

BIOGRAPHY OF
JAMES C. VARENHORST

GRAND EXALTED RULER
1999-2000

Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the U.S.A.

Born on January 21, 1932, in Hart, Michigan, James C. Varenhorst decided to become a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks after witnessing the good works of the Elks in 1940. Jim was seven when his father tragically passed away, and one of the Varenhorsts' neighbors, an Elk, exposed Jim to Elks picnics and the many other youth activities sponsored by Muskegon, Michigan, Lodge. But it was the Elks' commitment to the family that most impressed the young Jim. He would not be the only one in his family to later join the Order; his brother, two sons, and his two sons-in-law would also join.

In June of 1951, Jim graduated from Hart High School, and that fall, the one thing that Jim prided himself on—his skill in working with people—led him to enter the Saint Joseph Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Not surprisingly, Jim's 35 years as an Elk have been dedicated to working with people, both as a grassroots volunteer and an employee and officer of the Grand Lodge.

One short year later, Jim's studies were interrupted when he entered the U.S. Army to serve during the Korean War. He was selected to attend the military personnel school because of his strong management and administrative skills. In 1954, he received an honorable discharge from the army, attaining a superior rating in his permanent military records.

After his service, Jim returned to Ludington, Michigan, where he married the former Mary Nell Rath. Now a family man, Jim entered a variety of business enterprises. In 1964, Jim was initiated into Ludington, MI, Lodge No. 736. The next year he was appointed Lodge Esquire, and then proceeded through the elected chairs. When Jim was elected as leader of the Lodge, the man who had inspired Jim to join the BPO Elks penned a letter on Jim's behalf, stating, "You couldn't have chosen a better man to be your Exalted Ruler." In 1970, Jim's managerial acumen led to his election as Lodge Secretary, a position to which he was reelected each year for the next ten years.

During the next decade, Jim served the Order in a number of positions, both elected and appointed, including West Central District Vice President, Michigan Elks Scholarship Committee Chairman, Michigan Elks Youth Activities Chairman, Michigan Elks First Vice President,

and in 1976-77 he served as District Deputy Grand Exalted Ruler for the West Central District of Michigan. Jim was elected president of the Michigan Elks Association for 1979-80.

"I came up from the grass roots," Jim says of his background as the child of a working class, immigrant family, "and I made something of myself." And his accomplishments are many. As state Chairman for the Youth Activities Committee, he received a commendation from the Grand Lodge for 100 percent achievement; he was instrumental in organizing a new Lodge in Gaylord, Michigan; was elected an Honorary Life Member of Ludington Lodge in 1971; and was designated as Ludington Lodge's Elk of the Year in 1987-88. "Where I feel I've accomplished something is through Elkdom."

His inspired leadership, expertise in administration, and accomplishments in Elkdom led to Jim's appointment in June 1980 as Assistant Executive Director of the Elks National Foundation, the charitable trust of the BPO Elks. On June 1, 1981, he became Executive Director, and in that position, he diligently worked to update many of the Foundation's procedures and spearheaded an initiative to implement new computer technologies.

In July of 1989, Jim was elected to the office of Grand Secretary of the Order of Elks, where once again he worked to improve the efficiency of the office of the Grand Lodge and to update its technological systems. In addition to serving as Grand Secretary, Jim also served as Chief Operating Officer of the Grand Lodge of the BPO Elks, a position to which he was appointed in 1994.

In addition to his membership in the Elks, Jim is a member of the Loyal Order of Moose, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, and the Knights of Columbus. He is a member of Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church, where he serves as an Extraordinary Eucharistic minister.

Known for his vision and dedication, Jim hopes that his combination of high-minded ideals, strong management skills, and ability to reach out to people will serve him and the BPO Elks well as he fulfills his duty as Grand Exalted Ruler. "As we approach the third millennium, we are going into the third century of the Order—the 19th, 20th, and now 21st—we have a proud past, but we have to go forward with a new spirit of Elkdom."