
Nothing seems to attract public officeholders, or candidates for office, like a big crowd. And some of the biggest crowds to be found annually have been the Pella and Holland tulip festivals in Iowa and Michigan. The largest crowds gather to watch the “Völksparade,” which begins with a street cleaning ritual. Local dignitaries wielding buckets wet down the pavement while lesser dignitaries dutifully trail behind pushing their brooms. And all are clad in Dutch costumes—usually.¹

There were harbingers of these Dutch American celebrations as early as 1907, when the “old settlers” gathering commemorated the 60th anniversary of the Dutch settlements of West Michigan. For the descendants of the New Netherland colony, the Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909 marked the 300th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s discovery of the river that bears his name. It also was the centennial of Robert Fulton’s successful launch of his steamboat on the same river, a venture financed by New Netherland descendants; both were one-time events.

Annual festivals celebrating Dutch ethnicity date to 1929 when Holland, Michigan, staged its first Tulip Time; Pella followed suit in 1935. These two festivals inspired about two dozen other Dutch-themed festivals from Clymer, New York, in the east to Lynden, Washington, in the west. They combine commerce with culture, enticing visitors to spend afternoons browsing in shops and eating in restaurants in anticipation of a parade with floats and bands—and Dutch costumed dancers. Especially
after the Second World War these annual get togethers could attract literally busloads of tourists. Where there are festive crowds, there will be politicians.

Governors of Iowa have participated in Pella’s celebrations at least since the late 1930s. There are photographs of Michigan governors in Dutch dress going back to at least 1947. Both cities try to keep the festivals non-partisan by inviting both Republican and Democratic officeholders to klomp along for a few blocks. Holland has succeeded in attracting governors of both parties, Pella not so much.

Clyde L. Herring, a Democrat, was numbered among the “distinguished visitors” who came to Pella on 12 May 1936. He “donned a funny colored cap and helped the women scrub the streets” before climbing into a car to lead the parade through town. From this point on, most governors would make the pilgrimage to Pella for the parade, especially in election years. Herring’s successor not only visited the 1938 festival with his wife, but she very publicly “placed a large order for Pella tulip bulbs during her visit.”

At least as far back as 1939 a Pella delegation journeyed to Des Moines to personally invite the governor to attend the festival. In May of that year Governor George A. Wilson stood on the capitol steps to receive the invitation, a pair of klompen (wooden shoes), and a string of Pella bolognas, which he gamely draped around his neck. On parade day, he dutifully donned a Dutch hat and the klompen, as accessories to his suit and tie. He then pushed a broom “with evident enjoyment and plenty of good sportsmanship.”

For decades Iowa governors trod the parade route wearing some combination of traditional Dutch regalia and conventional Brooks Brothers suits. Some opted for a hat, others for klompen, or both. It is not clear whether they all pushed brooms. The most stolid looking was Governor Harold E. Hughes in 1968 who walked the parade route, and wielded a broom to scrub the street, in a business suit.

Iowa’s two most durable governors, Robert Ray and Terry Branstad (who held the office for a total of thirty six
years between them), became fixtures, beginning with Ray’s first visit in 1969 and concluding with Branstad’s final appearance almost five decades later. Branstad seemed the most engaged, bringing his family with him, with all of them wearing Dutch costumes for the parade.

The visitors to Holland’s festivals did not wait nearly as long to witness gubernatorial exuberance. When G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams arrived in 1950, he pushed a broom, walked the parade route, and even raised his klompen in the air with the Dutch dancers. No Michigan governor since Soapy has failed to appear in Holland in full Dutch costume, at least once during their tenures. The surviving pictures of those visits generally captured the governors having a good time, even the irascible ones. The decidedly non-irascible George Romney put a full effort behind his broom work (see the cover photo of this issue). Thirty years later John Engler would wield both broom and water bucket during his parade-route walks along Eighth Avenue. Engler brought his wife and their triplet daughters along on at least two occasions. The people who annually lined the parade could literally watch the Engler girls grow up during their father’s twelve years in office.

The nature of party politics in the two states even touched the Tulip Time participation in the two cities. Obviously, the governors participate in the festivals, in part, as politicians looking for votes. But the governors also symbolize the fusion of various groups beneath the umbrella of the state government. Courting the favor of various ethnic groups to make them feel socially included is as old as the republic. Identifying with the Dutch histories of Pella and Holland is both

Gov. Leo Hoegh marched in the Pella parade in wooden shoes, accompanied by his wife and daughter, in 1955. Courtesy of the Pella Museum.
good policy and good politics. Holland’s decidedly Republican political leanings has not deterred Democratic governors from coming to town and dressing the part. The state’s two most recent Democratic governors, Jennifer Granholm and Gretchen Whitmer, both participated in the ritual and in costume. In Whitmer’s case, she did it during her first year in office.

In Pella, the bipartisan tradition that prevailed since the days of Governor Herring ended when Terry Branstad, a Republican, vacated the office (for the first time) in 1999. The next two governors (Democrats Tom Vilsack and James “Chet” Culver) stayed away from Pella’s festival. Vilsack’s wife substituted for him in 1999. But there would be no gubernatorial presence in the Pella parade until Terry Branstad won the governorship for a second time, by defeating Culver in 2010. Branstad returned to Pella in full Dutch costume. His successor continues the tradition.

The ceremonial facet of these visits may be more important than the political one. Tulip Time exists in both Pella and Holland to do at least two things: celebrate the local ethnic heritage and highlight that heritage’s place in the American cultural mosaic. Woe to the political leader who fails to understand the importance these regional rituals play in creating a state’s broader identity. There is no guarantee that a governor’s wielding of a broom and the wearing of the klompen in the spring will translate into loyal voters trooping to the polls in fall elections. But: these gestures from governors (of various ethnic and cultural strands) do help create the sense of oneness that allows a political system to live and breathe, even for people who will vote against the governor in November.
Gov. John Engler walked the parade route accompanied by his wife and their triplets. Courtesy of MLIVE.


right Current Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, Iowa’s first woman governor, and her husband both joined the street cleaning event in Pella. Courtesy of the Pella Museum.
Endnotes


3. Pella Chronicle 14 May 1936, 1. It is worth noting that Gov. Herring was running for a seat in the United States Senate in the fall election. He won the election and carried Pella and surrounding Lake Prairie Township with 61 percent of the votes. (Pella Chronicle 5 November 1936, 1.)

4. Pella Chronicle 19 May 1938. 5. Kraschel lost the fall election to George A. Wilson, who carried Pella. Lake Prairie Township gave Kraschel resounding 76 percent majority.

5. Pella Chronicle 18 May 1939, 1, 10.


7. Governor Vilsack did accept the traditional invitation to attend the festival from the Tul p Queen for that year. Pella Chronicle 6 May 1999, 28. On Christine Vilsack’s visit to Tulip Time see Pella Chronicle 13 May 1999, 1.

8. My special thanks to Jessi Vos, Assistant Director of the Pella Historical Society and Museums, for her help in securing pictures of Iowa governors participating in Pella Tulip Time activities.
