

Interview with
James Essenburg

Conducted October 17, 1996
by Hal Franken

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

HF: Well, Jim Essenburg, one of the things that was a little different when I called you, you indicated that, yes, you were Jim Essenburg. So, I said, "Your name is James." You said, "Well, yes. James, but I'm Malcolm James Essenburg. Everyone calls me Jim." Now, Malcolm, was that sort of a family name?

JE: My grandmother was Scotch and born in Canada and so was my mother. So, I imagine they wanted a Scotch name in the family somewhere.

HF: It's not too uncommon that someone has a first name that's not used too much, but they go by their second name.

JE: As a boy, I hated the name Malcolm. So they called me Jimmy.

HF: You were born on July 11, 1912. So, that makes you a young gentleman of somewhere around 84 years old. And your father's name was what?

JE: Nicholas J. He was the City Treasurer of Holland until he died in 1914.

HF: Any special memories of him coming home with stories?

JE: He died when I was two years old, I have no memory of him at all.

HF: And your mother was from Canada? She was Scotch. Any special memories you have of her telling stories about coming to Holland?

JE: I don't and I regret it to this day that I didn't ask her any questions. I could spend hours just talking to her if I could now. Like a lot of people when you're young, you just fluff things off. I did the same thing. I don't know where they were married, when they married, I don't know the important things.

HF: That's so true. When we're young we don't think of these things, and now, at this time we'd just love to be able to ask them questions. Now, as a boy living in

Holland, you lived on what street?

JE: Maple Avenue.

HF: And what was sort of the end of Holland as far as the east and west end are concerned?

JE: Well, the east end was the depot. The north end was the bridge on River Avenue. To the south, after 19th Street, there was nothing. If one looked out there back door, they saw nothing but fields.

HF: Oh, my goodness. And, of course, the west end of Holland cut off of at about Ottawa Ave., about where the Heinz Company is. As a boy, what sort of things did you do for recreation?

JE: We did everything. We made everything. I often think of the old city dump at Kollen Park which is now a parking lot. And these kids would periodically go looking for old clocks to get the works out of them for something that had wheels that we'd need to make scooters or whatever. That was the main thing we did. Of course, we played ball. But I always remember that old city dump was a gold mine for us boys, and we swam in crystal clear Black Lake!

HF: Now, you've said that you'd find the wheels and what have you to make things and later in life you were very involved in the automotive business and was the manager at R. E. Barber Ford for a good number of years as the parts department manager. When did you start at R. E. Barber, how old were you?

JE: It was 1949, because I bought a 1949 Ford when becoming employed there.

HF: What did you do previous to working at R. E. Barber Ford?

- JE: Well, I worked for Jack Decker, the Chevrolet dealer and I worked in various wholesale places. I sold parts retail and wholesale, always in the automotive line.
- HF: Somewhere in the automotive line and then for Decker Chevrolet which later became DeNooyer Chevrolet. I forget who was the predecessor of R. E. Barber Ford.
- JE: John Vrieling.
- HF: So, you joined the staff in 1949. As the years rolled by, particularly in the Parts Department, you must have seen lots of changes in cars as to the way they were designed, as to their durability.
- JE: Well, the Parts Department itself, we did a tremendous business in those days, but that's before all the other auto parts stores like we have now all over town. There was hardly any other competition. We had trucks on the road selling parts in various areas. We sold hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of parts in those days.
- HF: That's right, the parts stores were not around in those days. So, you were pretty much forced to go to the dealer. What were the hours? Were they longer than they are now?
- JE: Definitely. We opened at seven in the morning and closed at six at night. With an hour off at noon.
- HF: And Saturday?
- JE: Saturdays till five. And if we had a holiday, say if New Year's Day, any major holiday, fell on a weekday, we had to work an extra half-day to make up for it. My first job in Holland, I was just out of high school, I worked at Montgomery Ward store on 8th Street. The wages were \$13.50 a week and with that I bought a Model

A Ford on time.

HF: And when did you get married?

JE: I first married when I was 29. I had two sons with my first wife. And I married Elaine in 1971.

HF: So, with your first marriage, did you rent what we would call an apartment or an upstairs, or did you buy a house or what?

JE: Those were the Depression days. We lived with my mother for a winter. She was alone. I was the last one in the family to marry and then we went to the upstairs of an apartment, then we built a house.

HF: Do you remember building the first house, as to how much it originally cost you?

