

ORAL HISTORY OF MR. RALPH OWEN

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Ralph Owen. We are recording on January 6, 1987, at the site of a condominium which Mr. Owen is constructing on Lake Shore Drive in Decatur.

Q. Can you describe for us the exact location, Mr. Owen? Maybe you can describe something of the view we have before us.

A. It's at the foot of Maffit Street on Lake Shore Drive - the south side of Lake Shore Drive. It's on the north side of Lake Decatur. It's about the 1400 block of Maffit Street, but 899 is the number we'll call it on Lake Shore Drive. We call it Lake Shore Club. The view is spectacular; in fact, we think it's about the prettiest view of the lake. It's looking south and we have a beautiful shore line to watch. This morning we have the snow showers on the lake. It's really a beautiful spot.

Q. And the sun is out, isn't it?

A. Yes, the sun is out today.

Q. We really do have a gorgeous view. Later we want to find out something about the history of this area, but right now, let's go on to find out something about you, too. This is only the latest in a series of projects you have undertaken. We want to know all about your business ventures, but first let's find out your family background. I believe your name has a Welsh origin, doesn't it?

A. Yes, "Owen" is Welsh, but my mother was a Gebhart, which was German. I say it was the Welsh flair plus the German background for business which constitutes my personality.

I was one of eleven children. My mother was one of seven Gebhart children. My dad was born in Decatur, that is, just east of Decatur. Mother was born in Decatur. Basically we are a Decatur family, although I was born in Wisconsin. My folks moved around and were in Wisconsin when I was born. I came to Decatur when I was about 14 years old.

Q. But your mother and father were born in Decatur?

A. Yes, in the Decatur area.

Q. How did they happen to be here?

A. Grandpa Gebhart came from the East. He was putting in some of the bridges for the early railroads back in the 1800's. He liked Decatur, and he settled here. He opened a number of businesses and built what they call the "Gebhart block". That's Mother's side of it.

My dad helped put in South Broadway. When they first paved the brick streets, he used his team of horses to put in the streets.

So our family does go back to Decatur in about 1860 or 70.

Q. But they decided to try Wisconsin for a while?

A. Yes, Dad was a salesman for Staley when it was a starch and syrup company. He covered the Wisconsin area. We lived there for a number of years as I was born there.

My family was born around Indianapolis. My brother, Bob, the attorney was born in Texas.

Q. You had a large family?

A. Yes, there were eight girls and three boys. There were six girls before my brother Bob was born. I was the ninth child. I grew up with a lot of sisters. My wife says I have no excuse when I got married - I knew all about girls.

Q. Maybe your sisters did all the work?

A. My mother had them well trained. She was a good German.

Q. How old were you when you moved to Decatur?

A. We came back to Decatur when I was 14. I went into Decatur High as a sophomore. I had my freshman year in Wisconsin.

Q. Can you tell us something about your childhood in Wisconsin?

A. It was never boring! With all those sisters to fight with! One sister was immediately older than me, about eleven months - so we were like twins. We went to Decatur High together. In Wisconsin it was very cold in the winter - about 30 or 40 below zero. In the spring - when it came (it took a long time to thaw all the streams) it was a delightful time.

Q. Did you graduate from Decatur High School?

A. Yes, I graduated in mid-year and went to Millikin University, which was the thing to do if you were a Decatur kid. There I met my wife Julie. She came from the Bloomington McLean area. I met her when I was a freshman. We went together about five years before we were married.

Q. In what year were you married?

A. We were married in 1942.

Q. You were going to school during the depression era?

A. Yes. We were very fortunate to be able to go to school, to college. We felt that Millikin was a good school.

Q. As I said earlier, you have undertaken a number of business ventures. Could you tell us how you started these and describe the various businesses you were in?

A. First, a little background. After graduating from Millikin, I joined the Army. I was at Chanute Field in the Air Force. I put 5.5 years there during the war.

During that time I got the idea of starting a hobby shop. I always had lots of hobbies of my own - models, etc.

So we came to Decatur in 1946 and started the Hobby Shop on

Condit Street. That was interesting because we started in my grandfather's house - in the Gebhart home. We called it the "Hobby House" because it was in a house. I thought to overcome the idea of going up stairs we needed a special name. We called it "Hobby House."

Q. Is it still standing?

A. The house was torn down a few years ago, but we moved downtown and opened our first downtown place on William Street, which they have torn down. So the City is changing. Then we moved to Prairie Street and there we put in toys. We changed to "Hobby House Toyland." We operated Hobby House Toyland until 1968.

