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Oral History for Mr. Donald E. Minton,
Retired Chief of the Decatur Fire Department

LOCAL HISTORY

This is Betty Turnell with the oral history series sponsored by the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Donald E. Minton, retiring Chief of the Decatur Fire Department.

- Q. Well, Mr. Minton, welcome to our series! How long have you been a member of the Fire Department?
- A. I've been a member of the Fire Department for 33 years.
- Q. Great! That's a long time.
- A. I've loved the job and enjoyed it the full 33 years that I've been in the department.
- Q. But it's time to change?
- A. That's correct. I think it's time to let some of the younger fellows have a chance.
- Q. We want to know something of your experiences, but tell me, how long have you lived in Decatur?
- A. I was born and raised in Decatur, so I'm a Decatur native.
- Q. Well, great! We won't say when, but we can guess because you're retiring.
- A. That's correct. I'm retiring young, and I hope that gives me a chance to do some of the things my wife and I want to do.
- Q. I'm sure you've had a strenuous career, as we'll find out. I think you will be looking forward to retirement. Will you still be living in Decatur?
- A. That's correct. My children and grandchildren, most of them, are here, and my friends. This is where I want to be. I like Decatur.
- Q. I do too! I'm glad you do. In your childhood in Decatur, will you tell us something about your experiences in growing up?
- A. A little bit about my childhood--I suppose I thought I had a normal childhood, which I assume most children think they have. As I said previously, I was born in Decatur. I started my schooling at Oakland School, which is now torn down. It is no longer there. That's where I went for my grade school education. I lived in the 1100 block of West Forest, which was a nice neighborhood.

During my junior high school years, I went to Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, which at that time I thought was the best junior high school in

the city. While I was in junior high school, I suppose that is when I started to develop some of my work habits. My family now I would consider to have been a poor family at that time. My first jobs were mowing grass and taking care of lawns in the neighborhood. I also had paper routes - an evening and a morning paper route.

Q. That kept you busy!

A. I thought it did, but I still had plenty of time to play the usual childish games and have fun.

Q. And you made some money?

A. I had to make money, and I enjoyed it. I went to Decatur High School when Decatur only had one public high school. Again, while I was in high school, I also worked at the Varsity Theatre.

Q. What did you do there?

A. I started as an usher and worked my way up to be doorman. As I look back, I think I started working at the Varsity Theatre for 10 or 15 cents an hour.

Q. My goodness!

A. By the time I quit there, I had worked my way up to a quarter an hour. But that was when the quarter was worth a quarter. It went further than it does now.

Q. You didn't feel deprived?

A. No, I felt that if there was anything I needed then, I could buy it. Everybody wants things he can't afford to buy, but my salary permitted me to purchase everything I needed. I graduated from Decatur High School in 1949. That gives you a little idea of my age. I graduated at the normal age for a high school student. My first job in the city after graduating was with the Walrus Manufacturing Company. During my high school years I took some vocational cabinet-making courses. I loved working with wood. In my junior high school years too I liked wood working. I still do to this day. This is my relaxation. When I came home from a frustrating day at the fire station, I liked to go out to the garage and work on a wood project. I enjoyed doing that. I did not stay at Walrus very long.

Q. Did they manufacture wood products?

A. Yes, they manufactured cabinets and laboratory tables. They were a cabinet-making firm. But the pay was not as good there as I could get at the Staley Company, so I went with the Staley Company in 1949.

Q. Right after high school?

A. Right! I started on the "extra board" at Staley's, where everybody started when they began their work at Staley's.

Q. Does that mean you filled in jobs?

A. Yes. You didn't have a steady shift. You worked when they needed you and where they needed you.

Q. But you learned a number of different jobs?

A. Yes. My father worked at Staley's, but I never had the opportunity to work with him while I worked there. I stayed at Staley's until I was drafted into the Army in January 1952. I spent two years in the service. Most of my time after basic training was spent in Japan. That was a very enjoyable experience. I got to see a lot of the world that I wouldn't have seen if I was not in the service. It's the type of experience that you wouldn't have traded for anything, but you wouldn't want to do it again. I got out of the service in January 1954, and went back to work at Staley's.

Staley's was a good place to work. I enjoyed working there, but I didn't think I wanted to make factory work my life occupation. An opportunity came to get on the Fire Department in 1955 when the work week of a fire fighter was lowered from a 72 hour work week to 56 hours. They put on almost a complete shift of men. That is when I went on the Fire Department--on October 10, 1955.

