

Barnes, Ira

Interview by
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for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. Ira Barnes Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Ira Barnes.

Q. Mr. Barnes, could you tell us something of your family background?

A. This I will try to do. My family has been here since before the Civil War. My mother's father was a young attorney just outside of Cincinnati. The federal government took over the family farm for an army camp known as Camp Dennison. One of the lieutenants in the army told my grandfather as a young attorney to be sure to come to Decatur and not to go to Springfield because Springfield would never get out of the mud. So my grandfather and his bride came to Decatur, went up to the Johns' home up on Johns' Hill and went up in the top of the tower to look over the land. They made Decatur their home ever since. In fact, it was in their home where I was born.

My father's family came from Fairmount, New Hampshire. My grandfather's brother was W. A. Barnes. He came here to Decatur in the 1850's and started a drug store. My grandfather met him here and stayed until the late 1850's, when he went to Jackson, Mississippi. He taught school, but at the outbreak of the Civil War, he decided to come back to Decatur. He smuggled his money out between the pages of his textbooks and came back to Decatur. Then he went to Fairmount, New Hampshire, where he married my grandmother and brought her back to Decatur. That was the family background.

Q. Mr. Barnes, you certainly know a lot about the history of Decatur, and your family has played an important part. Let's go back to your childhood. What was it like to be a child in Decatur when you were growing up?

A. I think it was fun. We didn't have the same things that children have today, but we had fun. We roller skated down the mound there on West North, rode in wagons, and slid down the hills. Once in a while we'd get to go to a ball game out at Downey's field or go out to the circus. We used to ride the old open street cars, and that was a fun thing to do. The circuses were out there too - and the horse races. I never did get to go to a horse race, but we had horse races there.

I remember walking to school in a pair of rubber boots with red tops. The snow was almost up to my knees. But not anymore - we don't have that kind of snow. Of course, my knees are higher now.

Q. You walked to school all the time?

A. Oh, of course. We only lived a couple of blocks from Gastman School so it was real easy - but I was supposed to get home from school early and not loiter on the way home. I remember that my dad peeled a switch and stood me up on the front porch and whipped my knees. All the little kids went home and came back to school saying, "Ira got a lickin'."

Q. What games did you play?

A. Oh, baseball - a kind of baseball. That was about all there was. I remember that birthday celebrations used to be really fantastic. I'm not a big chicken eater, but my birthday came in July, and it was the time for the first fried chicken of the year - on my birthday. And we always sent up paper balloons, which are strictly forbidden now by our fire code, but we always sent them up on my birthday.

Q. It was a big celebration?

A. Oh, a big celebration. All the grandparents and everyone who was around.

Q. You mentioned fried chicken in July. You didn't have it all the year around?

A. No - we had to go out to the country and get the chickens.

Q. They had to be big enough?

A. They had to be big enough to fry by the second of July.

Q. You really had some good times.

A. We did. We thought it was fun.

Q. You told us something about your schooling - that you went to Gastman School. After Gastman?

A. Then we went to Central Junior High, which is now gone. At Central Junior High we always got out at ten minutes after 12. St. Patrick's bell always rang at 12 and to this day, like Pavlov's dogs, I always get hungry when I hear that bell.

They finished Roosevelt Junior High. They had started it before the war but during the war they discontinued. After the armistice in '18 they finished the building, and ours was the first class in and out. I was there only one year.

Q. Excuse me, when you talk about the war, that was the first world war?

A. Yes, that was W.W. I.

Q. Well, go on, please.

A. We were the ones who picked out the Blue and Gold Comet, the school paper, the school colors, and what not. Then we left.

After that, I went to Stephen Decatur for three years. That building has gone too now.

Q. That's where the civic center is now?

A. Yes. I went there for three years and then my father thought I was wasting my time and thought I should go somewhere else where I could learn something .

I've got to add something. My father always said he was going to give me an education - something no one could take away from me. That he intended to do, and I think he did.

Q. Then from Phillips Exeter?

A. From Phillips Exeter to Harvard for four years.

Q. Now maybe it's time to find out how you decided on a career?

A. That was rather strange. I leaned toward medicine. My father told me - and I think it was one of the bad pieces of advice he ever gave me - He always said there were better ways of starving to death than practicing medicine. He started to practice in 1900 and things were a little tough then. He used to say he would go to the end of the street car line and then carry his bag through mud that would pull his rubbers off. He didn't think that was a very fun thing. As he said, there were better ways of starving to death. So I went into industrial chemistry from that point on - and that's why.

