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ORAL HISTORY FOR MR. RICHARD E. REEVES

LOCAL HISTORY

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This is Betty Turnell with another oral history. Today's guest is Mr. Richard E. Reeves, sponsored both by the Decatur Public Library and the First United Methodist Church of Decatur.

Q. I'm going to call you "Dick" since we are old friends. Could we start by asking you to tell us something of your early life, Dick? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

A. Well, it so happens that I was born in the Decatur Memorial Hospital in Decatur, Illinois. When my older brother was born, there was a little difficulty with the birth. That was out on a farm near Weldon. So when my time came, Mother came down to visit with friends in Decatur, and I was born in the hospital here. That was something in that time, I guess.

I grew up in Weldon - on a farm, to start with. My father died when I was about seven years old and then we moved off the farm into town. My mother taught school in Weldon for many years. I went to a country school for the first year and then to the grade school in Weldon.

Q. That system must have given you a good start!

A. I worked on the farm some all through high school and carried ice in the summer for a man out in the country at the time when people used to have ice boxes.

I stayed out of school for a year between high school and college and worked on a farm and in a filling station. Then I went to the University of Illinois, I was at the University of Illinois for three years. I taught in airplane mechanics in service at Rantoul and then down in Mississippi.

Q. This was service in the Army?

A. In the Air Force, but I was a civilian at that time.

Q. Was this in war time?

A. It was just before the war, and for a short time I kept my civilian status and taught Airplane Mechanics. Then I enlisted and became an Aviation Cadet. I went to Yale University for a while and studied engineering there. I was on the faculty there at Yale for a short time. Then I went to the Pentagon in Washington and worked between the Air Force and the U.S. Office of Education. I was assigned to San Francisco and went to all the junior colleges and universities of eight states in the west to tell them how the Air Force trained a young man (and a young woman, to some extent) who came from a farm or a drug store how to become an airplane mechanic or a navigator or a communications person or an armament specialist or whatever.

Q. Were you helping to recruit?

A. This was in the 1940's. Really, what I was doing was to demonstrate teaching aids and mock-ups. These were not generally being used in schools. We had cutaways and visual charts and so forth that were not used very much in education. The services - the Army, the Air-Force, etc. - used these aids to train people rapidly. So that's what I did at that time.

After I finished my military service, I came back and finished at the University of Illinois and taught in Architecture there.

Q. Was your training in the college of Engineering? What field did you study?

A. I started out in Architecture. I had to work my way through school to earn money to keep going, so I transferred to Agricultural Engineering. I graduated in Agricultural Engineering, which is a part of the Engineering school over there. To help finish my two B.S. degrees, and in the last year while I was getting the second degree, I taught Architectural Drafting.

Q. You were busy!

A. I kept out of mischief! But I want to say, too, that I was active in Wesley Foundation over there and was President of the Student Council at Wesley Foundation. I was influenced a great deal by Dr. Paul Burt, who was the director of the Foundation and the pastor of the church. I have many happy memories of that time.

Q. You still have some affiliation with Wesley Foundation, don't you?

A. Yes, I was one of their trustees and was on their board for a long time, but I'm not actually serving on that now. Joyce, my wife is. She is serving on the board over there.

Q. Now that we are speaking of Joyce, why don't we ask where you met?

A. Well, it so happened that she had gone to the University of Illinois while I was in the service. I didn't know her then, but then she went down to St. Louis to take nurse's training at Barnes Hospital and graduated from Barnes and Washington University. I had a friend over there - Barbara Moody - who was also a friend of Joyce. I had tickets to the Ploughboy Prom which was an Agricultural Dance. I didn't have a date, and Barbara said, "I have a friend coming up from St. Louis, maybe you would like to take her." So I did. It was a blind date.

Q. With a very happy ending.

A. Yes, I've been blinded ever since!

Q. I know you have a daughter, Trish, because she spoke at the recent award banquet, where you were presented the "Service to Mankind" award by the Decatur Sertoma Club and the Decatur Breakfast Club. She gave a glowing account of your family life. Do you have other children?

