

Austin, Dorothy
Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell
for the
Decatur Public Library

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Miss Dorothy Austin Interview

February 21, 1984

This is a recording of the experiences and reminiscences of Miss Dorothy Austin. The narrator is Miss Austin, and the interviewer is Betty Turnell. The recording is being made at the request of the Decatur Public Library. We are recording at the home of Miss Austin at 1764 North Oakcrest Avenue in Decatur on February 21, 1984.

- Q. We are very good friends so I am going to call you "Dorothy" if you don't mind. Dorothy, your family is one of the pioneers of Decatur and Macon County. In the book The History of Macon County, published in 1976, there are many references to Mr. Joseph Austin and his four sons - Benjamin, William, Joseph, Jr., and a half brother Jesse. I believe the Austin family arrived here in 1831. Do you know from which branch of the family you are descended?
- A. Yes - William Austin was my great-grandfather. He and Benjamin came before the rest of the family. Benjamin was the surveyor, and my great-grandfather assisted him in his work.
- Q. I believe your great-grandfather married a descendant of another pioneer family.
- A. Yes. He married Eleanor Warnick. Many of you know of the Warnick family. The story is that Judge Warnick loaned the first law book that Abraham Lincoln read.
- Q. So even though he operated a tavern, he must have been a well-educated man. A tavern didn't have the same connotation then that it does now.
- A. No - the tavern was a place to stay, like our hotels today. It's rather interesting that Benjamin Austin established a rooming or boarding house located where the Post building is now in downtown Decatur.

Q. Is that where the Post Jewelry Store used to be?

A. Yes.

Q. So you came from the branch of the family of William Austin - but he didn't stay here, did he?

A. The family moved - at least part of them - to Christian County, where my father was born. He was born in a little log cabin about four miles northwest of where Blue Mound is at the present time. As a small boy he and his mother and father left in a covered wagon and started for Texas. When they got as far as Missouri, they turned around and came back. I never knew exactly the reason for their coming back. It may have been related to the fact that the Texan, Stephen Austin, had been trying to get many people to come into that area - which at that time was a part of Mexico. The Mexicans prohibited any new Anglo-Saxon families from moving into the area because the population was increasing so rapidly.

Q. So it would be a rather dangerous undertaking? And of course, maybe your great-grandmother had something to say about it, too. Those journeys must have been very hard on women.

A. Yes, but several of the Austin families were in a group. Several of them stayed in Missouri. Others came back - at least, my father and grandfather came back and settled northwest of Blue Mound. The log cabin in which my father was born was moved later across the road to the northwest corner of that intersection. The present house is built around the original log cabin.

Q. Did you grow up in Christian County?

A. My family moved around a great deal. My older brother, J. B. Austin, was born in Decatur in 1904. Then the family moved to North Dakota, where my second brother was born. Then the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I was born. We moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where my sister was born. Then we came back to Decatur in 1917, I believe.

Q. So you grew up in Decatur - from 1917 on?

A. Yes. I first went to Decatur schools when I was in the second grade at Mary W. French School. Then we moved, and I went to Oakland School. It became too crowded, and I was transferred back to French School. Then on to North Dennis, where I attended Dennis School. When Roosevelt Jr. High School opened, I went there as a seventh grader. Then I went to Stephen Decatur.

Q. And you stayed there until you graduated from high school. I believe you told me that then or shortly after you graduated from high school, that you had an interesting work experience at the J. C. Penney Store?

A. Yes, it was quite an interesting experience for me. It was during the late 20's, probably in 1926 that I was in a group discussing the possibilities of working. I was a junior at that time. All of us were interested in finding jobs because the times were pretty hard. I happened to be sitting next to the daughter of the part owner and part manager of the J. C. Penney Store. She turned to me and said, "Dorothy, I think my Dad would give you a job if you would come down."

I had to wait until he came back from a convention. He offered to pay me a dollar a day for Saturday work. I had good luck that first day and sold quite a few things, so Harriet persuaded her father to pay me \$1.25 a Saturday. Later on, I helped her in the office. Harriet

was cashier and bookkeeper at the store. The store was on the east side of the 300 block of Water Street on the east side, where the Trunk Factory was.