In 1961 we bought the warehouse at 304 S. Franklin. It was then used by Barger's Auto Repair and a bakery. It was built, I understand, to introduce the 1927 model A Fords. We turned it into the Franklin Mall in 1967.

Q. We want to be sure to find out about that because that was a little early for malls, wasn't it?

A. It was ahead of its time a bit in that it was the first to be air conditioned inside and it had an inside sidewalk cafe' and all these little specialty shops. Everything tended to get bigger then, but there was a trend on the horizon to have smaller shops. Franklin Mall was successful, I believe, for that reason.

Q. Yes, it has been. You started another successful business there too, didn't you?

A. We closed up the toy business in 1968. We had a series of toy stores, about 12 of them. This was our warehouse. We started the Franklin Travel agency in 1968, the same year we closed the toy business. It is still going today.

Q. Very successfully!

A. I started it with no experience, but I had had 20 years of experience in the toy business and had done some travel. Since that time our two sons have come into the business. Bill came in out of high school, and Bruce came in after several degrees at college. We have retired, and they have taken over the travel business.

Q. You probably have noticed some changes in the business, haven't you, over the years?

A. Are you talking about the travel business?

Q. Right now - or any other changes?

A. I'll back up a bit. In the toy business we introduced self-service and the check out lines. That was ahead of its time. People expected clerks to wait on them. But we have a very large display, and we were there to help people, but when they found what they wanted, they brought it to the check-out line. So that was ahead of its day.

In the travel business in 1968, computers were on the horizon,

but they didn't become available to travel agencies until we put them in in 1977 after nine years in the business.

Q. That has revolutionized the business, hasn't it?

A. It really has, because they couldn't run an air line today, they couldn't make reservations and process tickets without computers. Millions are flying now, every day. It has grown a lot, and computers have let them do that. Our staff went from myself and one girl to seven or eight people when we put in our computers. We can now do twice as much work with the same number of people.

Q. And much easier?

A. Much easier and more accurately. A few years ago the accounting was computerized also. When you press a button to write a ticket, the information on that ticket is captured in the accounting mode and the computer does the invoice, prepares a statement and a report for the airlines. It used to take all night to write a small report. Now that work is done in a matter of minutes.

Q. And you have been through the very amazing changes that have taken place in that industry.

A. Yes, I didn't start the travel company until I was 47 years old. It was difficult, but I think the fact that when computers came along, my mind was open. Computers are definitely the way to go. Now almost every travel agency is computerized. Some thought they wouldn't be, but they had to be if they wanted to stay in business.

Q. Customers would be very disappointed if they had to wait until you made a telephone call or wrote a letter. It really has speeded up the business.

A. We used to use books to look up the schedules. Then we would call the airline, as you say. They would put us on "hold" or wouldn't be able to answer us. Now we are looking at the same information they are. It has revolutionized the industry, as you say.

Q. It's like magic, isn't it? You mentioned the computer advantage, but think of all the changes in American life that you symbolize in your life time - for example, the shopping mall concept, illustrated by Franklin Mall, the computerizations and now you are starting a new project, aren't you?

A. Yes, we are planning and expect to break ground in March or April for Lake Shore Club, our condominium.

Q. The condominium is certainly a new aspect of American life, isn't it?

A. Yes, it's fairly new. I don't know how far back it goes, but this decade mostly.

Q. I imagine most people have some idea of what a condominium is, but maybe you could tell us more definitely.

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A. A condominium simplifies people's ownership of property. They buy a portion of the apartment or building they live in and a portion of the ground, the walkways, the sewers, the water. Usually the care - the snow removal, the lawn care, the garden and all that work is done for them. They just pay for a portion of that service. It makes it simple for people who don't want to take care of their own grounds and want to lead a simpler life. Probably many people will be selling their big homes that have so much lawn care and moving into a condominium.

Q. Does the owner have any control over what is done?

A. Yes, because they are operated by a condominium association. They have a governing board, and the board makes the decisions. Then a manager carries them out. They have operating control through their board.

Q. This is an association of the owner? So it's a democratic organization?

A. Yes. They have votes proportionate to the size of their property.

Q. Will this be a controlled area? Will there be an overview or protection of the property?

A. It's very much controlled. To do this we have - I'm not sure if it's called re-zoned - but we have what is called a unit-development. The city has to approve it. It's been approved. There are two buildings with 12 units each. There cannot be any more buildings placed in front of them so they will have an unrestricted lake view, which people like. There will not be any more buildings or houses put in here. It will be these two buildings - 24 families here.