- A. Yes, we have a son, Dick Junior, who is out in the Los Angeles area and we have a son Jim, who is down in Florida. Then we have Trish, who is over in Springfield - so she is fairly close at hand.
- Q. A very fine family! I know you are a member of the First United Methodist Church here in Decatur. How long have you been affiliated? But first tell us when you came to Decatur.
- A. We have a friend, Bert Templeton, who is a member of the First United Methodist Church, too, and had been a friend of our families for many years. When I was about to graduate at the University of Illinois, he suggested that I might want to work for what was then the Decatur Pump Company. He arranged for me to come over and have an interview. They hired me and so I moved to Decatur.
- Q. And that company has since become Burk's Pumps?
- A. Yes, it had the trade name Burk's Pumps. A few years ago the company was sold and the new owners called it "Burk's Pumps." But it was the former Decatur Pump Co.
- Q. Now that we are talking about your career, did you have any other positions before then? Was this your first job?
- A. After teaching for a year at the University of Illinois, I came to Burk's. I traveled as a salesman. I traveled eleven western states - from Denver to the coast and from Canada to Mexico. I traveled a lot of territory. Then I came in and was in charge of engineering for about 18 years I guess - I was Vice-President of Engineering. Then I moved over and became Vice-President of Marketing. I took charge of sales, and advertising, and service, and all that sort of thing. I did that for 18 years. The last couple of years I was there, I was Executive Vice-President of the company. All of that kept me out of mischief, too, for about 38 years.
- Q. A long career! Great! We were talking about your affiliation with the First United Methodist Church. What positions have you held there?
- A. I taught Sunday School to the high school and college age groups and some adult classes. I guess I've done that for maybe thirty years. I was in charge of the building committee that built the educational wing of the church. Then I guess I've held most of the positions on the administrative board, or the official board, as it used to be called, and the council of ministries, and the pastor, parish relations for at least twenty-five years. I've been a delegate to our annual conference for many, many, years. I've gone to jurisdictional conference every four years since 1964 and to general conference every four years since 1968. So I've been pretty active in the national church as well as other places.
- Q. You really have been a pillar of the church!
- A. I don't know about a pillar.

- Q. We'll talk later about your work with UMCOR, which is a division of the United Methodist Church, but let's talk now about how this all came about. You were retired, you said, or we might say "semi-retired?"
- A. Active retirement.
- Q. Active retirement, but the Sertoma Club acclaimed your work in Africa. Can you tell us about what you have been doing in Africa?
- A. Since I retired in 1985, a little over three years ago, I've been to Africa four times, I've gone for UMCOR - the United Methodist Committee on Relief, three of those times to do feasibility studies, and to help get projects going on over there on wells. They have tremendous water problems in Africa and in sanitation, the building of latrines and that sort of thing. I worked in Sierra Leone and in Liberia and in Ghana and in Kenya. This is what is called "West and Central Africa." Of course, Kenya is in East Africa. I've been in Kenya twice. One time my wife, Joyce, went with me. We attended the World Methodist Conference and then took an eight-day safari afterwards so we saw the animals. We took a hot-air balloon ride over where the Masai live. We had a wonderful time there. Most of my work there, however, has been with the people in the so-called "bush", trying to get them water that doesn't have to come from a stream or a seep-hole. It's very primitive. The people are very poor and need help. I'm able to help them.
- Q. Very good! At the Sertoma award dinner you spoke of some of the conditions you found there and how you were able to help them. Could you tell us any stories of your experiences there?
- A. Studies that I have not made but have read of surveys made by people from the United Nations and from CARE, and they have determined that less than 2% of the people who live in the so-called "Bush" or up in the provinces of these countries have potable or pure drinking water. The need is very great. The lack of sanitation, the lack of knowledge of hygiene and that sort of thing results in the fact that in the district I was in the Myumba district this past winter, about a third of the babies that are born die before they are four years old because of the conditions in which they have to grow up. The needs there are just tremendous, and the equipment or tools or know-how to solve their problems just doesn't exist, unless someone comes over and helps train them, point the way, and also supplies the tools and equipment and oftentime the materials that are needed for construction, for example, cement and reinforcing bars and that sort of thing.
- Q. How did you get those supplies?
- A. Well, you have to order them from Europe or the United States and have them shipped over there, which takes a good deal of time. The other thing that makes it so necessary for UMCOR, or church groups or the United Nations or governments to help is that the economy is so bad. For example, in Sierra Leone the currency is called the "leon." The country is bankrupt so the leon isn't recognized by any other country in the world. When you want to buy equipment or supplies or tools or whatever you have to come up with dollars, or pounds, or marks, or francs, or whatever. So the supply of the money to buy these things has

