

Mr. W. Lindley Huff

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. W. L. Huff Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. W. L. Huff, Lindley Huff, and today we have other guests, too. In fact, we have a family party here. We have Mrs. Lindley Huff, or Helen, and we have Marcia Morey, a granddaughter, who has come to add a little bit to the discussion. So we're going to have just a little discussion of family history and some of the reminiscences that Mr. Huff and Mrs. Huff have about Decatur.

Q. Well, Mr. Huff, I believe your family founded the Huff Lumber Company, which is still in business today after four generations. That's quite a record.

Mr. H. That's true.

Q. I don't believe it had that name when it started. What was it called?

Mr. H. Huff Brothers Lumber and Planing Mill Company.

Q. Who started it?

Mrs. H. W. J. Huff, my father and two brothers.
& Mr H.

Q. When was it started?

Mrs. H. You were born in 1888 so it was probably started in 1898, wasn't it?

Q. You were a boy when the business started and it's been in operation for a long time. Do you know where it was located when it started?

Mr. H. I think it was down on Wabash Avenue.

Q. Well, you've had a long and honorable tradition in the lumber business. Let's talk about the time when you were growing up.

Mr. H. I don't know that it was very different.

Mrs. H. One difference was walking to school to the east part of town when you lived in the west part.

Q. You walked clear across town? That's a little different from today.

Mrs. H. Over the Wabash tracks and across the levee - four times a day ^{at} He came home at noon. He was about eight or ten. They sent him over there, and there were some pretty rough boys he had to get used to.

Q. Well, that gave you good training to get used to all kinds of people
Did you attend high school in Decatur?

Mr. H. Yes, and then went to Millikin.

Mrs. H. Then he worked in the First National Bank a couple of years before he went into the lumber business.

Q. What part did you play in the lumber business?

Mrs. H. He was manager of the country yard at Maroa. They had country yards - eight or nine his father had, and he went as manager at Maroa.

Q. That probably gave you good training.

Mrs. H. You ought to tell her about Bill Cross down there. There were so many interesting, colorful characters, as there always are in small towns. This Bill Cross was a little "tetched" but interesting.

Q. What was he like?

Mr. H. Well, he was a big chap; I expect he would be six feet tall if he wasn't bent over. He didn't have quite as much gray matter as many. For example, one time he came into the office and said, "I'm going to run for justice of the peace. I'd like to have your support." "All right," I said. "I'll give you a problem and if you solve it, I'll support you." "All right, sir." "Well, there are two coal dealers in town. Mine and Parker and Gray. Now ^{suppose} support I just quietly buy up Parker and Gray, and I'll own all the coal in town."

"Yes, sir - that's right."

"Well, it will get cold weather and I decide to sell the coal at \$14 a ton."

"Oh, sir, you couldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"Why you'd be guilty."

"Guilty of what?"

"Arson of course!"

I said, "Bill, I think I'll support you."

Mrs. H. Then there was a funny one too about the judge. Bill complained to the judge that they had no coal and were going to freeze that winter. It was a desperate situation.

Mr. H. Yes, and the judge said, "Your idea of the way things are done and mine are a little bit different. I'd steal a little coal before I'd let my family freeze."

"That's right, judge, that's right."

So the next morning when the judge went to the coal house to get a bucket of coal, it was empty.

Q. He wasn't so stupid was he?

So you came back to Decatur to take part in the business after you trained in Maroa.

Marcia: Pardon me, W. L. when you were in Maroa, you were more than just the manager. Didn't you finally buy the lumber yard?

Mr. H. Oh, yes, I owned the yard. I borrowed the money from my father and gave him a note for it.

Marcia: How much was it?

Mr. H. \$10,000.

Marcia: And you paid it off - in how many years?

Mrs. H. Well, he was there five years, but I don't know just when he paid it off.

Q. Were you married then?

Mrs. H. Not when he first went there, but we were married soon after because of the very sad tales he would tell of the terrible meals he had. He would have peaches and they would always be canned, and he would have headaches because the food was so bad.

