

TULIP FESTIVAL HISTORY

The Netherlands— Birth of a Dream, Part I

By Deborah Yates

IN THIS TWO PART STORY, the Dobbes share their personal history—an inspiring tale of the driving forces that led to their eventual move to the United States and a new life. Holland America Bulb Farm and its sister corporations are the result of the hard work and determination of just one family that immigrated to America. The Tulip Festival is the Dobbe family's way of sharing their love of the craft of bulb and flower husbandry and a way to support and promote the city of Woodland as well.

When World War II began in Europe, the Netherlands' game plan was to remain neutral. It had worked for them during World War I, so they felt it was a stance that would get them through World War II with limited damage to their country. Unfortunately, the Netherlands was an important country in the strategic plans of the Germans. Although the government of the Netherlands had been warned repeatedly about a possible invasion by the Germans, they were taken by surprise on May 10, 1940, when the German army invaded their country.

Changes in the social fabric of the Netherlands were numerous. Churches, social organizations, and schools were closed or restructured. In order to control the population, the Germans removed the food and living supplies from the country. The citizens were given rationing cards that were used to obtain food, or any item they could not make or grow. Anyone who was caught hiding, or found hiding someone else, had their rationing cards taken away. A more serious punishment was a trip to a prison camp, usually located in either the Netherlands or Germany.

Another major upheaval was the requirement that all men between the ages of 18 and 45 were to work in German factories. The forced labor was bad enough, but the fact that these factories were bombed on a daily basis by the Allies, made the jobs as dangerous as a prison camp. Those men who refused to work in these factories would go into hiding. Benno Dobbe's father, Ben, was one of the men who refused to work in the factories. He went into hiding on a farm located far from any city or large town.

The small farm where Ben hid was home to two parents, 13 children, and two other young men who were also in hiding. In this case, it was truly 'safety in numbers' if the young men were seen by anyone passing by. The young men were simply written off as members of the large family. The family managed to survive the war unmolesed, living in a house that was only about 800 square feet in size.

The people that hid these three young men were very compassionate. They raised crops for feeding the family, and to sell, if there was



TOP: A very young Benno Dobbe gives his two sons (front seat Stefan, back seat Ben) and two neighbor kids a thrill ride in 1979 (one year before emigrating to the US) on the frozen surface of one of the many canals which riddle the Netherlands, draining the land so it can be farmed and produce the beautiful bulbs and flowers we know and love today.

any surplus. The family was very aware of the food shortages in the country, so they generously helped their neighbors and strangers, by feeding them with 150 pounds of potatoes and other produce that they had grown in their fields.

While the world was at war, and the Germans were occupying their country, a love affair bloomed in the small house. Ben Dobbe fell in love with Alida, one of the farmer's daughters. Interestingly, the two lovers shared the same birthday, although Ben was one year older than his future bride-to-be. The war hindered the romance and delayed the marriage. When the war ended and peace was restored to the Netherlands, the families celebrated the marriage of Ben and Alida.

After the war, Ben and Alida purchased a seven-acre farm near the small town of Breezand, located in a 20 square mile bulb growing area of the Netherlands. In this area, 2,000 to 2,500 small farms grew a wide variety of flower bulbs. These bulbs included, but were not limited to, tulips, daffodils, iris, and crocus. The flowers were grown strictly for the bulbs, not for the cut flowers.

Benno was around six when he began working on the farm. He loved growing flowers right from the start. "I remember it all," says Benno with a smile. "When we got home from school, we had about 15–20 minutes to be kids. After our short break, we went out to work in the fields. At that time, we did everything by hand. All the heavy work in the field was done with horses. It was very tough manual labor. Everyone in the family worked hard, long hours. I was 15 before we purchased a tractor, which helped, but it did not reduce the long hours of work."

Along with being a farmer, Ben also had an interest in growing exotic birds. He would take these birds to local and regional shows.

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He was quite successful at winning prizes for his entries. As a courtesy to his father, Benno would go to these shows to help him with the birds. One weekend, when Benno was 15, a friend of his went along, supposedly to help, but in reality he went to see a girl he liked. This girl brought along her 13 year-old cousin, Klazina, so that Benno would have someone with whom he could talk. When Benno and Klazina met, it was love at first sight.

