5-16-1997

Achterhof, Elton Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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AP: Can you start with your name and where you were born and when?

EA: My name is Elton Achterhof. I was born in Holland, Michigan on [date removed], 1913.

AP: Have you lived here all your life? What other places have you lived at?

EA: No, when I was 17 years old, I quit high school and went to South Dakota. There I got employment on a farm over there. For the next three years I worked on farms, with different people, but on a farm. Because of the drought, and out there there was hardly any work to be had, I took a job with an electrical firm who had us moving the poles of the highway. The federal government took over the highway. They named it US 14, from Chicago to the Black Hills. That went right through the town of Volga, where I was living, and I got a job there. We had to move all the poles, out four foot to six foot, to get them off the right of way of the road. They were widening the road. That was my first job in the electrical field.

AP: So that's where you first started learning about the electrical business?

EA: Yes. Didn't learn much. It was all hard work. The ground was so hard you could hardly dig the holes. We didn't have power tools like we have now. We dug them by hand. You had to have a crow bar there, too, to keep chipping at the dirt, loosening it up, and then scooping it out. It was a slow process. Some days we had... They called the soil there "gumbo," and when that dries up it's just like blacktop. You can't move it, just break it to pieces and take out the pieces. And
that's the way we dug the holes. Somedays you'd only dig two holes in a whole day, because of the hardness of the soil.

AP: You stayed out there for how long?

EA: We started out in the summer and we went towards Huron, South Dakota, which was the next big town. There were other crews working there, too. They didn't complete that before the weather turned cold and everything froze up. I got the job of working as what they call the grunt, the guy that stands at the bottom of the poles and fastens things on for the line man working above. Then, gradually, I got to be a line man. I was a line man for three years. Then I got in the employ of Volga, South Dakota.

We built a power plant, much like the one that was at Zeeland, only not quite as big. But we had the same type of engines that they had at Zeeland. That was Fairbanks Morse. He took 14 inch pistons and a 21 inch stroke. We had two engines in the power plant, one three cylinder and one two cylinder. The three cylinder was 75 horse power per cylinder. When the plant was done, I got the job of being one of the operators. I worked there in the wintertime, and in the summertime, I did line work for them, because they extended some of their lines out further to get to the farmers. I also wired some buildings: farm buildings, houses, stores, churches. Everybody had to get the wiring done before the power came. It was a lot of work, and I stayed there. In May of 1941, I went back to Holland, Michigan with my wife and two children. We just came here on a vacation. I had an uncle here on the Board of Public Works. He talked to me and said, why don't you come back and live here and work here? I was happy where I was and doing everything. In October he sent me a
 telegram that if I wanted a job, I had to say yes and come or say I didn’t want to come. So, my wife’s folks, in the meantime, in 1937, they had quit farming and they moved to Holland, Michigan, because that’s where they had come from before they left it in 1911. When I got that telegram, my wife was all for moving to Holland, Michigan because her folks were here and her sisters and brothers, family. In November of 1941, we moved to Holland.

AP: You had two sons, you said? How old were they when you moved.

EA: Bob was five and Jim was about a year and a half.

AP: Where are they now?

EA: Bob is an electrical engineer for Haworth and Jim is a vice-president of Parkway Electric here. All my boys are in the electrical business. I have six sons and they’re all in the electrical business and they’re all here. And, I have three daughters that are all nurses, two of them in Holland Hospital and one of them in St. Mary’s Hospital in Grand Rapids. The whole family, nine kids, and they all live close.

AP: So Holland was very good for your family?

EA: Yes, Holland... The Lord was really good to me. He blessed me with a good business. I took a partner for a while, Casey Oonk. I took him as a partner, and the business grew. When I started, I operated out of my basement of my house. Now, I don’t know if you’ve seen the building they’re in now, moving into today... When they printed that book [picks up a booklet put out about the history of Parkway Electric], they had a hundred and twenty employees. Last summer, it was a hundred and fifty some. They will have to bring in, too, probably this summer. Parkway’s
wiring a new addition to the Hospital. That’s a big job, it’s supposed to be two years.

