

Huntley, Edwin L.

Interview by  
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for the  
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. Edwin L. Huntley Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Edwin L. Huntley.

Q. Mr. Huntley, were you born in Decatur?

A. No, I'm not an old pioneer here. My home town is Rock Island on the Mississippi River. I went to Bloomington at Illinois Wesleyan and I did my graduate work very interestingly at the National Recreation School and in connection with the Boys' Club and Motion Picture Study at New York University at Washington Square in New York. Then I have done quite a little work back and forth from Decatur to the school at Champaign.

Q. With all those studies, what field were you getting your degree in?

A. My degree would have been a Ph.E.D. but I lacked about 23 points in residency on the campus for the Doctor of Educational Philosophy - but my chief field is definitely that of the development of a community. The Adult Education part fits in with the idea of community development.

Q. So all these studies in recreation related to the area of community development and adult education?

A. Yes. I happen to have the honor of being the organizing president of the Illinois Adult Education Association, and the community colleges that we have throughout the state was pretty much tied in with the early work of the state Adult Education Association.

Q. That's really an idea that has grown magnificently.

A. It has added another two years to the basic system of education for the children of the state of Illinois.

Q. But we're getting a little ahead of our story. How did you get to Decatur?

- A. I came to Decatur from the town of Rockford. I was the assistant for adult education for District 1 of the Works Progress Administration. They had such a need for 27 different counties down here. So I came to set up that program for this part of the state
- Q. For the WPA?
- A. That's right.
- Q. That was during the depression, wasn't it?
- A. It was during the depression.
- Q. You must have had some unusual experiences.
- A. We helped to develop what is now the Junior College in Danville. Of course, the Junior College hasn't really been established in McLean County. We had these programs connected with whatever facility was available.
- Q. What year was it when you began?
- A. That was from 1936 to 1942.
- Q. Was WPA not in existence after that?
- A. No - with the coming of World War II the efforts switched from peace time activities to war activities. In the field we switched over to teaching as much as we could first aid and safety activities connected with the war. We trained the Civil Defense Personnel.
- Q. These were men and women interested in helping on the home front?
- A. That's right.
- Q. Then the Junior College was a natural sequence to these activities?
- A. Yes. We had a lot of help in the state from the Chicago Adult Education Association, a very strong body. They had a fellow named Ralph McAllistair who gave us a lot of help. Then, of course, we had the help of my co-worker,

Bob Brown, who was the head of summer school and University Extension in the Champaign area. The movement was based on the need to extend our public school system.

Q. What was your job then?

A. I was director of Adult Education in Decatur. All we were doing in those days was scratching the surface. To have the Junior College movement grow out of those crude beginnings is amazing.

Q. When did the Junior College movement start to develop? Was this a special event that caused this?

A. The beginning was in the city of Joliet. To get the law set so the schools could be set up in districts with taxes to support them was a major accomplishment.

Q. When the laws were set up, you were on your way?

A. Yes - We copied what the state of California had done. They have a very strong program.

Q. One of your jobs was with the Chamber of Commerce, wasn't it?

A. Yes, I worked first with the Decatur Association of Commerce. Later it was called the Chamber of Commerce. It is now called the Metro Chamber of Commerce.

The chief job of the Chamber is to bring individuals together to accomplish the aims and goals of the community. We had first to set goals toward which we were working and then find people and groups interested in assisting in solving the problems.

Q. What were the goals of the Decatur group?

A. To build a better, more attractive, and more liveable community. That covers a multitude of different activities. You can see from my experience that the first interest is education. In 1942 or 43 if you check

back we had a group called the Educational Advisory Committee for the School Board. Through this group we had the vote that secured kindergartens for the community. Such activities helping to create a better, more attractive town is the goal of the community development program.

Q. I think the average person would be surprised to learn that your first goal is education. I think most people have the idea that a Chamber of Commerce is interested in business.