“We knew from the moment we met that we would be together for the rest of our lives.” says Benno. “Even though Klazina was from the city, she would work on local farms in the summertime, so she knew what living on a farm involved. We were so young, that our families would not let us see each other very often. As we grew older, our families saw that we were very committed to each other, so they let us see each other on a more serious basis. We were married in 1970, just one week short of five years after we met.”

That was 38 years ago. Benno credits



ABOVE: Benno Dobbe in 1982 with three of his children as they package cut flowers in their warehouse. Nicolette (Dobbe) Wakefield is in back, next to dad, Ben in the middle looking up at Benno, and Stefan is in front, straining under a load of cut flowers.

LEFT: Benno and Klazina's boy Ben stands in a huge field of daffodils on the family farm in the Netherlands. The year was 1978.

the longevity of their marriage, in part, to the fact that they have always been best friends.

After Benno and Klazina married, life went on as usual at the Dobbe farm. Benno was the son that took the biggest responsibility for the farm. Together with his family, he acquired more land until the farm was over 100 acres in size. The farm was prospering and life was good.

In 1972, they had their first baby, a daughter Nicolette. Their first boy, Ben, arrived in 1975, and their second, Stefan, was born in 1977. They were a very happy and content family of five.

Life on the farm was going along as planned except that Benno and Klazina were restless. They wanted to make a change and they wanted it to be a big one. They decided to move to the USA. “When we told our families that we wanted to move to the United States, everyone was so shocked. No one could figure out why we would leave a successful farm, family, and friends to start a new life, basically from the ground up with little money in support for a possible

new endeavor, and live in a country located half way around the world. Our parents were very concerned that they would never see us again.” said Benno. “But the truth was we loved the United States for all they had done for us during World War II. We loved the American dream of hard work where the sky is the limit. And we were ready for a great adventure!”

Next month: Part 2—Life in America!



LEFT: Benno Dobbe with wife Klazina and his 3 kids in tow in 1978 where, at this booth, plugging (shooting) a tiny hole using the booth's toy gun activated a camera which shot the picture. Benno made this shot for all three of his children for their personal photo album. Benno was apparently quite a crack shot even in later years for the story goes that he won a HUGE stuffed animal for his granddaughter Katie at the Clark County Fair several years ago, hitting all the targets required.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BENNO AND KLAZINA DOBBE

TULIP FESTIVAL HISTORY

The Netherlands—Birth of a Dream, Part II

By Deborah Yates; photos courtesy of the Benno Dobbe Family

Now that the shock had turned into acceptance of the fact that Benno, Klazina, and the children were moving to America, it was time to figure out where the young family was going to make their home. From the research they had done about the United States, Benno and Klazina knew that they wanted to live on the West Coast. Knowing that books and maps could not answer all their questions, nor give them a feel for the land, the couple took a fact-finding trip to the West Coast in 1979. After landing in Los Angeles, they rented a camper and took off to see the country located between the Mexican and Canadian borders.

Benno and Klazina both enjoyed the idea of farming flowers, having a nursery, or even doing something not involved with plants. This was their great adventure and they were open to doing just about anything that would be interesting and financially rewarding. “We had Plan A and Plan B,” laughed Klazina. “Plan A was that we would start a farm. Plan B was that Benno would find a job and I would be a waitress. Benno and I agreed that we wanted to live in the United States, so we were very willing to do what it took to make a successful life here.”

When the couple arrived in Woodland, it was just another small town on their map.

Looking around, they liked the town and the area, but was it a place where they could find jobs and raise a healthy family? The couple talked to area residents, and began looking into the history of town. During their research, they discovered that in the 1950s and '60s, the world's largest bulb farm, United Bulb Company, had been located in Woodland. It wasn't the land, but rather management issues had caused the United Bulb Company to pull back to their home base in Mt. Clemens, Michigan. Thinking practically, the couple decided that if one bulb company could be successful in Woodland, so could they. With the stop in Woodland, they found not only a potential business, but more importantly, a new home.

There were close to 50 crying people at the airport the day the Dobbe family departed for America. Although the family had little money, they had big dreams. They were leaving the security of a successful family farm, the love of family and friends, and the familiar-

ity of their native country to seek their fortunes in a new land. It was an old story, told around the world, but on this day of July 20, 1980, it was a very personal story for the well-wishers waiting for the small family to board the plane—a plane that would take these five people out of their lives, possibly forever.