AP: And it all started from your basement?

EA: Yes. I started in a Model A Ford car, took the back seat out and put my electrical stuff in there. After about two or three months, we bought the first truck, a great big old Chevy (unintelligible). That was the beginning of it. Now, they’ve got 149 employees with trucks and stuff. They have their own (unintelligible) trucks. All the employees we hired years ago, they’re getting older now, but they’re still there. Parkway is all employee owned. You can’t buy stock in Parkway unless you have a license and you work for Parkway. When you sell, you have to sell that back to Parkway.

AP: How has that been an advantage for Parkway?

EA: I think because most of the journeymen are in that group now. There’s 17 all together, owners. They all have an interest in the business. They know if they work hard... We’ve always been able to pay a good bonus every year. We’ve never had to lay-off men because there was no work. We did a couple of times years ago when the winters were bad that we couldn’t get to the jobs or jobs weren’t moving because of the weather, but we never had to lay anybody off.

AP: I imagine you were pretty business with all of your work in starting Parkway, but were there any other organizations or activities that you were particularly involved in, or your family was involved in?

EA: I was involved in church. We went to Montello Park Christian Reformed Church. I
served on the (unitelligible) ministry there for many years. First, I was a deacon, and I was an elder for several years. The past two terms I was there, I was the Vice President of the church.

AP: Talk a little bit more about the role the church has played in your life and maybe how you see the church in Holland, too.

EA: Parkway Electric is primarily all Christian men. I don’t know about right now, because I’m not there no more. I don’t know just how many there’d be. My sons are there, and they’re all church people. All the people we hired when I was there were church people. Now those people all have their sons working at Parkway, too. It’s going into other generations. I think there’ll be a big change in Parkway in another five years, because most of my sons will be out, retired, and there’ll be somebody else who’ll have to be taking over the operating of it.

AP: Do they have any children interested in doing that?

EA: Oh, yes. I don’t know if they’re interested in that, but my oldest son, Bob, he only had one boy. He worked for us for a while, but he didn’t like it. Jim is the next one, and Jim has a daughter and a son, and they both work at Parkway, and his daughter is married, and her husband works at Parkway. I don’t think I told you that, but Parkway has five corporations within Parkway. One of them is P.E.C., that’s what we call that one corporation and that’s just the initials of it, P.E.C. It really is Parkway Electric Company, is what it is, but they just named it that way so it differentiates from Parkway Electric. The owners are the same men that own Parkway Electric. But, by youngest son, right away from High School, he was
interested in computers. He's made an organization now. They make factories to operate with computers. All the machinery like you see in Beechnut Candy has been their first customer. Since he did that one, they are all part of the big conglomerate, and he got a lot of work all over the world doing factories that way. Now, Parkway has an office in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Their busiest office is there. The reason that it's there is Puerto Rico is waking up and a lot of industry coming there now, and the candy company here has a branch in Puerto Rico, big branch, where they make all their gum. That factory is all completely run by computers. In that way, they do work. They got another office in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Dallas, Texas. They have engineers each at one of these places. There's 19 engineers here in the city of Holland, electrical engineers, that program these computers. So you can get an idea how big that part of it is. Computers today, like they just put one into Haworth, was three million dollars for the computer. They took one out that cost Haworth five million at one time, but this three million now is faster and doesn't need as much cooling as the other one did. Haworth wants to sell that other computer. He paid five million for it and all he can get for it is 10,000.

AP: Because the technology is so much better. It moves so quickly now.

EA: That's right. The technology is better, it works faster, everything changes. I was just listening to the talk in town on the radio today, I think, there was four computers for sale. People want to get a better one, a faster one, a bigger one, especially with all the stuff coming in that can go on it.

AP: Right, my dad just told me last night he wanted to get a new computer and theirs is
only less than four years old. They’re already obsolete.