Q. Mr. Minton, did you have any special reason for joining the Fire Department?

A. No, not really. It was an opportunity to try another job. I thought that the Fire Department offered security, a better pension for my retirement years. Like all kids, I had a fascination for the fire and police, and I wanted to try the Fire Department.

Q. You didn't mind the danger or the physical problems involved?

A. At that time I gave no thought to the danger or the physical problems. I didn't realize they were as severe as they are.

Q. Well, let's see what positions you held in the department.

A. One thing I did learn later on is that the fire fighter's job is the most hazardous occupation in the world. It still is. More fire fighters are injured or die in the line of duty than in any other occupation. Mining, I believe, is second.

My positions on the Fire Department? I started out as a fire fighter in 1955 and in November of 1961 I was promoted to lieutenant.

Q. What did you do as lieutenant?

A. Lieutenant serves as a company officer in the absence of the captain. The captain is in charge of the fire station. In his absence the lieutenant serves as person in charge or as a unit commander. We had more pieces of equipment than we had fire stations, so lieutenants were in charge of pieces of equipment as they left the stations to respond to alarms. In 1962 in October, I then received a promotion to the captain's rank and served as a station commander. Basically there were four people at a fire station, at the smaller fire stations. On the Fire Department, Station 1 has always been the headquarters.

Q. These stations are the places where the equipment is housed and the men stay between duties?

A. That's correct. At Fire Station #1 there was more than one piece of equipment, but at each of the outlying stations there was only one piece running out of that station. So the captain was in charge of the personnel and equipment of that station.

There are responsibilities for a captain or company officer because frequently he is first at the scene of alarm. He has to make decisions before a senior officer can arrive or get there. So there were responsibilities as a company officer or unit commander, and there still are.

The next level above captain on the Fire Department is the battalion chief of shift commander rank. I did not serve in that capacity. As a captain, I was offered the opportunity to take the test and go through the procedures for the Assistant Chief's position, and on December of 1972, I was promoted to Assistant Chief of the Fire Department.

Q. So that was a real promotion. You skipped a rank?

A. Yes. The responsibilities were totally different. As Assistant Chief of the Fire Department, my responsibilities were to coordinate the efforts of the three battalions or shifts. A battalion is a shift of people.

Q. How many men usually make up a shift.

A. From 30 to 35 men during my career on the fire department, each shift. This included seven captains and seven lieutenants. An assistant chief supervises the three battalion chiefs as well as overseeing the operation of the three shifts. Also my responsibilities included that of training officer for the Fire Department. I had to schedule the training for the Fire Department.

Q. Did the experienced men train the younger, inexperienced men?

A. Yes. We can talk about the training division of the Fire Department now. About late '72 or '73 there was a national report called "America Burning" that came out. It cited the fire problem nation-wide. There were several areas of concern. One was that fire departments had to

take a new direction--more toward fire prevention and public education. Additional training was needed and a level of professionalism through training had to be developed. The state of Illinois was one of the first states to develop this certified fire-fighter program. Most of the other states patterned their program after that of Illinois.

Q. A real tribute!

A. So Illinois was a pioneer in this area. At that time the levels were established for fire fighter competency and certification. There were also instruction or training levels certified. There were levels established for fire officers. The fire department started to train their officers as instructors. Now initially to achieve level one--the training officer level--this required a course at the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute to be able to instruct--a course on "How to Instruct."

Q. The University offers the Fire Service training?

A. Yes. The State Fire College is located at the University of Illinois. Now it is called the "Fire Service Institute." They train fire department personnel, as they do engineers and doctors and others in professions. But that's about the time that the effort to start a real professionalism in the fire service started.

Q. What was the impetus for this effort in the national government? Who started the concern?

A. That was when the National Fire Administration was started in government. Before this time most of the fire problems were left to the cities or municipalities to govern their own systems, while no one organization took charge of the total picture.

Q. Do you think this attempt was justified?

A. Very definitely! And it was needed. The number of lives lost dropped drastically within a few years. Municipalities didn't have the funds to really look into the problems in depth, whereas the National Fire Administration did. They did look into the problems and found what most of the problems were.

Fire fighters had done well for centuries at fighting fires. We could put the fire out after it started, but that wasn't the answer to the problem. You had to prevent fires from starting, and this is where the savings in life and property really came in.