All the immigration formalities had been handled in the Netherlands. When the Dobbe family left the Netherlands, they had ten suitcases (two each) filled with clothes along with one wooden tote filled to the top with family pictures, books and personal items. After going through customs in Chicago, they received their green cards, and boarded another plane bound for Portland, Oregon. It had been a long and tiring journey for everyone, but it had been exciting too, as the real adventure was about to begin!

The Dobbe family finally arrived in Woodland. They purchased a used car, and a truckload of formerly owned furniture. They moved into a rental house (619 Washington Street) and began their search for a piece of land on which to

start their business. They soon discovered that used land was expensive and new land was priced way beyond their means. A small miracle was going to be needed to get their business out of the ground.

It is funny how things work out. Benno and Klazina were out looking at property, in this case,

the property formerly farmed by bulb growers including United Bulb Company. “This particular piece of property had 125 acres and cost a lot of money—much more than we could afford.” remembered Benno. “But the man who owned the property saw something in the dreams of our family. He agreed to sell us 123 acres on contract, with no interest for three years. The two remaining acres we purchased through a bank. It was on this small acreage that we built our home and our first warehouse.”

Now that they had the land upon which to farm, they needed bulbs to plant. Since they were only allowed two suitcases each when they left the Netherlands, there had not been any room for many bulbs. Benno contacted his family, people with whom he had grown up, and bulb suppliers that he had done business with on the family farm.

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TOP: Benno and the kids get ready to unload the truck and move into their new home in the United States. Exciting! Left to right are Benno Dobbe, Stefan, Ben, and Nicolette.

RIGHT: Reading to the kids is a great way to practice your English, right? And the kids love the attention, too. Here they are gathered around the dining room table like millions of other households in the U.S. Left to right are Ben, Stefan, Benno, and Nicolette.



DREAM—cont'd from page 3

Slowly, they began replanting the former bulb growers land with new flower bulbs. The acreage outside Woodland was once again covered with colorful blooming flowers.

The Dobbes became another Woodland family. The children attended the Woodland schools, while Benno and Klazina became members of the business community. They worked hard on the farm. Although it was in essence a family farm, they did not have the traditional farm animals. They did however have a few chickens and the family pets. “We wanted to teach our children about responsibility, so each child had an animal for which they were responsible,” said Benno. “Nicolette cared for the cat, Stefan the dog, and Ben had the chickens.”

Benno and Klazina were both very proud of their successful business. In the Netherlands, the focus had been strictly on selling bulbs, but here in the Woodland, the focus was on selling the cut flowers. As the years went by, they successfully established commercial markets for their flowers in all 50 states. To do this, they currently employ about 30 full-time and 125 part-time people in Woodland.

Although things were going well, Benno decided that he needed to expand his business. During many business trips to California, all of which were done driving his used car, he established a market to sell bulbs to cut flower growers. Benno showed the flower growers that they could grow flowers from different species of bulbs on a year around basis. This was a new concept for them. To make this a reality, Benno introduced lilies, tulips, and iris bulbs to the growers.

Benno provided bulbs to these businesses for about five years. At this point, one business could not pay their bills. The company tried to recover their business, but it did not work out. Benno tried to take over the failed business, but there were too many complications involved to close such a deal. Instead, just like he did in Woodland in 1980, Benno started a brand new company in that area on 60 acres of

land which has grown since the start up of this business in 1986 to 280 acres to date. The new company grows a wide variety of flowers that they sell to wholesalers and super markets around the country. This Nipoma, California farm uses approximately 40% of the total

acres to grow cut flowers from bulbs, corms, seeds and plants and employs 125 full time people.

Through hard work and dedication, the Dobbbe family became a Woodland success story. But the success comes secondary to the fact that Benno and Klazina officially became proud US citizens on July 4, 1996. “We love the United States very much,” says Benno with a great reverence. “It is now our country and our home.”

Flower farming seems to be in the blood of the Dobbbe family. Benno followed in his father’s footsteps, and now all three children are following in the footsteps of their father.