EA: That’s right, four years old, they’re obsolete. One of my daughters got one and she too, it’s just about four years ago they got it, and now they don’t know what to do. Parkway’s doing that. Besides that corporation, there’s a corporation that does testing. They have a camera that can take pictures of the power lines. It can tell them when they come to a cut-out, which is a disconnection, or if it has leakage or isn’t carrying the juice or making heat, and this camera will determine that heat and start making a red signal. They can also go into a house and put the camera in the middle of the floor and turn it around so it cuts it right near the ceiling, and they can tell if the insulator did a good job, that the insulation is in there good. They have one man that just operates that, does that. They’re also getting into telephone wires. Telephone things are so different. I guess you would know that from working in the buildings in Holland. The telephone thing is getting so wild now. Getting into fiber optics. It’s really a glass tube, they’re doing that now. It’s a thinner cable, and they can send more messages over that cable. It isn’t inclined to leak, like wire is. There’s not any high voltage connected with it, so that you don’t have leakage. The Board of Public Works connected all the city, where they have these transformers set up in all the different places in town with the fence around it, so they cut the juice down to use, and they connected them all together with fiber optics. I guess, West Ottawa schools, they got all their schools connected together with it.

AP: So, that’s a lot of the changes that have happened in that industry.

EA: That’s right. The industry has changed so much. They do line work, actually do the
line work, they work for the city a lot, and Consumer Power. They have two big line trucks now.

AP: What other big changes have you seen just in other aspects in Holland beyond the industry?

EA: Holland has sure changed a lot from what it was when I lived here before. We were just talking about that the other night. We went, at that time, my mother’s brother moved to South Dakota, he was a farmer out in South Dakota. In 1923, we went there to visit, and we were gone for three weeks and we never locked the doors of our house. You didn’t have to. You wouldn’t do it today. At that time practically everybody went to church. Church was one of the main things that kept the city together and growing.

AP: So you think it’s not so focused on that anymore?

EA: No, I don’t think it is on the religious part of it anymore like it was then. That’s one thing we can say. We wired just about every church in Holland. We wired almost all the factories. Haworth was one of our big customers. I don’t know if you know Mr. Haworth. When he started business, he lived upstairs at 52 E. 18th Street. He was just married, and he lived upstairs, and he wanted to start making the planters that you’d put into the house when you take out those... Everybody had a dining room and a sitting room, and they had sliding doors in between there so you could shut them off in the wintertime. Everybody took off those sliding doors and then there’s part of a partition on each end of where the doors stood and they took them out, too, and that left a sub-floor that went through, but the finished floor didn’t, so it
left a whole there. Well, not a hole, it was just three-quarters inch deep. So, Haworth built a planter that you could buy and sit on that thing and you hide your hole in the floor. Then, he put artificial flowers in it. If he thought they had enough daylight, they could put dirt in there and have a planter right in the house. That’s how he started Haworth first. Then he went to sliding partitions, different partitions for offices. Now he’s one of the biggest industries in Holland. I think he is the biggest industry as far as hiring men and also the use of electricity.

AP: Last summer, Holland was recognized as one of the ten All-American cities. What do you see in Holland, what qualities do you think Holland has that earns it this honor?

EA: I think Holland has been a clean city. We’ve always had something to clean the streets when they were dirty. Even when we were kids, they had a big tank wagon and it sprayed water on the gravel road. We lived right near Van Raalte Avenue, and Van Raalte Avenue wasn’t paved all the way from 17th street and then it went down to 24th, and then it went to Donn’s Factory. That sprinkling wagon used to come down there and settle the dust in the summertime. I think Holland’s been a city that is blessed. The police department, I think, is on the ball. The fire department, everything. They spent money when they had to. The people, I think, most of them went along with it. I think the big change came twenty, thirty years ago. So many people moved form the south up here, hill billies, we called them. A lot of Mexicans moved in here. The sugar beet plant got them in here and Heinz.

AP: Is there anything you think the community still needs to work on or any negative
aspects or have any of those good things gone the way side in Holland?

EA: No. I think probably all of it was necessary and it worked out for good.

AP: So you think the community stayed very strong and Holland has maintained that through the years?