A. I think that's true. I had a friend who was a chairman of one of our committees who had moved to Arkansas. He had been on a trip back East. On his way home he stopped in the office. He said, "Ed, I'm on a committee to get into community development for the city of Arkansas. What should be our goals? Should we put ads in this magazine or newspapers?" I said, "The experience we have had shows that some sort of promotion doesn't get down to the nitty-gritty of the basic development of the community.

He asked, "Where do you start?" And I replied, "You start with people. You need to know just what kind of people you're working with. Do you know what the average education people in your town have?"

He said, "It isn't very high."

Then I said, "Then one of your first steps is to begin to develop the standards of education. To what level have they attained? You need to build a community so attractive from the standpoint of good churches, good parks, and playgrounds, good schools, and so on. Then your industries will automatically be attracted to communities of that kind. That is what we found in Decatur."

Q. And it works?

A. It works. So when we had all the effort to get the industries of Decatur do the job they could do in the war effort, we reached the high level already set. That effort helped the United States win the war. That was the thing we had here that other communities did not have and that's the reason that the ammunition and the shell plants and these other plants here first came to a community where they would be well received and where there would be the basics they would need to aid directly in the war effort.

Q. And there were many industries here in Decatur working on war material?

A. Yes. There is a story of Decatur that perhaps hasn't been told too realistically. When the war did come in spite of our hopes that it would never involve us, because that's destruction, not growth. But we had here a unique situation for which we had prepared our basic community. We had four or five firms that received the "E" awards for excellence for their production toward the war effort. The thing we placed on the desks of the officials in the war production was a complete survey of the manpower, the machines, and the facilities we as a community could offer in the war effort. So we had four major plants established rather quickly. There were two to the west on each side of highway 36 - the production of materials. On the other side of the road was the plant that filled the shells and saw that they were transported as quickly as possible. That was Remington Rand. The shells that came from Decatur were transported by ships and planes across the Atlantic to Teheran and from Teheran by mules and human beings up to the front to enable our allies of that time - the Soviets - to keep the troops of Hitler from coming down and taking over the oil they so badly needed. So Decatur had a direct bearing on winning the war. We produced shells at the Mueller Company for the Navy.

I was sitting in the office when a request came in saying, "We want to place a project called 'the Manhattan project,' and we are checking on Decatur. Could you furnish as many as 800 people for jobs? We need stenographic help and people who know some chemical technology."

We checked and reported that we could possibly come up with 3 or 400. At the time the Manhattan Project was at its peak it had 12 or 1300 employees.

Q. Did it ever come here to Decatur?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. It did? You mean as part of the whole Manhattan group?

A. Yes. They came and built the new plant immediately to the north on the Pennsylvania and the Illinois Central Railroads with everything they needed for their operation. The only thing that was given out was that they were manufacturing ping pong balls. The full story on that project didn't come out until the war was over. Then we knew that it was part of the atomic energy plant - and it was stationed right here in Decatur.

Q. How could the people who were taking shorthand and writing letters keep from knowing something? Were they sworn to secrecy?

A. Yes. The information and security at that plant was very tight. Materials from this plant went from Decatur to Oak Ridge so that is how the whole thing was tied in.

Q. And it was tied in to Los Alamos, New Mexico, too, and probably to the University of Chicago?

A. Yes. They took the gas with certain elements in it that they were pushing through strainers. The gas slowed, and the slowest part was collected. Now that is about as much detail as was announced.

Q. To make the ping pong balls! Those were pretty powerful ping pongballs. Now, when these plants for the war effort closed, what happened to them?

Did they leave Decatur or convert to peace time products?