Q. And you received your training at Harvard.

A. Yes.

Q. Then what kinds of jobs did you have?

A. I came back here in the 30's, when jobs were not too plentiful. They would always say, "We're shooting better men than you are." I did nothing for a little while. My father died shortly after that, and I spent a lot of time refurbishing some of the real estate he had until World War II broke out. Then I went to work for Atlas Powder Company in St. Louis making TNT. From then on it was Caterpillar Tractor Company and then Houdeille Hershey, and Borg-Warner and Millikin University. I taught there for two years.

Q. You've had a varied career.

A. I've had a checkered career. I've been around.

Q. You're retired now?

A. Yes. I've been retired for over ten years.

Q. What was your job just before you retired?

A. I was a metallurgist at Borg-Warner - in their nuclear division. We were making control rods to control nuclear speed of the reactor for nuclear vessels. When Borg-Warner decided to get out of that field, that closed the whole business as far as we were concerned. I think it's a mistake that the nuclear industry is still important and it's got to be, but Borg-Warner didn't see it that way. One of the thrills of my experience with Borg-Warner was being sent down to the Navy yard to work on the reactor of The Enterprise, the world's largest nuclear carrier at that time.

Q. Where was this?

A. At Norfolk, Virginia. It was in for refitting.

Q. That was part of your job?

A. Part of my job. I loved every minute of it.

Q. What about the history of Borg-Warner in Decatur?

A. They came here originally in the carburetor industry and then they went from that to automotive air conditioning. They've given up on carburetors. That was the division I worked in - the carburetor division - a sub-division known as EMPAC. It stood for Electro-Mechanical Power and Control.

Q. You were there when you retired?

A. Yes. I was there ten years. When they closed the plant, I was close to retirement and I thought I might as well take a little early retirement.

Q. What do you think about the future of industry in Decatur?

A. It looks bad right now, but I think it's coming. It's bound to come. I like to quote my grandfather, who said when he was here in the 1850's that with the coal, water, lumber, and the agricultural soil we have here, Decatur should have been known as the "Queen City of the Prairie". I'm

inclined to go along with him. As bad as it looks, I think we're going to come out of this all right.

Q. Let's take a look at the changes that have come to Decatur in your lifetime.

A. Obviously, paved streets are the biggest change. My grandfather said that Decatur was an island in the springtime with Stevens Creek on the west and the Sangamon River on the south and east. Decatur was an island. The soil and the water made a beautiful mud. Decatur has been a mud capital.

Q. It's rather ironic that someone told your grandfather to come to Decatur to avoid the mud of Springfield.

A. This whole area is good for mud. In the early days even with a horse and buggy you didn't get out of town when there was a heavy rain. On Sunday afternoons we used to ride the street car out to the end of the line and turn around and come back - the whole family. You couldn't go anywhere else.

Q. In the winter?

A. You just holed up and stayed. I know the farmers couldn't deliver their crops until the ground froze.

Q. The roads made a big difference - and drainage.

A. I've heard it said - and I don't know who said it - that if it weren't for quinine, Illinois would still be a swamp. It kept the yellow fever and malaria down until they could get the roads in.

Q. And other changes?

A. Well, entertainment is considerably different. I was going to point out that in the old Powers Opera House we saw Maude Adams in Peter Pan and Helen Keller.

Q. There were some great productions here.

A. There really were. I remember seeing Harry Lauder. He was at the Lincoln Theatre. That was after the Lincoln Theatre was rebuilt.

Q. A number of people have spoken about the fire at the Powers Opera House.

A. That was in 1914. I remember that very vividly.

Q. What interests do you have?

A. Now? I had to give up reading for a while, but now I'm back to reading. I like to play golf. I enjoy my grandson and family and I just have a great time with my lawn and roses.

Q. Let's talk about your grandchildren. Are you encouraged about their future?

A. No, I'm worried about what they have to face. There isn't a darn thing I can do about it and probably it won't be as bad as we think it will be.

Q. After all, we've come through some bad times in the past.

A. I've got faith for them. I think they'll make it.

Q. If they have as rich and full a life as you've had, they should do very well.

A. I hope they do. I couldn't ask for more.

Q. It certainly has been a pleasure to hear about your experiences and to hear about your family and the part they have played in Decatur. I thank you very much.

A. It has been a pleasure.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. Ira Barnes. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.