EA: I think that’s the only big change. When I was working at the beginning of my electrical park in Holland, the first twenty years I did a lot of work for, they had two Rusk factories. Now you can’t even buy Rusk, there isn’t Rusk. We had two Rusk factories. Look at the furniture factories that have disappeared. They’ve been replaced with other ones or other industry. Take River Avenue between 8th Street and the bridge. How many furniture factories, just in that area, went out? Ottawa furniture was a big outfit. That was on the north side of the street, and Padnos’ took right over that for their offices and stuff. Holland Furniture was another one that was big and had a good clientele. I don’t know who’s doing it now. Sly, he had a big factory. Holland Furniture, we did a lot of work for Holland furniture. They had their own generator. They had water and that made their steam and ran their steam engine. They’d run a generator. We took care of that thing all the time. Then, there was the shoe factory, which went out later than that. That was a big thing. There was hardly a young woman or man of my age or even older that didn’t work at the shoe factory, or Heinz, or somebody, when they were younger. We aren’t into the lumber industries. Now we’ve got Herman Miller. Howard Miller does Zeeland. But Herman Miller’s all over and Haworth’s all over. Now Haworth’s, in fact, is going back to wooden partitions. The fad changes, now, from
steel going back to wooden ones. There’s been a lot of changes in the industry.

AP: Right now, we’re in Freedom Village which is where you are living. Do you want to talk a little bit about what it’s like living here? How long ago was this built?

EA: About six years. I have to tell by my pacer on my heart; this is the sixth year for it. The reason is, I have to have it checked so often. I used to have it checked every three months. Now, I have to have it checked every month, they told me, because it was coming on six years, and they check it every month now. I was one of the first ones in Freedom Village. My wife was living and we were going to take an apartment in Freedom Village. But then her health declined. We had picked one of the apartments on the sixth floor, and she looked at it again, and she didn’t want to go that high, so, we took an apartment on the first floor, then, by back in the offices. We took that apartment. She ordered all the wallpaper and the carpets and everything that had to go into it. She did that, but she never lived to get in there. So I gave it up, and I took a studio apartment. I lived in a studio apartment for a year and a half. All the time I lived there I couldn’t eat. I had to run everything I ate through a blender and drink it, because I had an esophagus that kept plugging up all the time. The whole year and a half or two years that I lived there, I made all my own meals. I got one meal a day from the Village and they brought that into my room and I would dump that into the blender and make it liquid, so I could drink it. Then, we had called a doctor from Grand Rapids, a specialist on esophaguses. He was going to straighten my esophagus out, make it so it wouldn’t clog up on the end. They invented a tool that they could use electricity down there and heat, they could
seer the bottom of it so that it didn't close up any more. When he went down to do that, my esophagus split from top to bottom. So I laid in the hospital, I don't know how long. I don't remember this now. But I remember laying in the hospital in Grand Rapids and them feeding me through my veins. So, they got a hold of another surgeon who put all tubes in my. I had three tubes on this side, two tubes on this side. I had to feed myself eight cans of food a day, and I fed it in five times. Three times I fed two cans and two times I fed one can. I started five o'clock in the morning and ended at nine in the night, each day. I had two cans at five in the morning and two cans at 9 at night and two cans at 12:30, at noon, and then I had one can at 9:00 in the morning, and one can at the end of the afternoon. I did that for two years. The way I remember how it was two years was the guy, after he split the esophagus, he wanted to give it six months to see if it would close up, and it didn't. So, he wanted another six months, and it didn't. He still wanted another six months, and it didn't close up. Then we started looking for somebody else, and we got one, finally. A doctor in Ann Arbor said he thought he could do me some good if I would come down there and talk with him. My daughter took me there, and he wasn't too encouraging. At first, he kind of talked to us. He said, I think I can do you some good, but I don't know what I will do. He says, "I haven't seen your stomach. I don't know how much scar tissue there is in it and if you have ulcers in it." I didn't have ulcers in it. He says, "I don't know how much damage they have done," so he says, "I can take a piece of your intestine and make it into an esophagus. Or, if there is a piece of the stomach big enough," he says, "I can make
it into an esophagus and also a bag, kind of, to hold whatever you eat." That's what I got. I don't have a stomach. The stomach starts right here [motions to his sternum] and drops down to about here [motions to middle of the rib cage]. It isn't as big as a regular stomach. Then, we had trouble all the time. My body rejected it. Every three months about. The first time I really got sick, terrific pain in my abdomen, they took me to the emergency room from here to the emergency room in St. Mary's Hospital. There they called the doctor in Ann Arbor, and he right away told them what he thought was the trouble, and he told them what to do. My son Jim was with me that day, so he showed Jim how to do it. Then, after that, if I had stomach trouble... on either side, I had bags on both sides... if I had stomach trouble, they knew what to do. The body was rejecting a balloon on the end of each set of tubes. The tubes have like an electrical cord with three wires in it, white, black, and red. The red one was the one we fed through. Black one was the one that we put medication through. That went right to me old stomach, where the old stomach was, there was still a little thing there that they could put medicine in, and get it into the bloodstream. They both were fastened into locations, but with a balloon. That balloon was filled with water, and that was on the white tube. When they had trouble, they had to take the water out of it with a syringe, suck the water out of the balloon, and then they could let me stand up or roll around a little bit and move... [tape ends] When they put the water back in the balloon, that anchored the thing again. Jim knew, they told him, he had nine inches to pull on the thing before they would pull out of the intestines or the stomach. So, nine and a quarter inches he had
to play with. Then he would let it go back again and then that would anchor it, put
the water back in again, and it was in a different place in the stomach, in the
abdomen. This side here, I had a bag outside of the stomach, and a tube. I don’t
know exactly why they had two tubes that went up to my throat and then back down.
One went into the stomach and one went into the intestine. One of them they could
put medicine through to the part of the stomach that was left, and the other part they
put right into the intestines. There, again, the white tube wasn’t blown, and this one
we didn’t have as much trouble with as with this side. This one we had about every
two months Jim had to come and move it. But I went for two years with that tube. I
just a year ago about now... Now I can eat. I’m thankful for it.