to come from outside Sierra Leone. They don't have the money. They don't export enough stuff to get hard currency to keep the thing going. It's a real problem.

Q. How did you get along with the people?

A. Oh, they are lovely, lovely people! Really, in spite of all their poverty and the fact that they just don't have the material things that we think are necessary for life, they are happy, joyous people. They, of course, live in an entirely different situation from ours here. They don't have the kind of food we have. Many of them eat primarily one meal a day. Rice is a basic food. If they don't have rice at that main meal, they don't consider that they have eaten. They also during the day may suck on an orange or eat a banana or chew a few of what they call "ground-nuts" peanuts. But normally what we call a decent meal, many of them have just one a day. It's a different way of life.

Q. Before you came there, how did they get water?

A. Most of them would have to walk to a stream. Of course, that stream is used for everything. It's where they do their laundry and where they take their baths and so forth. As the stream flows on down to the next village, the water is used over and over. Sometimes, particularly in the dry season, many of the streams dry up. Then there might be a place in the woods or at the bottom of a hill or mountain where there would be a seep-hole, like a spring. It is a seep-hole, not a running spring. Then they would walk maybe three, four, or five miles, or even further sometimes, carrying a bucket or pan of water on their heads back to their village where they live. You don't waste water when that happens! The women and children do most of that water-carrying. They actually spend a great deal of their waking hours just getting water for the family. Often, as I indicated earlier, since only 2% of them have what is "pure" water, the water they get is polluted. They don't heat it to boil it or purify it that way, and they don't have any other way of purifying it. And to a large extent, they don't even realize it. It's wet and in many places, pretty clear looking. They don't even realize it's polluted. They can't see anything in it. They have to be trained to know that they have to purify it in some way. And that's a part of the training - the whole hygiene of the thing. Even when they put a well in - these are hand-dug wells that we're putting in - they oftentimes will come to a well with a pan or bucket that had not been cleaned out and is dirty. They will go back home and even if the bucket was clean, the children may play with it. The chickens or goats may get to it. So they have to be trained about hygiene and sanitation - all of those kinds of things. Over the course of time, the people from CARE and the United Nations and the Peace Corps and other organizations have learned that they really have to start out by training them about hygiene and sanitation because you can go to the trouble of digging or drilling a well for pure water, but if they don't take care of it satisfactorily after they get it, it didn't help them any.

Q. Were you ever ill there?

A. No, every time I go, I'm in pretty good shape, but I watch very carefully what I eat and what I drink and that sort of thing. In the

major cities you can get bottled water that so far I've found to be all right. You can get Coke or 7-Up almost anywhere, even out in some very remote villages. I don't know how it gets there, but you can get Cokes or 7-Up. It's warm, because they don't have refrigeration, of course, but you can get liquids that way. I don't eat leafy vegetables. There are oranges and bananas you can peel, and they raise yams, and casabas, and swamp rice and that sort of thing.

Q. But they manage?

A. That's what they say. They don't have any money. They don't have anything to do with. When you ask, "How do you get along?" they say, "Oh we manage."