Then the family wanted to go to the state of Washington for a reunion with some family members. They asked me to take over the cashier and bookkeeper position at the store and continue with it through the following year - the year I was graduating from high school. I intended to go to college, but I wasn't able to. I refused to commit myself, but when they couldn't find anyone they wanted, they asked me if I would take it on until they got back from the trip to Washington. I agreed. They got back in August, and Harriet was dead within three days. She had contracted an illness on their trip.

They wanted me to go on with the office work, and I didn't have the money to go to school, so I agreed to stay on for one more year. Then I knew I was going to go on to school.

So I stayed on as cashier and bookkeeper at the J. C. Penney Store here. I had many interesting talks with J. C. Penney himself. He came many times to the store.

Q. What kind of person was he?

A. He had a very interesting personality. He was sincere, a hard-worker. He would sell overalls and shoes just like the rest of us at times. At that time the clerks served customers all over the store. It gave an interesting background to many people who have since clerked in other Decatur stores.

Q. Do you think Mr. Penney was a very admirable person?

A. Very! He believed in policies quite different from the modern methods as far as salesmanship is concerned. He really believed in the Golden

Rule and that is the basis of the J. C. Penney Stores. At that time there were no sales. It was one price, and they stayed with it.

I remember an interesting experience. A woman came in and wanted to buy something, which at the J. C. Penney Store was 49¢ apiece. She refused to buy because she could get them across the street 2 for a dollar!

Q. There was something wrong with her mathematics!

A. I think so... I remember a story of early Decatur you might be interested in. One of my aunts, May Austin, married George Muirhead. He has told me about an experience he had when he was a small boy. As most of you know, Hieronymous Mueller had the first car in Decatur. He passed a store in downtown Decatur one day and saw this little boy standing and waiting. Knowing it would be such a treat, he stopped and asked my uncle if he would like to take a ride in the car. Of course, of all things he would love to have had a ride in that car. But he explained to Mr. Mueller that his father had gone into that store, left him out there, but told him he should stay there until his father got back.

Mr. Mueller (this is a reflection on his personality) was so impressed with my uncle's dedication to doing as he was asked, that he waited until the father came out of the store and then asked permission and took my uncle for a ride.

Q. That is a good story! ... Then you stayed with the J. C. Penney Store that year when you were head bookkeeper.

A. Yes - but the next fall I went to Millikin. I took two years of training at Millikin to prepare for teaching. At that time many teachers were going into teaching at the end of two years.

Then I was assigned to Ullrich School. When I found out I was assigned to Ullrich, I didn't know where it was, although I had been in Decatur all those years. I found out that it was at the southeast corner of Condit and Broadway. Many people will know it in later years as at the northwest corner of the Longview Housing Project. I always say, "But the school was there first!"

I became a teacher of second grade there, also taught third. Then I applied to teach sixth for a change, but I was asked to be principal. I taught as a teacher there for eleven years and served as principal for 28 years.

- Q. There was a story about the school, I believe. Why was it named Ullrich?
- A. The school was named for a school board member. Mr. Ullrich was the first millionaire Decatur had. He came to this country with \$5 in his pocket. He started by helping on boats on the Mississippi River on the trips taking produce to the New Orleans area. As he saved his money, he invested it in land in this general area.
- Q. Decatur is a little far from the Mississippi. Did he have friends or relatives here?
- A. I have no idea, but Decatur, of course, was on the Sangamon River, which was used for shipping at that time. I can't say just why he settled here. His daughter married a man from Bloomington.

You might be interested in something nice that happened to us at Ullrich School.

Miss Ullrich as a child had very interesting experiences in that, although she didn't appreciate it at the time, Lincoln was a guest in their home quite often. She said, "If I had ever known how important Abraham Lincoln was to be, I would have paid more attention to what they were talking about!"