AP: What other things throughout your life are you most thankful for?

EA: I wouldn’t change Holland for any other city. We do have some bars around here,
but it ain’t like other towns. Even Grand Rapids has got bars all over the place, too.
I think Holland is a good city. I think the churches have a big influence for that.
Holland hasn’t been blessed with union trouble like most other towns have, you take
bigger towns. We haven’t had any trouble with that. I think there’s more harmony,
more loyalty between labor and management, between management and labor. They
both are concerned about the other one. I’m happy here, since I was a little kid.

AP: Do you think there’s a generation gap right now in Holland? It’s probably
unavoidable.

EA: I guess there is a little bit of that. Yes, I think it is [unavoidable].

AP: Do you think there was when you were in school?
EA: No, I don’t think there was as much. We didn’t have as much stuff going on in the schools like they have now, either. My parents always went to parent teachers conferences. But they only had one meeting a month and in the summertime they wouldn’t have any meetings. They could all attend it. I think families visited each other more than they do now. They didn’t have baby sitters right away for the little kids, they used to take them all over. I can never remember having a baby sitter. I was the oldest one in the family.

AP: Did you watch your brothers and sisters a lot, or were you always out with your parents?

EA: We would go out with our parents. Never would I stay at home and my parents went away. Usually we visited relatives or neighbors. There was a whole bunch of them they liked to play cards. Friday nights in the wintertimes they always went to somebody’s house, and the kids went along, played with their kids. I think you saw more of that. Now, everybody has to have baby sitters.

AP: How else do you think priorities have changed?

EA: I think with unions. I think unions are a necessary evil, but when they get them all controlled by some big union boss who has to have $400,000 a year salary, I think that’s where unions are wrong. Now, Parkway is all union, but it isn’t a big union. It’s the Christian Labor Association.