JE: Sure, about \$12,000.

HF: Did you stay in that house for a long time or not necessarily?

(Interrupted by Halloween visitors)

HF: Do you remember what you sold it for years later?

JE: When I had a divorce, I gave it to my wife.

HF: Oh, so you don't know what may have transpired. Sometimes the homes that were built at one price and then 25 years later the prices really have escalated. Any other fond memories that you might have, Jim?

JE: Well, I've got one memory and for the life of me I can't find anybody that knows about it. As a boy, my mother took me down to River and 8th, on the corner, and a Human Fly climbed the Tower Clock Building. Now, I have never found anyone who knew about that or heard about it. It's very odd. I can visualize him getting on

top and waving. Try and get hold of Randy VandeWater and see if he ever heard of it.

HF: We certainly will have to try and find out about that. As a boy, your mother took you downtown and a person who impersonated a human fly went up the Tower Clock Building and you remember him getting to the top and waving. So, he didn't fall down or have an accident.

JE: No, not that I know of. It's very odd that no one's heard of it. Another oddity is when they started working on 7th Street here near Freedom Village, they ran into huge concrete walls. Nobody knew what that was, but that was where the Interurban went under 7th Street before it crossed the swamp. Nobody had ever heard about that.

HF: Now, we've heard about the Interurban serving Holland for some time and running to Jenison Park which was big in those days, but not a tunnel under 7th Street.

JE: Yes, there was a tunnel under 7th Street. I thought I'd mention that.

HF: Yes, because we're just trying to find people who've been around Holland and know a little of its history and maybe know some different kinds of stories like you're just telling.

JE: And right across here was a hobo camp when I was a boy. My mother forbade me to go there, but they had a camp there. They made what they called mud turtle soup. I suppose out of the turtles of the swamp. That's another thing very few people realize.

HF: And your mother chose that you not go there.

JE: That's right!

HF: Were there hobos that you would see down in that area?

JE: I also remember hobos coming and knocking on my mother's door to repair umbrellas, sharpen knives, all that sort of thing.

HF: And these were particularly during the Depression years?

JE: Well, in the 20's. I went to the old Washington School on 11th and Maple. That was the old red, brick school. When school was out, I would run to 13th and Maple where there was a barber shop. The first kid that go there got to sweep the hair off the floor, and Jack gave him a candy bar. That was one of the daily deals, you ran to the barber shop.

HF: At Washington School at that time, do you remember if they had all of you people like all fifth graders in one class, or did you have fourth, fifth, sixth, all in one class?

JE: No, there were grades. I have a picture of everybody in my third grade class.

HF: Do you recall how many students may have been in your third grade class?

JE: Probably about 25 or so. The teacher's name was Miss Cybil. Another one that's interesting is the old tannery where the Civic Center is. That was one of our haunts. We looked through the windows and saw the vats. Some of the workers had to walk past our house to get to their homes. The sidewalk would be spotted with purple spots where they'd been spitting as they walked. The dye must have been in their systems. Across the street from the tannery was the bark shed where they stored the tanning nuts and the bark. We used to play in there and build houses out of the bark. That was one of our playgrounds.

HF: Were there any special smells or was that not too bad?

JE: I don't remember that at all. Of course, the bark shed smelled like bark. No fumes, though.

HF: A playground for you, but also being able to watch them at work and going home from work.

JE: I was one of the first patients at the old Holland Hospital on 12th and Central. I was dragged by a car when I was five years old. I went in there May 9th and I was there for about 3 months. I could tell you a lot of stories about the old hospital!

HF: Then you were involved in a car accident, you as a pedestrian?

JE: No, I was sitting on a curb watching my big brother play ball and a woman learning to drive came and picked me off the curb.

HF: A woman learning to drive picked you off the curb and that necessitated a 3 month stay at the Holland Hospital and you were one of their first patients?

JE: Yes, they had just opened. Rena Boven was one of the nurses and Miss Lamb. Miss Miller was the head nurse.

HF: So, you had extensive surgery then and recuperation of the area of your forehead. That must have certainly been a very traumatic period!

JE: My poor mother suffered most! The senior Dr. Winters was the doctor that brought about my recovery.

HF: Later on he had two sons who became doctors, but that was the old Dr. Winters. That does date back a few years!

