

Mrs. Corwin Johns
(Eugenia Ewing Johns)

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mrs. Corwin Johns Interview

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Miss Turnell: This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Corwin Johns. Mrs. Johns has agreed to tell us something of her life in Decatur.

Mrs. Johns: I, Eugenia Ewing Johns, was born in Decatur on September 8, 1887, and have lived here all my life excepting several years away at school and many extensive tours in Canada, the United States, Mexico, etc. and two European trips, which were for seven months by ship, not just for a week or ten days by airplane, as is so prevalent these days.

As for some of the things I remember about Decatur, in my youth were the Corn Carnivals, we children loved those - the fire department races with horses and trucks on West Prairie Avenue, Riverside Park and the Natatorium, where we children took swimming lessons.

Later, I attended the Wood Street School, when Miss Mary French was the principal, for whom it is now named, and our sanitary drinking water supply was a bucket and dipper, used by all.

Then I attended the old High School, graduating in 1903. Among the distinguished early residents of Decatur, whom I knew and remember well, were Dr. and Mrs. H. C. Johns, my husband's grandfather and grandmother. After retiring from medical practice, Dr. Johns devoted his time to farming and cattle raising. In 1852 he helped to organize the Illinois Board of Agriculture and in 1856 he and two men from Springfield were sent by the Illinois Breeders' Association to England for investigating and securing cattle to bring back to this country. They brought the first shorthorn cattle to Illinois. He built their lovely home on Johns Hill, on 160 acres of land, where he farmed and raised cattle until his death in 1900.

Mrs. Johns, Jane Martin Johns, was very active in civic and social affairs all her life until her death in 1919. She traveled extensively and at the age of 85 in 1912, she wrote a delightful book entitled "Personal Recollections" - from 1849 - 1865 - about early years in Decatur and the Civil War. A limited number of copies were published by the Decatur Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She continued to live in their Johns Hill home until her death.

Mrs. Johns: Other distinguished residents of Decatur who were friends of my family and whom I remember were Mrs. Oglesby, Mr. and Mrs. Millikin, Mr. and Mrs. Orlando Powers, my grandmother's brother, Dr. and Mrs. Penhallegon, and Vice-President Adlai Stevenson, not a resident but a frequent visitor at our home, being a cousin of my father, Charles Adlai Ewing. Some of the beautiful mansions which are no longer here were those of Judge W. R. Race, Orlando Powers, J. Petticord, A. P. Hill, Samuel Powers, and last but not least, Reverend Fielding Ewing, my grandfather, where I was born.

In those days we had good train service to Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, and elsewhere, and I don't remember being snowed in or having a complete black-out. It would not have been so serious for us then because we had no electricity until I was grown and a large furnace to keep us warm. Lamps and candles and fire places added to the charm of living, but now I prefer electricity and a gas fireplace to coal and coal oil these severe winter days.

Miss Turnell: Thank you, Mrs. Johns. You have given us a very vivid impression of older times in Decatur. You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Corwin Johns. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.