AP: So you haven’t run into some of those same problems?

EA: No, but when we wired a school... The general contractor was A. F. of L. from Grand Rapids. The bricklayers, when they started on the job, they walked off, they
weren't going to work, because the plumber and the electrician were non-union. We were C.L.A., Christian Labor Association, but they called us non-union. We took it right to court. The government ruled that we were a recognized labor union, and if they wanted to keep their job they better all go to work. That's about the size of it. We did. Everybody got along good and there wasn't any trouble at all. I think because of that, Parkway blossomed, because if anyone got tough with us, we went to court and let the government settle it. Now the government always settled it. We were a government recognized labor union and our men, actually, were getting more money than the union men, because we furnished every journey man with a truck. He had the privilege of driving that truck home, and that saved him from buying another car. Every year at Christmas time, according to what the book says [referring to book put out about history of Parkway Electric], we gave them each a bonus, and it was never less than a thousand dollars. That thousand dollars, at that time, was a lot of money. So, we never had no labor trouble with our men. Pretty near all of our men that all started with some of the other electricians around Holland, and some of them even had started for themselves, but found it going pretty tough to make it.

AP: How have your own priorities changed throughout your life?

EA: I always worked. Even when I owned it, I had work clothes on, I wasn't dressed up. The only one that was dressed up was the bookkeeper. Even when I was home, I always had something to do. I remember the one place that we owned, we lived there the 30 years out on Graaschaap road, just south of 32nd street. I bought that
house and that land through the bank. The people that died that lived there... it was filthy. My wife was so mad at me. But, I cleaned it up and I remodeled the whole house. In about a year and a half, we moved into it. I did all the work myself except the plastering. I did all the plumbing, heating, and electrical.

AP: So that work ethic has been something very constant in you life?

EA: Being the owner of Parkway, I got all the service calls. So Saturdays and nights, there was hardly any night that I slept the whole night through without getting a phone call. I also had chicken coops with 1,200 chickens. I raised hatching eggs for Frederickson's Hatchery, with is a thing way of the past, now all gone. I had pigs. Do you know where the Christian High School is? I farmed that land, the 40 acres that that's built on, besides the land I had on Graaschaap road. Then, that was all put into the city and we couldn't farm that anymore. Then N____, they bought the land from them to make it N_______. We couldn't spread manure right under their noses, so we had to quit. So I bought a place further out in the country, 142nd. But then I didn't farm. I just lived there. I didn't have it big, I had 11 acres. I built a new house.

AP: Now when you say you built a new house, you built the house?

EA: I did most of it. I always was interested in carpentry work. In South Dakota, I helped carpenters a lot. I did a lot of carpentry work, too. I built the Christian Reformed Church in Volga, South Dakota. I was the only one person hired. The rest of the guys that helped to build it were farmers. In the winter time they had time to come and help. I was the boss and I did it myself, the rest of it. When we moved
here from South Dakota, the first house I bought was on South Shore Drive, Montello Park. That’s how we went to Montello Church and how Parkway got its name, Parkway Electric, on South Shore Drive. That way before it was always called the Park Road. Now they named it South Shore Drive, that sounds a little better, I guess. That house, too, I remodeled that house completely. There’s the bands. [Tulip Time Children’s Parade in background.] They have a lot of the school bands. I’m glad it didn’t raining. That’s what the weather report is, it’s supposed to rain, too yet, this afternoon. Or at least a good chance of showers. Oh, they’ve had some terrible Tulip Times, too. Oh boy.

AP: Have they? Like what?

EA: We had one, the kids dropped like flies, it was so hot and muggy. High humidity, and they marched and they got to Kollen Park and they just sprawled all over the ground there, the lot of them, dead tired.

AP: They had to wear those uniforms and costumes, those get pretty hot. I don’t know what’s worse, the weather to be so cold, like today, or so hot.