Q. It worked?

A. Yes. The Decatur Fire Department is a very progressive department. It was prior to my being chief and will continue after I retire. They jumped on the band wagon very early, and are willing to try new things and new methods to achieve their goals.

Q. Mr. Minton, we haven't made you chief yet. Let's see how you got to be chief.

A. Former Fire Chief Hap Hamm retired in April of 1974, and that is when I was appointed by the city manager, Les Allen, to be Fire Chief for the Decatur Fire Department. That is when I started my duties as chief. In 1974 Decatur had four disasters in about half a year's time. In late winter, we had a 23 inch snow. The streets were blocked and while the number of fires didn't increase, the ones we did have we had trouble getting to because of the number of cars that were stalled and blocked the streets. How do you answer a first aid or rescue call if you can't get there? We had some personnel who had snowmobiles. So we pushed those into duty. In April of '74, a tornado hit the northwest section of the city. In May of '74....

Q. Excuse me, were fires involved in the tornado?

A. No. We were extremely fortunate.

Q. You just helped with problems that occurred?

A. That is correct. We helped people get back on their feet. We provided lighting, rescue work, treated the injuries, things like this.

Q. And all of that is part of fire training?

A. That is correct. We are called on to handle any and all emergencies. When an emergency occurs, they call us. The kind of emergency is left up to the caller. In early years fire departments were noted for getting cats out of trees. To some people that is a real emergency. And at one time it was considered a real emergency, and the fire department did answer animal calls. Fire departments no longer do that. You cannot risk a human life for an animal. That just isn't done. The city of Decatur has animal control people who handle these types of situations.

Also, the old image of the fire fighter just sitting around and doing nothing is just not the case. Fire fighters now spend much more productive time than they used to. Sitting around the fire station just isn't done.

Q. Are they learning new techniques and working on equipment?

A. I think last year the fire fighters put in about 28,000 hours of training. Now this included classroom and drill. There are always new techniques to be taught. There are new subject areas that must be covered. The emergency medical calls have greatly increased. The fire department is answering many more of what they used to call "first aid" calls. It used to be that we responded as "first aid level" trained people. The American Red Cross First Aid was the way our people were trained. That was the service we provided. That is no longer the case. Decatur is unique in the way it responds to emergency medical calls. We

have one ambulance service in Decatur. The Fire Department and the ambulance service work very closely together. The cooperation is great here. When other cities hear about how we work here, they can't believe it. When a call is received (of course we now have the 911 phone system) by the city dispatcher, if the caller requests ambulance service, the call is immediately switched to the ambulance service. If the person requests help, then the Fire Department units are dispatched and the call is also given to the ambulance service by way of the Fire Department dispatcher.

Q. If it's needed?

A. That's right. Whenever a person is injured, they may be needed. So the ambulance starts a vehicle to the scene. If they are needed, they come on in. If they are not needed, they don't come in. The ambulance service supplies advanced life support while the Fire Department provides basic life support until the ambulance with their paramedic units gets there.

If a call is received by the Ambulance Service and the person needs help and one of our units gets there quicker, they notify us and we respond with one of our seven locations. We frequently can get there more quickly and provide a service before the ambulance service can because of our locations.

Q. I think you started to tell of four disasters?

A. The first was the snow storm, the second was a tornado, the third one was a flood.

Q. Decatur was really hit hard!

A. We spent our time sand bagging the water works so we didn't lose water for the citizens. The fourth disaster was the Norfolk and Western explosion. That was on July 19, 1974. That was probably the largest fire-type disaster that the city has had.

Q. And you definitely had to play a big part in that?

A. Yes, we certainly did. Do you want to recall that event?

Q. I think you should because I know I wasn't in Decatur at that time, and others probably need to have it recalled.

A. Well, at about 4:45 a.m. on July 19, 1974, a switching crew at the Decatur yards of the Norfolk and Western Railroad pushed five loaded jumbo tank cars onto track #11. They cut them loose and allowed them to roll eastward toward an empty boxcar that had been previously switched to that track. The tank cars impacted the boxcar with sufficient force to cause the coupler of the boxcar to override the coupler of the leading tank car and puncture the head or end of the tank car. Now this tank car was loaded with LP gas. LP gas spilled from the hole and

vaporized when it came in contact with the air. It formed a huge vapor cloud. This cloud covered an area approximately a half a mile wide and three quarters of a mile long. At about 5:03 a.m. that vapor cloud found a source of ignition and exploded. The explosion was tremendous. The shock waves were reportedly felt 40 miles away. Damage was done to 700 homes; 67 residences were destroyed.