Q. And it will be safe for them to be there?

A. Yes - high security. We'll have basement parking with an elevator to the first, second, and third floor. They'll have control of their front door with intercom. They can call to the unit. They can go down to let their visitors in or they can press a button that will release the door.

Q. So it really is the best of both worlds? They have all the ease and convenience of city living plus the beautiful view and openness of the country.

A. We keep a natural atmosphere. We'll put in walkways and gardens. We'll put in an oriental garden and a gazebo where they can look at the lake and a barbecue area where they can entertain. So it will have the best of both worlds. We'll keep the nature look of those squirrels you see outside and the birds. There will be a fishing dock down at the lake and even our own private beach where people can go down and wade if they want to.

Q. Beautiful! What is the history of this part of Decatur where we are standing.

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A. That's interesting. This area was first owned by the Mr. Allen that the Allen Bend Drive was named after. He sold this 80 acres where we are located to Mr. Maffit. Mr. Maffit put in an ice house. In fact, he had six ice houses here, and 125 employees who cut ice and then delivered it with their wagons.

Q. You're talking about the time after Lake Decatur was built?

A. No. Excuse me - this goes back much farther - right back to the end of the Civil War when Mr. Allen came back from the service and Mr. Maffit started his business - probably in the 1860's. In fact, he was cutting ice in the 1890's when they still had the ice house. They quit the ice cutting business when ice was custom made by Polar Ice and those companies.

Q. Now, the ice was cut from the river?

A. Yes. It was cut from the river.

Q. The Sangamon River?

A. Yes. It was stored in the ^{ice} house with sawdust because there were lots of saw mills. A lot of this is written in the book, "A Pictorial History of Decatur." People would enjoy reading that. It has been well documented with photos but we just don't have a picture of the ice house. We have pictures of some of the ice houses. This one was here until about 1920. In fact, the bridge across the Sangamon River was taken out before the lake was built. But we still see the Sangamon out in front of our spot - the fishing and all.

Q. The lake was built in the 1920's?

A. The lake was built in the 1920's. They thought it would take a couple of years to fill but they had so much rain that it filled up in one year, which was unbelievable. This was the spot where the Maffit bridge was. It was one of three bridges across the lake - the county bridge which became "51 South" and "Lost Bridge" further east. We're at Maffit Street now. There were three bridges and this was one of them - one of the ways you get into Decatur.

Q. And of course there is easy access here?

A. Oh yes, right on Lake Shore Drive. We're only seconds from the hospital.

Q. St. Mary's?

A. Yes, and only minutes from downtown. It's a beautiful location and since we're on the south side of Decatur we usually have a breeze coming off the lake.

Q. It certainly is interesting to know that you have had such exciting ventures and that this is turning out so well.

But we'd like to know a little more about the Decatur you used to know when you came here as a high school student. What was Decatur like then?

A. It was a much slower town. It was dominated by a few big companies like Staley's and Mueller's. We didn't have Caterpillar then, but the transfer house was downtown with the bus and street car transfer there. The streets were narrower, with the shade of trees across them. When I was a young man, they widened Main Street and as things progressed, there were more cars with wider streets. It wasn't necessarily better, but they had to make room for a growing city.

Q. Where was the high school you went to?

A. It was on Franklin Street between North and Eldorado Street.

Q. Where the Civic Center is now?

A. Yes. It was there for many years, you know. In fact, my son Bill finished there. My dad went to Decatur High School, but I think it was in a different location then. So three generations of us went to Decatur High.

Q. Where did you spend your time in service?

A. I went over to Chanute Field thinking I would enlist and see the world in the air force, but I went to Weather school there. My brother Bob, who was three years older, went at the same time. We were together in the first class of weather observers. Out of a class of 150 they selected 12 to be instructors. Bob and I were both in that first class. One of our students who was interesting was Mr. Roberts, the weather man from Champaign. He would stop to see us and point out that we had gone to Weather school together at Chanute Field. Bob and I were instructors. They gave a fore-caster's class then and we both went into the forecaster's class and again were both chosen to be instructors. We had been there about three years and thought it was about time to move on. We went to Officer's Candidate school. I went to the Chemical Warfare school and he went to field artillery - anti-aircraft artillery.

Then I went overseas to Alaska, the Aleutians, for a short stay. Chemicals, fortunately, were never used in the second World War. So I went back to the air force and finished my service in Detroit.

