

Interview on the Life of Elmer J.O. Frerking  
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This is a history of my grandfather, Elmer Frerking. He was a man who made a difference, but was seldom noticed. In every walk of life there are a few people who do their job so well, and who do it with so little fanfare, that one hardly notices that they are there. Surely these are people of whom the Lord will one day say: "Well done thou good, and faithful servant."

Elmer was born on a small farm in Missouri on February 28, 1902. When he was 18 years old he took a job as a janitor at St. Paul's College in Concordia, Mo. This turned out to be a lifelong career and in 1925 he was promoted to be the superintendent of buildings and grounds. Although Elmer had little schooling, he was blessed with the natural ability to repair almost anything or to organize workers for any task great or small. He saw the construction of all the buildings on campus at St. Paul's College as the school increased to its maximum size.

Always referred to and addressed by his first name, Elmer became a legend of mechanical and engineering knowledge and competence. Without the benefit of blue prints, he was able to recall the design and location of underground wires, conduits, and pipes when trouble-shooting required their location. He seemed to possess an uncanny ability to diagnose technical failures that sometimes defied even hired architects and engineers. A local high school got a new heating and cooling system installed. The engineers from Kansas City could not get it to work properly. So then Elmer was called. Within half an hour he told them what the problem was. He also did all the repairs at St. Paul's College. As an added vocation he operated an electrical repair shop out of his home and was considered almost a wizard at rewinding and repairing electric motors. He was constantly busy repairing small appliances, and his work was both reliable and reasonable in cost.

He was known by almost all the students and faculty of St. Paul's College over a 47 year period. He was probably known by more Missouri Synod pastors than any other layman. When it came to the faculty, he had the ability to size them up in about a week and they also had to earn his respect. The students at St. Paul's College all knew him. He also got along with the students, but would get disgusted with them when they didn't take care of the property.

One of his more conspicuous work habits was the unusual way in which he went about trouble shooting when it was reported that a light did not work in some student's room. Elmer would begin by unscrewing the light bulb and insert his finger into the socket to determine if there was electricity present. The student would, of course, be awestruck as he watched in amazement. Then if Elmer could not feel a shock, he would wet his finger and repeat the procedure just to make sure that no electrons were evading him.

During the 1930's and 1940's the college generated its own power with diesel generators. It also heated the buildings and dormitories with hand fired boilers. As such it was necessary to have someone on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week to tend the fires and check on the generators. There were two janitors of whom Elmer was one. It was necessary to work 12 hour shifts during those days, and for only \$85 per month. This made it difficult to support a family of four, but in the hours that remained, the small appliance repair shop brought in enough extra money to keep his family clothed and fed. His friends were mainly the people he worked with through his shop and at the college and with whom he was on very good terms because his work schedule would not permit him to have many social friends.

Elmer was quite hard of hearing, and he always wore a hearing aid, which got him by quite well. It seems that during his younger days at the college, a student had become ill and had to be transported to his home in St. Louis, Mo., which was 200 miles to the east. The trip had to be made on a cold and rainy evening. The only available vehicle was the old pickup truck owned by the college. Because of the rain and sleet, the windshield wipers were ineffective and Elmer made the trip with his head out the window to see where the truck was going. The trip resulted in a severe ear infection from which Elmer's hearing never recovered.

Extraordinary service was not unusual for Elmer. Since his home adjoined the campus, it was convenient to call whenever a problem arose. Elmer was always willing to oblige, whether the problem occurred late in the evening or on a Sunday afternoon.

The later years were easier for Elmer, and before retirement the schedule shifts were reduced to 54 hours a week and finally, keeping pace with American workers, to 40 hours.

Elmer retired as head of the Buildings and Grounds at the age of 65. This was followed by another decade of appliance and motor repair out of the shop at home. Elmer's retirement left a gap at St. Paul's College and the appearance of the campus suffered a bit for several years until others learned to step in

and fill the gap.

When Elmer's family was younger he would arrange to butcher a whole hog during the winter. One of his brothers lived on a farm near Concordia, and Elmer would butcher a hog on the farm and scald off the hair. Then he would skin it. After that he would bring the meat home and put it in the wash house, which was a little building adjoining the house. Elmer's wife, Laura, referred to the building as the summer kitchen although some people would refer to it as a smoke house. Somehow Elmer knew what to do with all that meat. He would cut up the bacon in strips and his wife would fry it and put it in large stone crocks covering it with bacon grease when it was still hot. When she finished, she would have two or three crocks of bacon covered with lard. It would keep from spoiling for about a year, and the Frerkings used the bacon for breakfast most of the time. Some parts of the hog were used for making sausage. They just ground up everything that was left over and put it into sausage casings. The sausage was stored in the attic of the house until it was needed.