Q. By fire?

A. No, blown apart. Eleven schools were damaged.

Q. Fortunately, this wasn't when they were in session?

A. No, that is one of the blessings that we were thankful for. The direction of travel of the concussion went across the least populated area of the city. Also, the early hour was a blessing. The children were not in school. There were no workers at most of the businesses. Factory workers in the industrial area were at a minimum because the night shift is not the largest number of workers. There were no fires in the homes that were damaged, and there were no additional explosions in the rail yard.

That was definitely the largest problem that the Decatur Fire Department had to deal with. It was a unique situation in that the rail yards were not within the city limits. They were in a no man's land. They were not under our jurisdiction, that is, the Decatur Fire Department's jurisdiction, nor were they under anybody else's jurisdiction.

Q. So what did you do?

A. We handled it as if it were in the city. We had to because of the city residences surrounding the rail yards. We had to control the situation so it would not do further damage to city residences or property.

Seven railroad employees lost their lives. There were 40 injured and seven of those lost their lives. There were 312 non-railroad persons injured. Most of those were in the residential area. Most of these injuries were minor burns from the initial heat from the explosions, lacerations, and other types of minor injuries.

The railroad yards were approximately 60 sets of rail tracks wide. There were 283 freight cars demolished, and there was damage to over 300 other additional cars.

It was a huge disaster. Most of our concerns at the time were rescue operations. We were not aware that the people in the residential areas surrounding the yards had gotten out. So our first concerns were to search these residential structures to make sure that there were not any people there.

Also in the railroad yards was a building which housed railroad workers. They slept there. There was a restaurant there where they ate. We knew

that there were sleeping accommodations for 38 people in there, and they could have all been occupied. We got companies into the rail yards as quickly as possible, and searched for those people and helped to get them out.

It made you stop to think if you were in the right occupation or not.

There were other concerns in the rail yard that day, other hazardous cars we had to be concerned with: four other LP tank cars coupled to the car that ruptured. Those had to be gotten out. There was one alcohol car that could have caused very serious problems.

Q. Well, you had to cooperate with the railroad to do all of this, didn't you?

A. Yes, and we received excellent cooperation from the railroad while we were trying to handle this situation.

There was also a car of explosives and a car of ignitions. There were about a dozen other cars in the yard that probably could have caused another explosion similar to the one which occurred had they ignited.

Q. And they did not?

A. They did not.

Q. Great!

A. This was one of the Fire Department's main concerns. The National Transportation Safety Board investigated this disaster and indicated that excessive switching speed was the cause of this accident. About that same time nationwide there were other rail yard accidents that caused the railroad industry to provide additional safety measures for these cars carrying hazardous materials. So for every bad there is some good that comes from it.

Well, that fairly well covers the largest disaster we experienced.

Q. You're glad that not every year is like 1974.

A. We're very glad about that. The changes in the Fire Department over the years are very evident.

When I was first employed by the Fire Department, there was a lot of concern because of the coal-fired furnaces. There were a lot of chimney fires and roof fires.

As natural gas became available, the coal-fired furnaces became converted to natural gas, and that eliminated most of the chimney fires and roof fires.

But it seems as you solve one problem, another problem always comes up. The energy crunch made people much more aware of the need to conserve energy, and wood-burning fireplaces came into being. With wood-burning fireplaces also came more fires caused by these fireplaces.

Q. People weren't familiar with dealing with wood fires?

A. No, and they weren't installed correctly. There were no codes governing such fires in the initial stages when the fireplaces were first put in. So codes had to be developed to control such situations.

Another large concern now for the Fire Department is the need for additional insulation, because of energy conservation. Such insulation was developed from newspaper, shredded newspaper. It's cellulose insulation, one of the most effective of the insulation materials. The only problem is that in blowing this insulation into homes that needed it, you have to protect it from prolonged exposure to recessed light fixtures because of the heat build-up in the recessed light fixture. Now they are having problems caused by this insulation's becoming overheated. While it does not burn openly, it smolders and spreads until it reaches material that will burn--a wood or other paper source in home construction. It has caused several house fires.

