll make sure that they don't forget about you." And that's why, Jason, I really appreciate what you're about, and what you're doing with [The Joint Archives]. It's because of your research, and the amount of time you spent, that she will now be honored, and I appreciate that. I'm happy to share with you, whatever I've been able to share with you during this interview, and hopefully--I know I'll be proud of what's going to happen. Good luck with your research.

-End of Interview-