While I was principal, I did write to Mrs. Ewing as she was known then. (She had married Mr. Ewing of Bloomington.) I wrote to her to see if they might be interesting in doing something special for Ullrich School. We were going into a period of some special programs and I thought she might find it a good time to give some special help. She sent \$1,000 to the school board and asked that the teachers and principal of Ullrich School be allowed to decide what the money should be used for, but it was to be for Ullrich School. We had no assembly room. What we needed were materials to help the youngsters with experiences and help in teaching aids. We made out a list and sent it to the board. The board thought we should do something that would honor Mr. Ullrich. However, I had been in correspondence with Mrs. Ewing on the matter to see if it had met with her permission. I duplicated her answer and sent it to all the board members. They approved it.

Q. What did she say?

A. She said that the idea of using the money to help children learn was in accordance with Mr. Ullrich's philosophy and hers too. Within a year or so, probably during her yearly visit to Decatur, she came out to school, met the teachers and children, and was very happy with the things we had purchased. Many of these purchases were equipment in the way of recorders, flash cards, dolls for the kindergarten and primary rooms, any item the teacher felt was needed to do a good job.

After she went back, a year later she sent a check to me, in care of my handling, for \$1,500. We deposited the check with the school accounts - through the public school office. Everything was

again requisitioned and charged to this account. We again bought learning materials to enrich the background of the children who were going to Ullrich School.

She came to visit us several times. She was in her nineties by then. At the time of her death, she left another \$1,000 to the Ullrich School. This we used in the same way.

I had written to her and asked, at the time of the first \$1,000, whether we could have a picture of her father that we could have enlarged to hang in the lower corridor. Instead of a small picture, a large picture came, already framed, that she had made especially for us. We had a name plate made for the bottom, explaining that Mrs. Ewing had given it in memory of her father, for whom the school was named. The picture is now at the Macon County Historical Museum.

Q. I'm sure Mr. Ullrich would have been pleased.

A. I'm sure he would. At one time her niece came with her. Her niece had married to a Stevenson. She was very much impressed, too, with the work being done in the school.

Ullrich School has now been closed. It is no longer in the school system, but much of that material is now scattered over Decatur, where the items were needed. They were taken to the schools where they were needed. So the \$3,500 was well invested and is still working in the Decatur school system to help with the education of children.

Q. Very good! I'm sure you felt it was a great help to you as principal. You were principal there 28 years. Were there any people who came through that you remember especially?

A. We had youngsters - I don't feel qualified now to name names, but during the war one of the boys, whom I had taught as a third grade child - was one of four men in the armed forces who knew the electrical wiring of the big bombers and he and the other three members of the team were sent from camp to camp to do the instruction work there.

We have former students who have gone into teaching. The thing that has impressed me most is that the children seemed to establish good homes. Many have gone on into the labor force and have been treasurers and presidents of labor groups here.

It's quite interesting to realize the number who still recognize and speak to me. They ask about former teachers and express an appreciation of what those teachers have meant to them.

Q. So you probably think you made a wise decision not to remain selling merchandise all your life but to go into teaching? It must have been a very satisfying career that you finally went into.

A. Each year was different. Each year was interesting and very challenging. Like many other teachers in the Decatur district, I went on with my education, although I didn't stop to attend classes.

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Like many others, I took extra work during the summers and during the school year. I completed my Bachelor's work at the University of Illinois and then continued at the U. of I. and received my Master's degree. Then I went on and got a few credits in addition to that, always taking work that would help me in teaching. I don't begrudge a bit of the experience I had at Ullrich School. It was very challenging and very satisfying.

- Q. Of course now you have retired from teaching. Do you have any thoughts about retirement?
- A. Yes - retirement can be very interesting. It could be terribly boring, but if you have someone you can enjoy being with, traveling with, and attending meetings with, it's a very interesting time. Retirement is not a time to stay away from people. Retirement is a time to really enjoy the companionship of people.
- Q. It sounds as if you are enjoying this new life of retirement you have described. We thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences and experiences with us. I know your former students would echo that. They appreciate all you have done. We thank you.

You have been listening to the experiences of Dorothy Austin. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.