Q. So a large part of your duties lies in educating the public?

A. Right! This is the answer to the fire problem--educate the public as to how they can prevent fires and the need for early detection.

Now there is a state law requiring smoke detectors in all residential structures.

Q. Smoke detectors are effective?

A. Very effective. However, there is also maintenance required in smoke detectors. Our department has offered for the last several years information to people as to how to install the smoke detectors and where to install them correctly and the maintenance that is required to make sure that they continue to operate.

Q. Effective batteries?

A. Yes, the batteries. In hotel-motel units we now require that smoke detectors be "hard-wired." In other words, they are not battery operated.

For years there has been a saying that most fires are caused by three factors: men, women, and children, or their careless acts. That is pretty much the truth. If we could control people, we could control fires. There are only very few fires that are not started by men, women, or children.

Q. Such as lightning?

A. Yes. These are your natural causes. Fires in the kitchen--there are many fires in the kitchen because we don't give our cook stoves the maintenance they require. We don't keep them clean. There is a build-up of grease. This causes problems. We don't clean out the broiler. This causes problems.

We know we can plug only so many electrical appliances into an outlet. So then we try to "octopus" it and plug more appliances in, thus overloading our electrical circuits. These are the types of careless acts we know we shouldn't be doing, but we do them anyway.

Q. So you do need to train the public?

A. You bet! That's a big job of the Fire Department now, and all fire department employees are involved in this training of the public. There is a speaker's bureau established by the city in which fire department members will go any place and present a program that is appropriate for the group they are appearing before, telling them about the fire problem and how to help us solve it!

Q. And the public has responded?

A. Yes, really well. I'm not sure of the reasons. Obviously we have been trying to reach them through the news media and other sources. We have gotten through to some.

Insurance cost increases have caused some people to be more concerned. They can't afford the loss. You can't replace some items regardless of the insurance you have.

The main efforts of the Fire Department now are directed toward the children. The old adage that "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" is fairly accurate. While we are getting through to a large percentage of adults, the most apathy toward the Fire Department still comes from the adults. The children are going back to their parents and getting them involved because of many of the programs the Fire Department offers today. That's good.

Q. Well, Mr. Minton, as you look back on your career, what are your feelings? You indicated when you started that you had enjoyed this career you chose. What are your feelings today?

A. I certainly do. I would not have chosen anything different. It's very rewarding to know you have helped somebody.

Q. It certainly is. Your work is very much appreciated by the public, I'm sure.

A. We hope that it is. The Fire Department has always been looked on as the city service that is offered as being the "good guys."

Q. Of course it is. When we call you, we need help.

A. When they call us, they need help. When we get there, things start improving for the better. This is because we do a good job. We are the "good guys." It's a very rewarding job, very rewarding.

Q. It's great to look back on a career like yours and feel that good about your work. What are you going to do during your retirement?

A. I don't have any hard, fast plans. I would like to do a little traveling. There is a lot of this country that I haven't seen.

Q. We haven't talked about your personal life. Do you have a family?

A. Yes, a wife who has stood by me through the years, even though she thought my first love was the Fire Department. I have a son who is on the Fire Department. That is a decision he made himself.

Q. That is a compliment to you, isn't it?

A. I feel that it is. I have three daughters. One of them also works for the city of Decatur. One lives about an hour from Decatur. I have two grandchildren from her and one from the daughter who lives in Decatur. I have one daughter who lives in Dallas, Texas.

Q. You have reason to travel!

A. We have a little reason to travel, yes, although I don't want to spend too much time with them. They have their lives to live, too. But there are many things to see.

My wife and I have some little motor scooters we enjoy riding around. If you see two elderly persons such as myself riding around on little blue motor scooters, you'll know it is my wife and me.

Q. Good? I hope you have a very happy retirement!

A. Thank you. I'm looking forward to it.

Q. We appreciate your sharing your experiences with us. You have given us a great deal of enlightenment and taught me, and I'm sure our listeners, points about the Fire Department I wasn't aware of. We really appreciate what you have done for us.

A. One last comment. If you have further interest in the Fire Department, don't hesitate to go to the department and ask for someone to come and talk to you with more information.

Q. Very good! We hope people take advantage of your offer. Thank you very much.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. Donald E. Minton as he retires from his position as chief of the Decatur Fire Department.

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. This recording was made in the library on November 14, 1988.