

122 The Mayor Who Cast Out Nines

The story of the unofficial mayor of Blawenburg was chronicled in a Van Harlingen Historical Society Oral History based on a 1997 interview with Lawrence Koplik. As I read the interview, I was reminded of how different it was to live in the first half of the 20th Century. As you read about the mayor in this blog, I think it will be obvious how life has changed since that time.

For many years, residents of the Village of Blawenburg called him The Mayor. He was neither elected nor appointed. In fact, there was no mayor of Blawenburg, because the village is a Census Designated Place (CDP), not a municipality. Nevertheless, Edward Hoagland Terhune was called the mayor out of respect for his longevity, community service, and pleasant manner.

Ed was born on September 22, 1907 at Ouke Voorhees Farm, one of the six farms that were purchased to make up the Village for Epileptics just north of Blawenburg. The Village purchased the farm in 1920, and Ed moved with his family to Blawenburg. His parents, Augustus and Mary Ellen Terhune, moved to a duplex house on the south side of Georgetown Franklin Turnpike (Rt. 518) just west of Blawenburg Church. Ed lived there until he was married and moved to Somerville. His heart was in Blawenburg, so he and his wife, Elizabeth, moved back to his home village after a year.

Ed's mother was a teacher at Blawenburg School before Ed was born, and Augustus was a plumber at the Village for Epileptics. Ed was the oldest child in the family, and he had two brothers and a sister—Douglas, William, and Frances.

School

The local students all went to Blawenburg School. It was an old-time, one-room schoolhouse, which Ed tersely, but humorously, described as, "Very nice. Outdoor toilets. No plumbing." He had the same teacher for all eight years, and when he graduated, he moved on to the Bound Brook High School. There were no school buses at the time, and Bound Brook High School was the closest high school in Somerset County that could be reached by train. He and the other students walked to Skillman Station at the tracks near Camp Meeting Road and traveled 14 miles to the high school. Once the school bus was invented, Ed's siblings went to Somerville High School.

Recitation was one of the important skills students learned at that time. Students from each class would come to the front row and take turns speaking what they had memorized. This skill served Ed well as he developed an excellent memory, which he applied to arithmetic.

Growing Up

Blawenburg had fewer houses, open fields, and a lot less traffic in the first quarter of the 20th century. Summer was a time to play outdoor games like baseball and tennis, and winter brought ice skating at the pond at the Village for Epileptics and “coasting” on local hills when ice and snow covered the ground.

TV had not been invented when Ed was young, and radio was in its infancy. He built his own crystal radio so he could hear programs from Pittsburgh’s station KDKA.

Most people had gardens and root cellars for storing root vegetables for the winter. Since there was no electricity, they preserved their food in iceboxes. Ed remembered the iceman coming around to bring new blocks of ice to keep food cold. He also remembered home deliveries of food from Paul Wertz’s Market in Hopewell.

The Terhunes were expected to play an instrument. Augustus was a charter member of the Blawenburg Band (circa 1890 –see Blog 33) and played the trombone. Following in his father’s footsteps, Ed joined the band and played the trumpet. He said he was motivated to play by their trips to Willow Grove Park in Pennsylvania to hear concerts by the legendary bandleader John Philip Sousa. Unlike today, when music lessons are started young to ensure students can take part in high school and college bands, Ed and most of his friends were self-taught or coached by another player. He started learning the trumpet at age 12, practicing every day and going to band rehearsal once a week.

Work

When he was young, Ed worked at Van Zandt’s farm. His job was to look for chicken eggs, feed the chickens, and do whatever else was needed. After a year, he left the job he liked to work for more pay at Public Service Electric and Gas in Bound Brook. He remained there for 48 years, working his way up from meter reader to supervisor of customer service. Among his memories were having to deal with people who didn’t pay their bills and had their power shut off. Ed had a simple solution. He told them to pay their bills! Of course, that was easier said than done.

Community Service

Ed was active in community and charitable organizations. He served several positions on the Blawenburg Reformed Church Consistory (Board) and was the church treasurer for 35 years. Ed had a keen ability to do mental math and was swift and accurate with his calculations.

Ed was a charter member, officer, and treasurer of the Montgomery Fire Department in Blawenburg. He also served as an usher at Princeton University football games for over 40 years. He served as past master of the Hopewell Masonic Lodge and held memberships in the Princeton Shrine Club, Trenton Crescent Temple, and Scottish Rite.



Charter members of Montgomery Township Volunteer Fire Company #2, originally named Blawenburg Fire Company, are shown.