- A. The plants to the west left one little manufacturing company, but the rest of the structures weren't such that you would want to put a plant there to use. They calimed to use some of the shelters where they stored the shells to grow mushrooms in!
- Q. But they didn't really grow mushrooms, did they?
- A. No. Too, we had at that time the last of the interurbans running from Springfield to Decatur. Some workers came from Springfield.
- Q. So you are saying that some of that work and some of the buildings were temporary and nothing was continued after the war?
- A. That's right. We had a group that was able to take a tour through the plant.
- Q. During the time it was operating?
- A. Yes. The thing we had to do was to put tape on the soles of our shoes so so there was no danger of sparks as we walked through.
- Q. That must have been rather frightening!... Well, with all the war workers here, even though some lived out of town, you probably had to provide recreation and other services for a lot of people?
- A. Yes - and to find places for them to live. In this house, the owners lived in the downstairs, and upstairs were people in the plants. We had to find people first and then a place for them to live.
- Q. They had to double up! I suppose they had to have some kind of recreation although their work hours were probably pretty long and irregular.
- A. That's right. The other big plant here was called the "Caterpillar Military Engine" plant.
- Q. A part of the Caterpillar system?



A. Yes - they started to build a diesel motor but only about 100 of those were ever turned out. So they went back to the D-C 7 track, which was the same motor they used on tractors in the Peoria plant. The roof that had to be built on that plant was out of wood beams so the plant is now occupied by the Firestone Tire Company and because the Caterpillar Tractor Company liked Decatur so much they first acquired the land and built a plant with their specifications with steel beams and tracks so they brought to Decatur the plant which employs the greatest number of workers - the Caterpillar Tractor Co. In Decatur they don't produce the tractors like those of other plants. Here in Decatur they produce the machines that push the dirt and also the huge trucks that carry up to 75 tons. They call those trucks the "Off High-way Truck."

Q. This development at Caterpillar came about after the war? They just continued their plant here after the war?

A. Yes. that's right.

Q. You really had some exciting experiences during that time.

A. It was an exciting time for Decatur and for the individuals who had to see that the program was carried forward.

Q. Was there a big let-down after the war or did the momentum continue? In Decatur?

A. We had a committee on Post-War Planning and Employment.

Q. This started during the war so you would have some plans ready?

A. So we had some plans for what to do. For a few years the community was able to maintain the bulk of these plans and to find some new employers to come in to operate and build for peace and not for destructive purposes. I think we did a pretty good job to hold production at a high level in that period.

Q. Besides the industries that came during the war, what else has influenced the growth of Decatur?

A. To compare the city of Decatur the best way is to look at the organizations of city managers throughout the state. But we should say here that the unpopular job that the old Decatur Chamber had to do was to bring about a referendum that established a city manager form of government. There was a lot of objection to it.

Q. Why did they object?

A. They just didn't understand the governments that communities in the state can have. You can have aldermen, you can have commissioners, or you can have the city (or now I believe under state law the county) manager form, should be set up. But the thing we had to sell was that the city manager form was superior to either the commission form or the aldermen. That took a lot of groups coming together. The group that deserves a lot of credit was the League of Women Voters. They were out in the forefront and did a whale of a good job for the city.

Q. So the referendum passed?

A. The referendum passed after the second or third time.

Q. Mr. Huntley, how has the city management plan worked out, once it was put in practice?

A. The people in the community that I have had any contact with feel that they get more of their money's worth under the city manager form than under the old commission or aldermanic form of government. I certainly believe that we ought to know that for good business operation in the community the city manager far exceeds the other two forms that a city like Decatur could have.

Q. That's good to hear... We know that Decatur is a very industrial city. There are many plants and industries here. How did it get started in that line? What was the early history?

A. The thing that started the industrialization of Decatur was the gunshop of Hieronymus Mueller. He was the man who was more than just someone who could work with machines. He could take the machine and improve it. He spent his life time in that area.