Q. So you just had to marry this poor fellow to take care of him!

Mrs. H Yes, I had to rescue him from that terrible life. I'm not sure I cooked any better.

Q. Well, I can see how he succeeded with all of that salesmanship. After you owned the place in Maroa, did you stay there?

Mrs. H We stayed there five years. We moved to Decatur in 1917.

Mr. H. Father had the business then. It was wholesale lumber. They sold a lot of the lumber to the Staley Company.

Mrs. H You took over the wholesale end, didn't you?

Mr. H Yes - I traveled twice a year on buying trips.

Mrs. H He took over the business from his father in the midst of the depression.

Q. That would be a hard time to take over!

Mr. H. It wasn't ideal.

Q. You must have noticed a lot of changes in the lumber business.

Mr. H When we first started, we operated out of Cerro Gordo, and at that time the old Northern Cork white pine was wonderful wood, but it ran out. Then we went south and started to buy yellow pine. There are two kinds of yellow pine - long and short leaf. The long leaf was very strong - almost as strong as oak. The short leaf wasn't so good. It was better for finishing lumber. Then quite a while later we had to go to the west coast.

Marcia: How many lumber yards did you oversee in central Illinois?

Mr. H. There were nine. There was a manager at each yard. He was usually a partner

Marcia: What did you tell the managers during the depression?

Mr. H. I told the managers, each one of them, that they had to give me a check for ten dollars every week. I didn't care where they got the money. On that \$90 a week I ran the business, raised a family, and got along beautiful

Q. Good! And they could give you that \$10 a week? That gave them an incentive to get out and hustle.

Mrs. H Now his grandson is in charge ^{of the Huff Lbr. Co. in Decatur} They gave up the country yards.

Q. If you have nothing more to add to the lumber business, let's go on to your community activities. You certainly have added to the community life of Decatur. For example, weren't you on the school board?

Mr. H Yes. I used to have a bunch of friends drop in the office in the morning and settle all the questions of the day. I remember I said, "It's up to all you fellows who can to get on a tax spending body because if we don't have proper handling of that, we're all sunk."
They all said, "That's certainly true."

About a week later, one of the boys came in and said, "You remember that stuff you were talking about?"

I said, "Yes," and he said, "Well, now's your chance to run for the school board."

I said, "What the hell do I know about the school board?"

He said, "You have to have business administration."

I said, "All right, I'll run." Unfortunately I was elected.

Mrs. H You were on and president for twelve or thirteen years.

Q. I've heard you've signed many many certificates of people who graduated from the schools here.

Mr. H I think about 10,000.

Q. So all those people who have high school certificates can look at them and see your signature on them. Very good!

Marcia: I think each one of your three children received a certificate with your name on it as president of the school board.

Mr. H. That's true.

Marcia: I remember my mother, Dorothy, the middle child saying that one time she was in the 7th or 8th grade, the teacher looked at her and said, "Just because your father is president of the school board doesn't mean I'm going to give you any good grades!"

Q. Any other memories of the school board you want to bring out now?

Mr. H. Well, yes. The superintendent of the school~~s~~ board at that time was William Harris, and he was not only a fine man but a very good educator. He was one of the best friends I ever had. I couldn't have managed the school board without his help.

Mrs. H. You admired his business sense so much. *as well as his ability as an educator.*

Q. That was a great tribute - but you also were on the park board, too.

Mrs. H. You've always been interested in the Decatur parks and very proud of them. You wanted to serve there because of ^{that} your interest.

Mr. H. ~~List~~ ^{LACY} Chandler was the Superintendent of Parks at that time. He was one of the finest men I ever met. He could do more to ruin the King's English than any man I ever ^{met} saw, but he was a natural *executive*.

Mrs. H. He saved Decatur a great deal of money. People ought to know that.

Q. And gave them service ^{beyond the call of duty} in the parks!

Mrs. H. You were on that board for 12 years and president of it.

Q. Then I think you also contributed during the war.

Mr. H. Yes, I received the "Navy E" for our production of munition boxes. We built the boxes for the ⁵ *Swish* anti-aircraft shells.

Q. When you say "we," who is meant?

Mrs. H. The lumber company.