Q. When you went there, your object was to help them get wells?

A. Yes, the object was to get some wells dug.

Q. And how were they operated then? You said you didn't have any electricity.

A. You have to dig them with a pick and a shovel. They are about four feet in diameter and a man or even two men can go down in the well. They can go down 40, 50, or even 60 feet down to what we call the water table - where the water is. Over the years we have taught them how to line the well with reinforced concrete. They put a well-head at the top of the well and cap it so that it doesn't get contaminated so easily. Now we are putting hand-pumps on. Oftentimes, if the hand-pump breaks or something goes wrong, then there is a man-hole in the cover of the well, and they use a bucket and rope. A great many wells are of the bucket and rope type that never have had a hand-pump on them because they aren't available, or they've had a hand-pump until it breaks. And they have to use a bucket or a rope. Then they have to be trained that the bucket they use can't be thrown in the dirt or dragged along, and that you don't let the rope lie in the dirt where the animals are. That's a problem. Even in the schools - we were digging a well at a Nyamba boys' secondary school and a well at a Harper's girls' school - they are high school age kids. Even though they are told about sanitation and hygiene, they forget. They drop the bucket in the well. They throw it around and play with it. It's a continuing problem.

Q. What was their reaction after you gave them this water?

A. Oh, of course they are very happy not to have to walk and hunt and sometimes not find water, particularly in the dry season, but there is also a situation in which many of these people are organized into tribes or villages, and there is a village chief. Sometimes the village chief decide they don't want a well in their community or their village.

Q. What!!

A. Well, they wonder what the women will do.

Q. Oh, it's women's work to carry the water?

- A. It's women's work and if they have to walk four or five miles to go get it, it keeps them busy - as if they didn't have anything else to do. I ran into this the first time when I was in Ghana. There were some ladies who were with the Wycliff Bible Translators living in this community. They would very much liked to have had a well close by instead of having a house boy or someone like that walk two or three miles to a stream to get water. They would have liked to have a well in the village. But the village chief there would not let them have a well just because he wondered, "What would the women do?" But I have to say on the other side of that, in order for the women to have any kind of social life where they can converse with each other and get away from the "old man" some of them preferred to walk to the water hole rather than have to do the drudgery work around the house and have to take care of all the children - although most times the children would go with the woman. She would carry one on her back.
- Q. But at least it was an outing?
- A. It was an outing and a little bit of social life that they could have - an interesting thing to observe anyhow!
- Q. At the banquet, we were told that you acted as a kind of ambassador for these African countries. What did they mean?
- A. Well, I don't know. I suppose if you go and carry some of the culture we have and some of the religious ideas and faith and commitment, I suppose in a sense you are an ambassador.
- Q. You brought hope and good will to these people?
- A. Yes, that's right. And one of the things they need is hope. Unless people from the outside world bring them that hope, they don't have any reason to think they ought to have any hope. Somehow they can't seem to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Unfortunately, for many of these people, colonialism over many centuries, I guess, never taught the native people. They didn't educate them or teach them to look after themselves in the sense that we have learned to do. Consequently, they still look to outsiders to help them. There are increasing numbers of the young people particularly who are being educated in oftentimes missionary schools. The government may help to pay the teachers, etc. but more and more people are being educated now and at least from my standpoint, the fact that the church has been responsible for much of this education gives them a love for the church and what it stands for. People who are in control of government and in responsible positions have more and more been educated in Christian Schools. Although the Muslims, who for example in Sierre Leone make up 40% of the people and less than 10% are Christian, have adopted many of the practices of the Christian people. They have elementary and secondary schools now and they have an evangelistic effort.
- Q. This is a very practical kind of missionary work, isn't it?
- A. I think so. Since I'm an engineer and know something about wells and water and that sort of thing, it seems a natural thing for me. I suppose some people would say it's a "call." It's a natural thing for

me to go and be of some help in that area. As someone said over there, one of the missionary women said, "We don't come over here to convert people. We come over to witness and God and the Holy Spirit do the conversion. We don't convert people. We witness and they are converted by God.