Q. Did you finish your officer training?

A. Yes. I went to officer training from Chanute Field. It was a three month course. I was an enlisted man for three years. When I came out, I was first lieutenant.

Q. When you look back over your time in Decatur, what are the main changes that stand out in your mind?

A. The city has expanded a lot. The homes around the lake and the subdivisions have made it sprawl a lot. In the past it was much smaller and tighter with all the best homes basically in the west end. I think Southmoreland wasn't even occupied. It was laid out, but it was a victim of the depression so that Southmoreland wasn't even occupied. But soon after the War, it seemed to sprawl into all the subdivisions.

The negative side is the lack of respect. It seems like the town and the country in general has this quality. (Lack of Respect)

The shopping centers, the supermarkets have taken the place of the small grocery stores. You used to go across the street to the small grocery store. Now you have to go many blocks. The big stores are cheaper but often don't have the friendliness of the little store. That's why Franklin Mall has gone so well. We have the small shops.

Q. And the friendly atmosphere?

A. Yes - the friendly atmosphere. When you shop, you're talking to the owner or maybe the assistant. They really care about you. The big stores seem to have lost that touch.

Q. Your sons live here, don't they?

A. Yes, they both live here.

Q. Your daughter too?

A. My daughter lives here. She's an attorney - the assistant state's attorney. Her husband is also an attorney. They both went to the U. of I. They went to Washington for eight years, but he wanted to get into the travel business. So they relocated in Decatur, and he is working for us along with his brothers-in-law Bill and Bruce. The business is in good hands.

Q. So you feel secure about the future of your business?

A. Yes. It took a while to get ready to retire and to feel comfortable in it, but I realize that they do a good job.

Q. What do you see for the future of the city of Decatur?

A. I'm afraid I can't be real optimistic. It's like the announcement this morning that they are moving the headquarters of Mueller's away. That's about the third such blow. Staley's headquarters moved to Chicago. You lose something when you lose the headquarters. Mr. Powers was a wonderful president of Mueller's and expanded it. But we won't see him daily and he won't be here to manage it. You can't help but have more interest if you're here in the town where your headquarters is.

I also see that companies are getting away from heavy manufacturing. Caterpillar is not going to use so many people.

We're lucky to have ADM with their high tech grain. They are on the forefront of so many things. We've enjoyed working with them.

I think Decatur will grow again, but maybe not for a few years yet - and then more slowly.

Q. And in a different direction?

A. Yes - not the heavy industry we've had. That's the biggest thing I see.

Now the farmers are having problems with over-production. We're in a farm belt. We always think in Decatur that our prosperity or success rests half on the farmers. That was true in our toy business and now in the travel business. They are going to need 5 or 10 years to recoup and get going again.

But I think basically we're optimistic. We wouldn't be building this condominium if we weren't.

Q. And of course the people are the same - just going in a different direction. And certainly travel won't diminish from all indications.

A. That is probably one of the biggest changes. We used to think people who went to Europe had to be wealthy. They planned the trip for six months or a year ahead. They took a steamship and stayed for a month, two months, three months. They took their family along. Now it has reached the point where anyone can go. If you are a teacher, you can go every year. If you're married you can go at Christmas and in the summer. The world has changed a lot. Anyone can travel. Many more people.

Q. And that's good?

A. That's good. I've enjoyed it. I've been around the world three times. As we see things, we see how different they are. My oldest sister went to India for 50 years as a missionary. She went for a few years and stayed for fifty! I visited her five times in India.

We would have thought it an impossible dream to think of a working person going to India or going to Europe or Japan, but now its possible. They can save and every year or two they can go.

Q. It's certain to have an influence on the atmosphere of conditions between countries, isn't it?

A. Yes, the good fostered through the AFS students and the People-to-People programs we'd like to think has an effect. Sometimes I wonder, because the people themselves don't have that much control under a dictator. We've seen that in Spair and the Philippines; and Russia is a hart dictatorship. You really don't do anything on your own in Russia. I've been there once. But China is opening up. Even they are having trouble with their studets now. They've been given some freedom and want to have more. I guess we've seen a lot of change, but an awful lot for the better - for example, in world health. When I first started the travel business, we used to have to vaccinate for smallpox. They don't vaccinate the kids anymore. I guess more people died from

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the vaccination than would have caught the disease. So I guess world health is much better.

Q. So we have made progress?

A. Yes - much.

Q. The city of Decatur certainly appreciates, I'm sure, the contributions you have made.

Thank you very much, Mr. Owen.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Ralph Owen. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.