EA: I’ve seen it when it rained, too. They marched in the rain. They changed yesterday. I think if it wasn’t so cold yesterday, they probably would have had it yesterday. It was so cold and windy, that wind went right through everything. One thing I can tell you about Tulip Time. When I was in junior high school or high school, I don’t know just how old I was, I was about 14 or 15, and I took biology, and I got to be the teacher’s pet. I was really interested in it and all my life I was the kid that had turtles and frogs. My mother was a woman that would stand all of that. I could take
snakes home and show her snakes, too. She wasn't sacred at all. Summertime at my school, I took that big container they had, the cage for snakes and stuff. It had a drawer about two and a half inches deep all the way around so you could put water or sand in it and make him have a place like that. They used to feed him frogs and polywogs or minnows. Then I had 13 or 14 different kinds of turtles. I even had a horn toad from Texas, and I had snakes. I took them home for the summer, then. I had a nice place to put them. We had to bring them back again in the fall. I did that two years, I took them all home.

AP: Can you describe a significant turning point in your life? Were there any events that you would call a turning point?

EA: I think that the Depression... Like I say, I was going to high school and was working in the bakery. I worked every morning four o'clock. Friday afternoon I'd go there right after school and I'd work all night, and then Saturday morning come home and sleep. I think that was a turning point why I went to South Dakota. My mother was sick, she was anemic and she fainted quite often. My brother had infantile paralysis, or polio, and he's crippled. He's crippled today yet. Everything went wrong for me at that time. The guy that I was working in the bakery for, he was going bankrupt. He'd pay you with a check and it was no good. I think that was really a turning point in my life. I had a hard time in school because I went to work at 4 o'clock in the morning, and I worked till late, then I walked to high school. I never went to proms or anything or parties they had at school because a lot of times I worked after school, too. Go there and work until 6 o'clock, and then go home in the evening. Seemed
just like there wasn’t any life, just work and go to school. I fell asleep in school so often.

AP: It sounds like some wonderful things came about from going to South Dakota for you.

EA: I’ve had a lot of things in my life, I don’t think anybody has had more operations. I’ve had several operations on my eyes. One eye I can’t see anything anymore. The other eye is 95% gone. I had four operations on each one of my knees. Now I have artificial knees and they’re about 12, 14 years old now, and they’re worn out. I had x-rays on them a couple weeks ago, I went to the doctor and I said, "I know I’m almost to the point I cannot walk at all." Not walk, so much, but to get up and walk. So I just thought I’d see if he could do anything. He said, there’s nothing they can do. He said, "Your heart and your lungs won’t take the operation." I figured out on my knees, I had eight operations on them. Then I had, in South Dakota, a pitch fork right through this knee, besides that. Another thing, I came down a ladder, working in Macatauwa park one time. I was on a house and I had an extension ladder way out, and I couldn’t reach it yet. The house was built on a slight hill. I just took another ladder up there and put it on the slanting roof and had to get up about ten feet to where the wires went into the house. It was raining and the ladder slipped, it was kind of mossy on the side of the house, and the ladder started slipping, and I jumped right for the rough, and I hung onto the roof and stayed there. I broke my heel, lengthwise. That laid me up a long time. I had, I guess I’d say about four operations on my eyes, too. Right now I’ve got a particular kind of cornea from somebody else. They transplanted a cornea on my right eye. The little stitches are still in there yet.
I can see a little bit with that eye. I had open heart surgery six years ago, and, because of my esophagus sticking and plugging up all the time, spilling the contents, a lot of times, into my lung cavity, I had pneumonia. There’s 30 times that I’ve had pneumonia. In fact, this is the first year I haven’t had it. I had a shot for it, too, this year, for pneumonia and I had a cold shot, both. The 31 times I had pneumonia... my lungs are shot, the scar tissue is so thick. But, all the way, the Lord’s been with me. He’s carried me through all those operations. I’m thankful.

AP: He’s been a very important part in your life.

EA: Yes. I can’t remember when I wasn’t a Christian. I can’t remember any time in my life when I wasn’t a Christian. When I was little kid, I believed the whole time. I had a good Christian mother.

AP: You still see your children quite regularly.