Back row (L-R): Bill Terhune, Claude Lewis, Bob Saums, William Mathews

*Front row (L-R): Louis Verbeyst, **Edward Terhune**, John Ficken, Ken Dorey, Tom*

Skillman Charter members not shown: Jim Ajamian, David Moore, Dix Skillman, and John Van Zandt, (See [Blog 29, A Tale of Three Firehouses](#), for more information.)

Casting Out Nines

Ed applied his talent for math as treasurer in several organizations. Perhaps it was because of all those exercises in recitation in school or a natural aptitude for math, but he could look at a column of numbers and quickly give you the sum.

Even math whizzes need to check their work, especially if it involves an organization's finances. Ed used a process called casting out nines to be sure his answers were correct. Most of us have never heard of this system, but it was common in the era before calculators and spreadsheets. This mental math technique seems complicated, but like many things, it becomes easy as you use it. It involves adding the digits of the answer to an addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division problem. According to ChatGPT, "casting out nines is a method for checking arithmetic by adding the digits of

numbers repeatedly until only a single digit remains, then comparing the results of the original numbers and the answer. If the final digits do not match, an error was made in the calculation, although matching digits do not always guarantee the answer is correct.”

I saw Ed use casting out nines in a church meeting while presenting a treasurer’s report several decades ago. It was fast and proved his mental math was correct. I won’t pretend I understand it, but it was impressive to witness. This procedure was important in its day, but is less relevant today.

Travel

Not everyone had a car when Ed was young. His father had a Ford touring car, but only drove it when the weather was warm. He put it up on blocks in the winter because the roads weren’t plowed.

Until he was old enough to drive and own a car, Ed walked or rode his bicycle. He frequently traveled by bike to Hopewell.

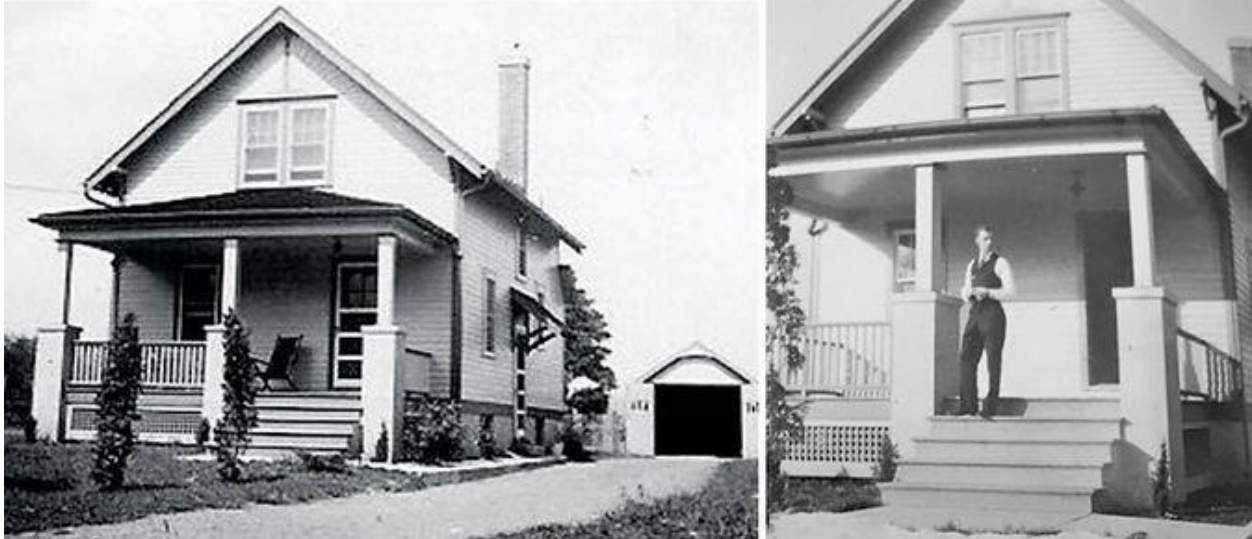
Recreation

People entertained themselves by playing games such as cards, listening to radio shows, and playing outdoor games like baseball and tennis. When Ed was old enough, he would go to the movies at the theater in Hopewell. Shopping for clothes was also an occasional form of entertainment because they had to travel to Trenton, where the larger stores were located. Entertainment was what you made it in those days.

Married Life

Ed was married to Elizabeth Hoagland Terhune for 31 years until she passed away in 1968. He was quick to point out that his Hoagland family was not related to her family despite the same surname. They had two boys, David and Thomas, and a girl, Faith. After several years as a widower, Ed married Leocadia (Lee) Bol Terhune.

