

Gill, R. Wayne

Interview by  
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for the  
Decatur Public Library

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R. Wayne Gill Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Today we are introducing a new series of oral history based on the history of one of Decatur's greatest assets - Millikin University.

Our guest today is Mr. R. Wayne Gill, better known to many as "Hank" Gill.

Q. Well, Mr. Gill, you've had a long association with Millikin. Can you tell us how it started?

A. I was born in Clay County at Flora, Illinois and when I was 5 or 6 years old I came to Decatur with my grandmother to visit my aunt, Dr. Claire A. Garber, who had started her practice here at the turn of the century. Her office and living quarters were in the north side of the Powers Building facing the Millikin National Bank.

Q. Did you just visit here in Decatur first?

A. Yes, I visited and many times when I came to visit my aunt, she pointed out Mr. Millikin as he was on the street. Then in 1907 my mother moved to Decatur, and we lived close to the campus. I was associated with Millikin from that time on because Jimmy Ashmore, who was the athletic director and coach of all the athletic teams lived across the street and I grazed his horse and came over to the university to carry water for the football team and when they built the gymnasium back in 1911, that's where I started my basketball career.

Q. That was a boy's dream, was it? To have all those opportunities for athletics and individual coaching.

A. That's right.

Q. So you really had a natural association with Millikin from your earliest years?

- A. Yes, I did. Back then from Oakland Avenue and West Main corner, I saw Mr. Millikin's cortege taken in to the auditorium for his funeral.
- Q. That was in 1909, wasn't it?
- A. I believe that's right.
- Q. When you first saw Mr. Millikin as you were looking out the window of your aunt's office, did you have any impression of him?
- A. Well, he was a very impressive man. She explained to me some of the history of Mr. Millikin - how he came to Illinois and started the bank over on Merchant Street. So I learned a lot about him.
- Q. Did you finish your high schooling here?
- A. When I came to Decatur, I was in the 4th grade at Gastman School. Then I went through the 8th grade, as they called it then, which was I guess a junior high school, and from there to Decatur High School. Decatur High School then was a relatively new building.
- Q. And then you finally got to Millikin as a student?
- A. I came out to Millikin the fall of 1917 as a student at Millikin.
- Q. 1917? That was right in the middle of the first world war, wasn't it?
- A. That's right. And in the fall of 1918 they formed a unit here known as the Student Army Training Corps. We called it "Stuck at Taylor's College". We were here until the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, and we were mustered out the middle of December.
- Q. What did you do in that military unit?
- A. We did everything they do in a military unit. We drilled and all that sort of thing.
- Q. Did you have guns?
- A. We had wooden guns, and of course, we also had some academic work along with the military.

- Q. You called it "Taylor's College."
- A. That was because Dr. Taylor was the president. Our first captain was a brusque guy who used foul language. He didn't stay here but about four weeks because Dr. Taylor went to Washington and got him removed.
- Q. He didn't realize that army language wouldn't do on a college campus.
- A. When he called out commands, you could hear him all over the west end of Decatur.
- Q. Fortunately, you didn't have to serve in the war since the war was over.
- A. Only in the training corps.
- Q. Then you returned to your academic studies?
- A. Yes - in December, after Christmas vacation school went on as it had prior to the training program.
- Q. Tell me, did you go into athletics as a career then? What was your course of study?
- A. My course of study was science - chemistry, mostly.
- Q. So you followed the regular academic program? With sports on the side.
- A. Yes, that's part of the educational program.
- Q. Yes - and the fun, too.
- A. Oh, yes.
- Q. You've seen many changes in the campus over the years. What are some of the outstanding changes you've noticed in the campus itself?
- A. Well, first of all, the School of Music building was built about 1913. There was no more building on the campus then until about 1932 when Gorin Library was constructed. There have been so many changes on the campus. During the first world war the back campus was built up with barracks and mess halls and so forth. Of course, these were all taken down when the training program was over. And then I came back to the university

as business manager in 1946 and my first job was to put barracks on the campus for the World War II veterans. The whole north side of the campus was blanketed with barracks and trailers.

Q. Maybe we should establish that this main building was the very first building on the campus.

A. The main building and the power house were the first buildings on the campus. Then Aston Hall was built about 1905 or 07, sometime around there.

Q. In the biography of Mr. Millikin that Albert Taylor wrote, he talks about the old assembly hall. What was that?

A. That was the auditorium. That's one of the best auditoriums as far as sound is concerned. It's now named Albert Taylor Hall. It's in the middle of the Liberal Arts Building.

Q. It's been made into a theatre?

A. It's now a small theatre - yes.

Q. And that was where the whole student body used to gather for assemblies.

A. We had assemblies and chapel programs every day.

Q. Required?

A. That's right.

Q. That brings us to the association of the university with the church. It did have some connection with the Presbyterian Church?

A. It's an affiliation. We're not actually supported by or the school wasn't founded as a Presbyterian institution.

Q. But it did have the background of the church behind it?

A. That's right.

Q. What changes have you noticed in the curriculum? What was Mr. Millikin's idea in founding the university?

- A. His idea in founding the university was to provide vocational training. He believed that everyone should have a vocation, should be able to make a living. As far as changes are concerned, it's about the same as it was when he founded it. You have a school of business administration, you have a music school and you have the liberal arts and sciences, and you also have industrial management.
- Q. Engineering? At least, pre-engineering.
- A. Engineering, yes. One of the changes is that back in the early days, Prof. L. M. Cole was Professor of Industrial Arts Department. They had manual training and forging and all those things. Now it's more stream-lined into more administrative type of engineering.
- Q. Now they've added a strong academic program to the vocational training, haven't they? It isn't just a trade school, is it?
- A. No, no, it's not a trade school at all. They've always considered the liberal arts with a way of earning a living.
- Q. Why don't we talk for a minute about some of the people you remember who have been associated with the school - professors or coaches or students?
- A. Professor L. M. Cole was one, and Prof. Townsley, who was principal of the academy.
- Q. By the way, the academy is no longer in existence? That was a preparatory school?
- A. That's right. And Grace Patton Conant was head of the English department and when she left there was Miss Davida McCaslin and Miss Charlene Wood. Clyde Hart was an outstanding student and also taught in the English department. Another outstanding student was Dr. William Casey, who ended up at Columbia.
- Q. In what capacity?