JE: The old South American ship burned in the early twenties. And from our playground

we could see the fire. They must have had an oil drum on the upper decks because it exploded and filled the air and went clear across the block and through the basement of a house. I can remember seeing that hole, round, looking like a barrel in the basement wall. I don't think many people know that!

HF: No, I don't believe I've heard the story of the South American having a type of fire and explosion like that.

JE: The most interesting time was the winter. The farmers came in for the feed to take to their pigs (the residue from the sugar beets). We hopped on their bobsleds and came down a street away from our home.

HF: The farmers came with their teams of horses, pulling bobsleds to get the residue which they would then feed to their livestock. After the sugar had been squeezed out. This particular area where you're living received dramatic changes over just the last few years, but I imagine you remember this as probably being a swamp and also the old Riverview Park where there were a lot of ball games and football games, and the old covered grand stand. Were you a part of that sometimes?

JE: Both of my boys played football in high school and I saw them in their games right across the street here. I even sat in the grandstand when it was the fair grounds.

HF: Now that dates back. There used to be the Holland Fair and then around 1933 they moved the old grand stand to Riverview Park. It became one of the few football fields that had a covered grand stand. Another interesting note?

JE: My wife always kids me that I was born at noon. In those days, the curfew blew at twelve o'clock, and all the factory whistles blew, and here I was born in the midst of

all this. I had a real coming out - a royal welcome!

HF: That used to be a tradition in the area. At twelve noon all the whistles would blow.

JE: Seven in the morning and nine o'clock for a coffee break and noon. Then we head back to work. All day long the darn things were blowing.

HF: Now, you mentioned two sons who you used to watch play football. How many children do you have, Jim?

JE: The two boys.

HF: And they are doing what kinds of things today, living in the area?

JE: Bill, the youngest, is in Holland. He's in the computers and so forth for Herman Miller. He is a program and electrical technician. My other son, Tom, the older one, is in Grand Rapids. He's the owner of two or three athletic clubs. He also referees football games.

HF: Interesting! So, you've enjoyed the growth of the area. Is there anything about the growth of the area that you look at as frightening to you now or that you say it's time to stop? What's your assessment of that sort of thing?

JE: I wonder where it's all going to end. Traffic seems to be a problem. When I was a boy, everyone lived harmoniously! Really, I'm not too happy with the crime involved today. We're losing our Dutch heritage.

HF: We're losing something of our small towness and, of course, some of our Dutch heritage. Some of our culture is changing. Did you speak Dutch in your family home?

JE: No.

HF: Because, as you indicated, your mother was Scotch. So, consequently it was not one of those homes where a lot of Dutch had been spoken.

JE: No Dutch influence at all. Had neighbors all around us, Dutchmen. Not our home, though.

HF: Anything else you'd like to add, Jim?

JE: Well, I've run out of my notes here. A very interesting thing is, I talked about the Kollen Park City Dump. Everybody had an ash pile in their backyard. In those days you all had ashes and no ash pick up. So, everybody'd dump them in a certain place in their backyard. My brother contracted with another friend of his and hired a horse and wagon to haul ashes one spring. The horse ran away and the wagon broke down! It was a sorry plight, but comical!

HF: I've enjoyed talking with you. If at any time you think of something else that you think would be worth adding to this, don't hesitate to give us a call. Thank you very much!

James Essenburg

M. James Essenburg, of Holland, died Tuesday, Dec. 9, 1997, at his home in Freedom Village.

Born in Holland, he graduated from Holland High School and was employed in the automotive field, retiring from R.E. Barber Ford in 1975.

He was a member of Hope Church and for many years was a volunteer at Douglas Elementary School as a reading mentor.

Surviving are his wife, Elaine; children, Tom and Judi Essenburg of Grand Rapids, William and Gail Essenburg of Holland, Candy and Jim Jeltema of Saugatuck, Craig and Marian Barsumian of Pompano Beach,

Florida, and Cathy and Michael Baldwin of Atlanta, Georgia; 11 grandchildren; nieces and nephews.

A memorial service will be held Saturday at 2 p.m. in the Hope Church Commons Sanctuary, 77 W. 11th St. with the Rev. Marion de Velder officiating. Burial will be in Riverside Cemetery, Saugatuck.

Visitation is scheduled for 2-4 and 7-9 p.m. Friday at Mulder Chapel, Dykstra Funeral Homes, 188 W. 32nd St.

Memorials may be given to Hospice of Holland or Douglas Elementary School.