Q. When did he start his work?

A. The thing that brought Mr. Mueller to Decatur was the fact that by 1854 two railroads had been built - one east and west and one north and south - right through this little struggling community in the state of Illinois. He had come from Germany to Chicago and then to Freeport, where he married. Then he brought his bride to Decatur and started his gunshop. The gunshop has developed into the company we have now, which produces the gas and water systems for communities all over the world. The fact that the equipment for gas is being used on the pipeline in Alaska shows the importance of what that company has done. The thing that Mr. Mueller did came about in this way. At that time there was in Decatur a plant that was making the iron for railroad trains to run on. To operate that plant of iron production they had to have water. So they built in the vicinity of east Main and Wood Streets a huge area to pump the water from the Sangamon River and then pump it on to the plant. One of the first towns to pump the water into pipes so it could be closer to the place of use was Decatur. The city had a man like Mueller at the head of the department to pump that water. He got tired in the winter when the temperature was down below zero to have to tap these pipes under

pressure and get that water all over him while he put the new pipe in. So he developed a major invention not only for Decatur but the whole world - the Mueller tapping machine. The same mechanism is used for water and gas now - but the pipes into the main without the loss of water or gas and without incurring the unhappiness of the persons doing the operation. That was a major invention and it helped. They tell the story of the early iron foundries in the east Eldorado Street area. That area for years was called "the levy". The plants were located along the Wabash and the Illinois Central Railroads. And the sparks would fly out of those plants at night, and you could see them for a long distance as they hammered the iron for the making up the rails. People would come in by train and by horse and buggy to stand and watch the sparks fly. The men who worked there were paid as much as \$5 a day, which was a fortune in those days. The plant was operated by a West Pointer and an Annapolis man. It had a pretty good operation to bring in engineers of the type who could operate it. As the railroads moved west, the production of the rails followed. This group came from Indianapolis. But after about four or five years' operation here, it moved on to Kansas City. Then the development from iron to steel rail had a great deal to do with it. But right on the railroad tracks we had these fine buildings which had been constructed for this former operation. It then became the center for the railroads in Central Illinois. One of these firms moved to Decatur from Springfield and the other from Peoria to Decatur. The area we're in today was part of that development for people who worked in those plants. Of course, the whole city of Decatur has been a typical railroad community because of

of that initial development from the gunshop and the iron rail operation to the tapping machine, so you see it's a sequence.

Q. Did Mr. Mueller come here before the railroads came or as a result of their coming?

A. He came at the same period that the trains came. The first trains came to Decatur in 1854, and Mr. Mueller too. He came at the right time. So that was the beginning of Decatur's industrialization. The thing that he did was to attract a good many German people to the area - the inventors particularly. The list I have of the early inventions - far from a complete list - covers three pages with dates and titles. So you see how it started.

Q. Mr. Mueller was only one of those extremely influential in the growth of Decatur, wasn't he? Who were the others?

A. Well, we must mention at least one other person who had a great deal to do with it. The second would be the story of Augustus Staley. He had started the company back on the east coast in Baltimore. He started by selling corn starch. His competitors stopped his production right under his feet, and he had to find some other production. So he came to Decatur where he found a plant that had gone bankrupt. He took that old plant and developed it into a plant to make corn starch, the very fine plant we know today as the Staley Company. Of course, they no longer make only corn starch. We have in Decatur the best equipped lab in the hydrocarbon field of any laboratory in the world.

Q. Is this laboratory a Staley operation?

A. This is a Staley Lab - immediately to the east of the main Staley Office Building.

Q. Is it used for their processing of corn products?

A. Yes. They have R & D - research and development. From the standpoint of value of such work in the United States, for every dollar spent on research and development, the returns have been over 100 per cent. So the reason we have the high fructose sugar lies directly in that laboratory.

Q. We haven't mentioned soy beans.

A. Well, there are over 400 different types of products that come from soybeans - paints, oils, etc. - and shipped all over the world.

Q. That certainly is an inspiring story. Thank you, Mr. Huntley, for sharing your reminiscences of Decatur with us.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. E. L. Huntley. This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Deatur Public Library.