Q. We mentioned UMCOR. Perhaps we could say a little more about that association?

A. UMCOR - the United Methodist Committee on Relief is a division of our Board of Global Ministries. Its main emphasis is to help people in this country and throughout the world who have real problems such as disasters and very critical times. If there is an earthquake or a famine or a flood or that sort of thing in various parts of the world, through the money UMCOR raises across our denomination and through their expertise that various people associated with UMCOR have, UMCOR will help those people. Mexico City had that very bad earthquake two or three years ago. They were there. When there are floods in this country or throughout the world, they help. The famines we hear about in Ethiopia and the Sudan, they have been in the forefront of that. They send blankets and they send food and people to help - doctors and nurses. Our whole denomination in this country - of which there are probably 38,000 churches - by giving to the Board of Global Ministries to UMCOR help fund this kind of activity. So each of us can be a missionary in that sense. Goodness knows it's a helpful thing. When we give to UMCOR, we have always been told that 100% of the dollars we give to the Advance, for hunger or a disaster such as a flood or earthquake. 100% of those dollars go to the project. All of the administrative cost are taken care of in other ways.

Q. We have often heard that governments over there may misappropriate other funds. Is that a fact?

A. I'm sure it is a fact, particularly when we have money or supplies given from government to government. As we give through the church, we then work through the church in these countries. That's another thing - if we have to pay for the volunteer work in this country and other there, we couldn't afford to do it.

Q. Your work is volunteer?

A. Yes, it's volunteer work. It's part of the way I pay for the space I take up on earth. I guess that's how we do it.

Q. You certainly are doing your share! But how can other members of the public help Africa?

A. An increasing number of people go over on work teams now. While I was in Sierra Leone this past winter we had work teams from Pennsylvania, from Indiana, and from Kentucky and Tennessee. Some of them come over to help in building latrines and dormitories and that sort of thing. The group from Indiana - both conferences of our church in Indiana - have committed themselves for a number of years now to a program they call "Operation Classroom." What they do is to supply books, tablets, pencils, and rulers and that sort of thing to a number of schools in



both Sierre Leone and Liberia, and then they are going over there to - in some cases help repair or in other cases to build schools - or places for some of the teachers of the schools to live in. The repair work that needs to be done in some of these schools is just unimaginable. They need black-boards and all of the things that make a school go. The Indiana people are also giving money to a fund over there - a revolving fund - so that the teachers can be paid.

Q. Do you mean the native teachers?

A. Yes, the native teachers. They may be two or three months behind in receiving pay. The pay doesn't amount to hardly anything, but it's all they have. It may amount to thirty or thirty-five dollars a month, but when they haven't had it for two or three months in a row, they are almost destitute as to how to get along. The Indiana people have made a contribution in Sierra Leone to a revolving fund. The government may be delaying their payment. They use this revolving fund to pay the teachers. Then they replace it when the government finally has enough money to pay them. It's just amazing how those people get along when the haven't had any income for a period of time.

Q. Well, Dick, we know you have served other organizations in the community. In 1987, for example, you were named "Rotarian of the Year." What other groups have you served?

A. Well, I have been involved in several groups, I guess. I was on the board of Webster-Cantrell Hall, which originally was a place for boys and girls who were orphaned. Now some unwanted children or children who have been in trouble with the law may be in this home if their parents don't want them or are non-existent. They look after them. I have also been involved what is called "Day probation" for high school aged students who were in trouble with the law maybe for the first time and needed to have training other than going to our public schools. I've been involved, of course, with Rotary. I've been in several projects there. At the present time the Rotary Clubs across the world are trying to stamp out polio. It is pretty well non-existent in our country now, but in other countries it is still prevalent. Our goal is to give the vaccine to every baby across the world and to accomplish that in the next few years. I guess I've been involved in YMCA work. I keep out of mischief.

Q. And very helpful! What are your plans for the future?

A. I'll keep involved as long as my health is good, I guess. When I go to these other countries, like Africa, you have to be invited. You don't just pick up and go. I plan to continue to be a consultant to UMCOR. When they need me and when my so-called expertise would be helpful I may go back to Africa or I may go someplace else. As I say, I'll keep going as long as my health lets me.

Q. That certainly is great! We join the Sertoma Clubs in celebrating your work, Dick, and we feel that you really have made a great contribution. Thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us.

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library and the First United Methodist Church of Decatur.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. Richard E. Reeves.

A. Thank you very much.