A. He was in the history department, I think. He became a professor at Columbia. Then there was Dr. John C. Hessler, the head of the chemistry department and he also served as dean. Later in the 1930's, he became president. And William Henderson was also in the chemistry department. Dr. Tyler was in biology and as far as the presidents are concerned, I either went to school to all of them or served under all but one - and that was Dr. Fellows.

Q. What do you remember of them?

A. Dr. Taylor was a very fine administrator. Dr. Hessler came back. He was the one who brought the university together when it was in flux. Dr. Malone as president pulled the community together and Dr. McKay had a great influence on the university with new buildings, and the curriculum was looked at. And now, of course, Dr. J. Roger Miller has been president for the last ten years.

Q. So each president has added some contribution?

A. Yes, very much so. In Dr. Malone's tenure, the Scovill Science Hall was built.

Q. Let's go back now to your own college days. When did you graduate?

A. I didn't graduate from Millikin. I broke my arm in basketball in my senior year at the end of the first semester in 1921. I took the next semester to make up the work of the first semester and then I went as assistant to Bill Muer at Decatur High School in the athletic department in 1921 and 1922. Then I was prevailed on by a couple of my buddies to go to Bethany College in West Virginia and that's where I graduated in 1923.

Q. And then what kinds of jobs did you have?

A. My first position was - Norman Wann was the coach here when I was in Millikin and when I graduated from Bethany, he went from Millikin to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. He wanted me to come there as

freshman coach, which I did for one year. The next two years I was at Northwestern Military and Naval Academy at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. I came back to Millikin in the fall of 1926.

Q. On the coaching staff?

A. I was basketball and track coach, yes, until 1937 when I went with the recreation department as Superintendent of Recreation for the city of Decatur. I stayed with that until 1946, when I came back here as business manager.

Q. So you have been associated with Millikin on and off all your life. We said earlier we were going to talk about World War II. If you returned here in 1946, it's about that time.

A. I came back here in '46 and the first thing I did was blanket the north side of the campus with barracks and trailers for the veterans who were coming back, and we got up to an enrollment of 1600.

Q. That was the time of the G.I. Bill?

A. Yes, the G.I. Bill. And those barracks stayed on the campus until 1953 when we built the science hall - we took some of them off. Then gradually we took all of them off when we built the dormitories and Kirkland Fine Arts Center and Griswold Physical Education Center.

Q. Those were quite exciting years right after World War II, weren't they? With all those boys coming back with all those experiences?

A. Yes. The university was really overloaded as far as space was concerned, but we managed to take care of them.

Q. Are there any other students you remember - perhaps your classmates?

A. Oh, yes, I remember a lot of them. Some of them when I was a kid and carrying water around here - Bob Evans, who later coached at Stanford, was in the securities business in California, Joe Catlin, who was captain



in World War I. I've mentioned Clyde Hart and William Casey, Orville Diehl, Chester Cox. They've always had a lot of fine students.

- Q. In reading Mr. Millikin's biography, we're very much aware of the high ideals that he had when he founded the university. What do you think Mr. Millikin would think if he would return to the campus today?
- A. I think Mr. Millikin was a far-sighted man in founding the university. I think he would change with the times; and I think he probably would very much approve of what's happened.
- Q. You think he would be very pleased with the university today?
- A. Yes, because the university still has the same tone he had envisioned for it.
- Q. That's a wonderful tribute to a man's dream, isn't it? To see it come into reality and be such a force in the community?
- A. That's right and of course he left his entire estate in trust, and it's administered by the Trustees of the Estate of James Millikin and every year his shadow lengthens. The estate has contributed to the education and charities of the city of Decatur some seven million dollars over the years.
- Q. What a wonderful contribution! What do you see for the future of Millikin?
- A. I think it will maintain its same posture. We'll have the arts and sciences, the schools of business and music and industrial management.
- Q. I think we should mention that although you've had such a long association with Millikin, you're still working here! You're still busy. We're in your office here at the university. You're still energetic and very much a part of the university. What is your work now?

- A. They're very kind to me. I retired in 1963 and became assistant to the president with Dr. McKay until 1968. I've been Secretary-Treasurer since 1953. The board has been very kind. They let me have an office and I'm still Secretary-Treasurer of the university.
- Q. That is a great contribution to the school and a great recognition of when you have done, too.
- A. I appreciate the fact that they have let me have a place to hang my hat.
- Q. Do you have any hobbies in addition to your work with the university?
- A. Oh yes. I play golf and keep up my interest in athletics.
- Q. It looks as if you have found the secret for a very happy life and a very worthwhile contribution.
- A. I've always said I'd be willing to do it all over again.
- Q. That puts the final stamp on it, doesn't it? It shows that you not only have contributed a great deal but you've enjoyed it along the way.
- A. That's right.
- Q. Thank you very much for sharing your memories of Millikin University, Mr. Gill. We really appreciate hearing what has happened over the years.

You have been listening to the memoirs of Mr. R. Wayne Gill, that is "Hank" Gill. He is Business Manager Emeritus of Millikin University along with all the other jobs he has had here.

This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