In the 1930s, Ed and Elizabeth bought a Sears and Roebuck home and had it shipped to Blawenburg where it was constructed next to the Montgomery Township School, west of the church. It was one of two Sears houses in the village. (See Blog 52)



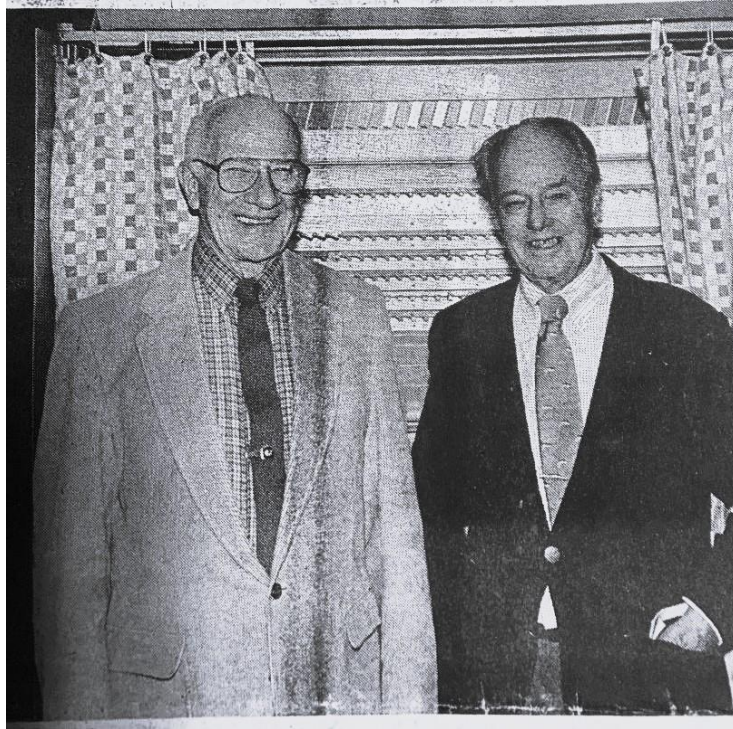
Ed and Elizabeth's Sears house. He is standing on the porch in the photo on the right in 1937.

Ed Terhune passed away at his Sears home on August 16, 1997, a month before his 90th birthday. He was affectionately called the mayor. While not an elected political leader, he was a quiet community leader in Blawenburg. He modeled competence, respect for others, and wholesome values, attributes that we should all strive to achieve.

Also of Interest

1. Electricity arrived in Blawenburg in the early 1920s. Ed's family had it installed as soon as they could in 1922.
2. In World War II, whether or not you were a soldier, you pitched in for the war effort. Ed was exempt from service because his father was ill, and he needed to help his mother and provide an income. During that time, Ed, like others in Blawenburg, knitted scarves for soldiers.
3. There were several tennis courts in Blawenburg – mostly made by the residents. There was ample room for them in vacant lots. Ed played a lot of tennis and ended up in several tournaments. To create a flat surface for the court, Ed and his buddies dragged a railroad tie behind a car. Ed's father was a plumber and had many pipes, which they used to support fencing for backstops on the court. While not the courts we are accustomed to today, these courts served an important purpose.
4. The picture of a teacher and several students from Blawenburg School has appeared on the home page of this blog since its inception. The teacher is Mary Ellen Terhune, Ed's mother.

5. Ed served as a checker at the local polls on Election Day. In a 1982 newspaper interview, he said he couldn't remember how many years he did that, but it was a long time.



Ed and his election poll partner Hap Heins, both Blawenburg residents, in 1982.

Learn More

1. Read the interview.
This blog was a snapshot of Ed and life in the early 20th century. I encourage you to read Larry Koplik's full interview. It is available from the Van Harlingen Historical Society. There is one copy in the Somerset County Library in Montgomery.

Koplik, Lawrence. The Unofficial Mayor of Blawenburg with Ed Terhune, Oral History 05-20, Belle Mead, Van Harlingen Historical Society, Copyright 2005.
2. Casting Out Nines—There are many resources on the internet and YouTube to learn more about casting out nines. Search for Casting Out Nines.

Sources

Information

Interview—see the Koplik citation above

Ed Terhune's Obituary—Town Topics, August 20, 1997

Sears house (two pictures)—from Blog 52, shared by Peggy Querec, Ed's niece,

Casting Out Nines—Various Internet searches

PICTURES

Fire Department Charter members— MTVFC No. 2

Ed's Sears house—1937/38 pictures of Ed Terhune's house, shared by Peggy Querec, Ed's niece

Ed and Hap Heins—Photo by Clem Fiori. Princeton Packet, April 10, 1982, shared by David Blauw

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