Q. That's a real contribution!

Mrs. H. You got a very nice compliment from one of the men high up. He asked you why you hadn't raised your prices.

- Mr. H. Why, I told him that I thought if I didn't raise my prices, maybe my great-grandchildren would have less taxes to pay for this war.
- Q. But you've always been interested in ammunition and guns, is that right? And you helped the police department?
- Mr. H. That's right. Two of us - Mr. Traver and myself got interested in the police department. We decided we should check them over and see how they could shoot. We were amazed to find they couldn't shoot. They were terrible. They couldn't have been worse. So we undertook the proposition to teach them how to shoot, and we really enjoyed it very much.
- Q. And you gave a great help to the police department. Who was this gentleman who helped you?
- Mr. H. William G. Traver. We also helped to put the first police radio outside of Chicago into Decatur.
- Q. That was a great help to the police department too. Well, I presume that your interest in guns led to an interest in hunting, too.
- Mr. H. I always have hunted - around here, and we had a crowd who went to the far north every early winter. Dr. Goodyear and A. E. Staley, Jr., ~~Dr. Egan?~~ and Ralph Monroe.
- Q. Those were all your cronies who went on these hunting trips. I suppose that fishing was a hobby, too.
- Mr. H. That was a little later, ~~when I went to Florida to fish.~~
- Mrs. H. Don't forget when you got your antelope in Wyoming. It's right there on the wall.
- Q. Oh, yes, it's looking down on us now - and the large tail of a fish is mounted along with a collection of guns. Well, you really have your trophies around you - Photography is another hobby, too, I understand.

Mr. H. It used to be. The Leica was one of my favorite cameras. But the cameras have got so smart now, I'm afraid of them.

Q. Like computers. they know more than we do! I believe you also enjoy rock polishing?

Mrs. H. We had lots of fun looking for rocks.

Q. And books - I believe you like to read.

Mr. H. Well, I like to be read to - I developed glaucoma years ago. I'm practically blind.

Q. So you're dependent on people to help you out.

Mr. H. They're awfully nice about it.

Q. I'm sure they're glad to - why don't we talk about some of the people you remember who made a special contribution to Decatur. You mentioned Mr. Staley, ~~who gave you a poem as a friend, is that right?~~ You want to talk about these people?

Mr. H. There was George Chamberlain, the superintendent who built the Staley plant. We were very good friends, and I sold Staley's a good many hundred thousand feet of lumber when they built the plant here.

Q. So you've had some very fine friends who have also contributed a great deal to the city.

Mr. H. I think Gus Staley had the finest mind of any man I ever knew. I remember on time we were on a trip and we got into this little town. The only way we could get news in the town was when it came through on the wire. They would make a copy and stick it on a nail. Gus went over that, and by the time we got cleaned up, taken our baths on our return from the woods, he reported that Chamberlain had died, and told ~~me everything that had~~ ^{NEVILLE} ~~happened.~~ ^{me about every event with which} ~~he had~~ ^{been connected.} He had a remarkable mind.

Q. Well, Mr. Huff, do you have any impressions of Decatur over the years you've lived here?

Mr. H. I feel that it's a good town to live in and to bring up your children.

Q. How about you, Mrs. Huff?

Mrs. H. I think it's the garden spot of the world, next to Hawaii *perhaps*.

Q. And Marcia, have you enjoyed living in Decatur?

Marcia: I've traveled quite a bit throughout the country and throughout the world, but the thing that brings me back are my family ties and the bonds and foundation that my grandparents have built here. In that respect, it's a paradise on earth, I think.

Q. Well, I think that's a very nice note to end on, Mr. Huff. I certainly appreciate your help and yours, Mrs. Huff and Marcia. It's been a real pleasure to reminisce over the days you have had here in your business and community efforts in Decatur. I thank you very much.

Mr. H. I've enjoyed talking to you ~~very~~ much. I hope I've made some contribution.

Q. You've made a real contribution! You have been listening to the reminiscence of Mr. W. L. Huff, assisted by Mrs. Huff and their granddaughter, Marcia Morey. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