EA: Yes, all the children are good Christians, and all the kids graduated from Christian high school. That, again, was a big expense in my life, but I was always glad the Lord blessed me with enough money that I could do it. Everyone graduated from Holland Christian High, and everyone made confession of faith in Montello Park Christian Reformed Church. They all married Christian help mates. Through the years, a lot of satisfaction. My wife, she was a good Christian lady. She did the most of the lot of work of helping them with Catechism and stuff. She’s been dead now five years.

AP: Are there any final comments you’d like to add or any other important things you’d like to talk about?
EA: No, but what I would say, though, is God has blessed me all the way. Even today, it’s hard for me to get up and walk. But, I see other people here who can’t get up at all, and they’ve lost their mind. I have my mind. I still can remember. I’m thankful for that. I can remember things I did in kindergarten. I always had a real good mind. I’ve got a good memory. Did you go to Holland Christian High School? There’s a teacher, she’s living today yet. She was our literature and English teacher in Holland High. She’s 102 years old. I would like to go see her again. Lillian C. VanDyke. She lives at 244 W. 23rd St. She’s sickly now and she has a lady living with her. When I was in business, she remodeled her house and we did the electrical work on it. Every time she’d come, she’d point her finger at me, "Recite the 'Lady of the Lake.'" I’d have to recite that for her, the 'Lady of the Lake,' and... what from Poe?... and then Chaucer: "When that Aprille with his shoures sote, the droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote, and bathed every veyne in swich licour, of which vertu engendred is the flour... So priketh hem nature in her corages, than longen folks to go on pilgrimages... The holy blisful martir for to seke, that hem hath holpen, whan they were seke." Then she’d say, "Well, how about 'Hiawatha'?” On the shores of Gitchiegummi, by the shining big sea water, stood the wigwam of Tikomus, daughter of the moon Tikomus, dark behind it rose the forest, rose the dark and gloomy pine trees, bright before it beat the water, beat the shining big sea water. That’s the first paragraph. Then there’s 'Lady of the Lake.' The stag at eve had drunk his fill, where danced the moon on Monan’s rill, and deep his midnight lair had made in lone Glenartney’s hazel shade. She always had us recite them over, and then
she always used the Bible, too, for memory work. The Beatitudes, I remembered them, and several of the Psalms. She was my favorite teacher. She was born with one hand off, and she could carry a book. I can see her yet. I thought she was the nicest lady in the whole world. She was really always good to me and I would like to see her now again. I called this lady on the telephone, she was in the hospital then, I asked if she thought she would remember me. She said, "I’m sure she would." She did then and she thought she would yet. But she’s 102 years old now. I don’t think I’ll get there. I don’t want to either.

AP: We will certainly be thankful to have had this time to talk to you about all those memories and your life in Holland and down in South Dakota. From the Archives we really thank you for having the time to talk with us.

EA: Holland has just been a good town. It’s been a good business town. I made so many close friends. Like Jerry Haworth. Years ago the Chamber of Commerce made a trip to Hawaii, took a tour. You could get tickets and Jerry called me up and he says, take your wife, forget about work, put your name in. So I did. We went around to Hawaii. I was married 25 years, and Hawaii wasn’t a state yet. Then we went again on the 40th wedding anniversary. I wanted to go on our 50th, but my wife didn’t want to go. Hawaii has changed so much.

AP: You were married over 50 years?

EA: If my wife would have lived, it would have been 62 now. We had good years together. In spite of all the big family, we did things as a family, and I think those are things I’ll never forget. For seven, eight years, every year we went for two
weeks to camp out at Spider Lake near Traverse city. The kids all talk about that yet. They had a good time there. I did a lot of fishing. Besides all the work I did, I quite often fished. I like to fish. I ain’t crazy about fishing on Lake Michigan, on the big lake. I had a small boat and I took a different lake. We would rent a cottage up at Hutchens Lake sometimes. I’ve been down there. If I had a week off I’d get to stay away for a week and I’d go there for a week…

AP: Thank you for your time this afternoon. I think we’re about out of…