Sometimes Elmer and his wife would also cure the hams and put them in the attic. The hams were laid on the kitchen table and covered with salt. Elmer would work as much salt into the ham as he could. Then he would cover the outside of the ham with salt and wrap it up in cloth. The hams were then stored in the attic until the family needed them later.

The whole butchering exercise is just another example of the many talents and abilities that Elmer had. It just seemed like there was nothing he couldn't figure out how to do. Butchering a hog was a cost-effective way to feed his family.

Elmer had a favorite chair in the kitchen, and when he got up in the morning he would sit in the chair for a little while with his shoes off and read the Kansas City Times. Then when his wife had breakfast ready, he would eat breakfast and go to work at the college. He always came home at noon, and his wife would have a good dinner prepared. Since Concordia, Missouri, is a small town of about 1000 people, distances are small and the two children, Marvin and Carol, usually came home for dinner at noon as well.

Some of Elmer's characteristics were: hard working, quiet strength, friendly--talked to anyone, very intelligent, very neat small handwriting, loyal to job and family, and big rough hands.

Elmer didn't have much time for leisure activities, but playing cards and checkers were his favorites. As we might expect, he was quite good at checkers and after about a couple

dozen moves the opponent usually found himself in a situation where he could only make moves which resulted in his checkers being jumped. After the game was over Elmer would sometimes laugh under his breath, making a noise that sounded like "key-ey-ey". He also enjoyed teaching his children how to play cards and checkers. Another thing he enjoyed doing was to listen to and watch ball games.

Sometimes in the winter, after it snowed, Elmer would go out rabbit hunting with his 22 gauge rifle. He would usually come home with two or three rabbits which were skinned and used for food. Elmer would also go into the woods in the fall and gather nuts for the winter. There was a good supply of walnuts and hickory nuts in the area. Some winter evenings were spent with the family picking out nuts after Elmer cracked them. Once the two janitors from the college located a tree in the woods which had a swarm of bees living in it. They got permission from the owner of the woods to cut down the tree and take the honey. Cutting down the bee tree was an unusual experience. The bees were not too happy about their tree being cut down but the janitors wore protective clothing and screens on their faces. After the tree was downed, each of the janitors got around seven gallons of honey.

Elmer was a good provider for his family, very responsible and hard working. He reserved Sunday afternoons for spending time with his family. At Christmas time he would always put the lights up on the tree, and bring home Christmas candy for his family.

He was a protective father. His daughter, Carol, worked at a local restaurant downtown until late at night, about 11:30-12 midnight. Carol didn't drive so Elmer would get up out of bed to give her a ride home. When Elmer was dying in the hospital in a semicoma, on a snowy day, his daughter came to visit him in the hospital; his thought was still on Carol. He said, "If you have a problem with your car, just take mine." His car was in a different state at the time. He was concerned whenever someone in his family was sick.

Because of his work with two jobs, his family didn't get to spend as much time with him as they would have liked. So his children would hang out with him at St. Paul's College especially in the evenings after school (when they were younger).

One year shortly before Christmas, Elmer got a pain in his wrist which persisted. Through the years Elmer had never been one to complain about his health, and he rarely went to the doctor unless the illness was bad. In this case, the doctor diagnosed the problem as tendinitis and administered a cortisone

shot. The problem did not go away, however, and x-rays were taken. The problem was found to be cancer which had already spread from his lungs. Elmer had smoked in his younger years, but had given up tobacco about 20 years before. He quit smoking the day after his daughter was married. He had, however, spent many hours at the college covering steam pipes with asbestos. In any event, Elmer had lung cancer. Radiation treatments followed, but Elmer was to finish his work here on earth about nine months later. On December 7, 1976, he died in Springfield, Illinois, where his daughter was then living.

Elmer is buried in the cemetery of St. Paul's Lutheran Church overlooking both his home and the campus where he served for 47 years. The words "Asleep in Jesus" appear on the grave marker, for a good and faithful servant.