“Ben is my right-hand guy,” Benno said proudly. “He is the COO and head of sales for both Washington and California. Nicolette is the general manager of the retail and gift shop outlet (Royal Dutch Flower Gardens) located on the farm, and Stefan has his own business (Petals and Stems) in

Phoenix, wholesaling cut flowers. We are a family business and we work together, no matter where each person lives.” And to make sure that the family keeps in touch with their roots and are able to speak with their relatives in the Netherlands, the children were taught to speak Dutch when they were growing up. “This has also proved to be a good business move with the Netherland bulb growers and suppliers,” said Benno. “People always appreciate it when you can do business with them in their native language.”

After Klazina worked on the farm for the first number of years she wanted to do something with alternative healing, a passion she had for some years. To accomplish this goal she had to go back to school. She first went to Clark College to get enough credits to be allowed at an Acupuncture School in Portland. After 4 years she graduated with a Masters Degree in Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine. In 1998 she opened her own Acupuncture and Herbal Clinic in Orchards. In 2000 Klazina opened a clinic in Woodland. Benno is very proud of what Klazina accomplished; “I have heard so many people who were treated by Klazina and said it helped a lot.” said Benno.

DREAM—cont'd on page 5



ABOVE: Benno and the kids, hard at work planting bulbs with a mechanical planter.

RIGHT: Klazina and the kids out in the fields in the family wagon. Left to right are Klazina, Stefan, Ben, and Nicolette.

BELOW: The fruits of their labors which Tulip Festival go-ers enjoy today, too. Left to right are Benno, Ben, Nicolette, and Stefan.



DREAM—cont'd from page 4

From the time he was a child, Benno has been a person who makes the most of the opportunities that have been presented to him. He has used his natural and learned abilities, along with a positive mind set, and hard work to make his dreams come true. As the old saying goes; the Dobbe family has literally 'bloomed where they were planted,' whether it was in the Netherlands or in the United States. No matter what has come their way, they have made the best of the circumstances, be it good or bad.

In 2007, Benno Dobbe was named Woodland's Citizen of the Year. It is an honor that Benno takes to heart. "We love Woodland and we have tried to give back to the community whenever possible," he said. "It is just neat that we can help out whenever possible." And this help has been immense. The Dobbe's paid the first year's rent for the Woodland Community Service Center and has continued with ongoing financial support. They have

worked tirelessly (time, money, and personal sacrifices) on the Woodland Swimming Pool Committee, and they have contributed to the A.J. Patnode fund, as well as the Sunshine Foundation, Woodland Rotary, Beaver Boosters, and SWIFT, to name but a few local organizations that have benefited from their generosity. They also donate cut flowers and bulbs for many worthy fundraisers, and provide beautiful floral centerpieces for the Northwest Medical Team dinners. Their flowers have even graced the White House tables for a state dinner. Benno has named a beautiful new pinkish deep-red tulip for the town of Woodland.

Looking back on his life, Benno is proud for all the things that he and his family have accomplished. "We feel blessed with our decision to move to the United States, and to the wonderful town of Woodland. We are very proud of the many excellent people working for us, they are our extended family! It has been a wonderful

journey and we are looking forward to the future and all the new adventures that it holds. Unfortunately, we have more dreams than we have the time to live them. But we will do our best to make them all come true," chuckled Benno as he headed back into one of the many greenhouses filled with his beloved flowers.



RIGHT: Christmas at the Dobbes! A fine photo to send back home to the Netherlands. From left to right are Benno, Stefan, Nicolette, Ben, and Klazina.

BELOW: Dad (Benno) and Stefan gettin' crazy on the snow-covered slopes of the Pacific Northwest. What fun!



LEFT: Back row left to right. Stefan holding Samuel with his wife Jodi right next to him. Next to Jodi is Benno or "Opa" (every grandchild calls him that, he tells us. It stands for 'grandfather' in Dutch). Next to Benno is Katie, then her mom Jennifer and her dad Ben; on the far right back row is Nicolette.

Front row from left to right is Zachary and Madelyn in front of their parents, then Emily and Erin, both daughters of Ben and Jennifer, then Gelina Wakefield with her dad Chris Wakefield (Nicolette's husband), and Klazina is kneeling in the front. Klazina is "Oma" to the grandchildren ('grandmother' in Dutch). This picture was taken in June of 2006. Later on in 2006 two more grandchildren—Lydia, the (4th) daughter of Ben and Jennifer, and Harland, who is the son of Nicolette and Chris—were born (for a total of nine grandchildren) and both appeared on the front cover (in the big wooden shoes) of this year's Holland America Bulb Farm catalog.