

Siburt, James

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. James Siburt Interview

January 31, 1984

This is a recording of the reminiscences and experiences of Mr. James Siburt. The narrator is Mr. Siburt, and the interviewer is Betty Turnell. This recording is being made at the request of the Decatur Public Library, of Decatur, Illinois, in the Board Room of the Library on January 31, 1984.

Q. Mr. Siburt, I believe you've lived in Decatur a long time. Were you born here?

A. No, I wasn't. I was born in Champaign, Illinois.

Q. Why don't you tell us about your early life?

A. I was born in Champaign, Illinois. I lived my first 24 or 25 years on a farm. In 1927 we moved to Decatur and have lived here ever since. There was a time during the Depression when we moved out of town for a couple of years, but other than that, we have lived in Decatur since 1927.

Q. Were you born on a farm?

A. No, I was born in Champaign, but my folks moved to a farm shortly after I was born. I was born of poor parents, farm workers, good Christian people. My early life was pretty hard because life was hard on the farm in those days.

Q. Where was this farm?

A. Around Mahomet, Illinois. We moved around from one place to another. My Dad would keep a job for four years, and then he'd want to change.

Q. Did you have brothers and sisters?

A. Yes. I'm the oldest of six children. Four of us are still living.

Q. Did you all have chores you had to do?

A. Oh, yes. We had our jobs to do as far back as I can remember. Wood had to be carried in because there was no running water and no electricity.

As I said, life was pretty hard. We got up at four o'clock in the morning. Most of us were still working at 7:30 or 8 o'clock at night.

Q. Did you have animals you had to take care of?

A. Oh, yes. Farming then was all done with horse-drawn implements. People were beginning to experiment with tractors. They were used for plowing some, but it wasn't until after World War II that modern machinery became popular as it is today.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. In one-room schools and on the farm.

Q. Can you tell us something about one-room schools? How did they work?

A. Well, she taught from the first grade through the eighth. I don't know how she got the job done, but in some way she did. We had our reading, writing, and arithmetic, history and spelling, and that was it. I went through all the eight grades in one-room schoolhouses. I went to high school in Champaign, for three semesters and then dropped out.

Q. The teacher probably didn't have children in all grades?

A. Sometimes, no - but most of the time the children ranged from 6 to 14 or 15 years of age.

Q. Did she hear one class recite while the others were studying?

A. Yes - that's right. That's the way it was done.

Q. What did you do at recess time?

A. Oh, we just played regular games like kids do. And we had only about a 15 minute recess it seems to me. Then at noon we had an hour for lunch.

Q. Did you take your lunch?

A. Yes - I can't remember not taking my lunch. Most of the time we were a mile from school. We walked. I don't remember ever my parents taking me.

Q. Did the teacher have to build a fire? I suppose there were stoves.

A. Yes. There was a large coal burning stove in one corner of the room. I remember that when I was about 12, 13, or 14 years old, the teacher paid me 10¢ a week to take care of the furnace.

Q. Do you feel that was a good education?

A. I think it was as good as the kids get now. Of course, we didn't have all the technology they have to study now. We didn't know about computers or things like that. Life was much easier in that way.

Q. But she did teach the basics. Did you have any social life at the school?

A. Yes. I can remember we had suppers. What do you call them?

Q. Box suppers?

A. Yes. The girls would fix up a lunch, in a decorated box, and the boys would buy the supper. Sometimes a girl would tell a boy how a particular box was decorated so he would be sure to get her box.

Q. Then the boy would eat with the girl whose box he had bought?

A. That's right. We had some fun. Life was hard, but we didn't know anything else. We were happy.

Q. When you went to Champaign High School, did you feel you could compete with children from the city schools?

A. No problem, as I can remember. We weren't cheated too much in our education in the country.

Q. Now you are going to move to Decatur. That was in 1925?

A. 1927 - in the fall. In 1925 I had left working on the farm and was working for a contractor in Mahomet, Illinois. The contractor was from Decatur. In 1927 he wrote me a letter and wanted me to come to Decatur to work

for him. So that's how I came to be in Decatur.

Q. What was Decatur like then?

A. I can remember the street cars, of course. We lived out just at the city limits, about half a mile west.

Q. Did your family move here?

A. Yes - my wife and at that time I had three children. We moved just west of the city limits. The street car came almost to the city limits - within a block. The city limits then were at Linden Avenue on West Main. We went about a block beyond that. The street cars came out and if you didn't have a car, it was easy to ride all over town for a nickel, as I remember. Transportation was good.

Q. Then you had this job with the construction man?

A. Yes - and I kept that until the depression hit. Then I was laid off.

Q. Tell us about the depression.

A. I was laid off, I believe, in 1930. It was in the fall. The farming was all done by hand. I was an experienced farmer so I just moved the family out in the country. I had a job shucking corn. We shucked corn by hand - picked it off one ear at a time and threw it in the wagon. We got maybe 2 or 3¢ a bushel. If you were good enough, you could shuck a hundred bushels a day - or a hundred twenty-five. In those days you could make \$2 or \$3 a day, which wasn't too bad.

Q. Prices were lower then?

A. Yes - as the depression deepened, prices kept getting lower. You could get a loaf of bread for a nickel - if you had a nickel. Some of us didn't, but the Lord was able to provide our needs. We never were without something to eat and a comfortable place to stay during the depression.

Q. Living on a farm, you probably had a garden?

A. Yes - we had a garden, and my wife canned everything she could for the winter, and I had money enough saved to buy a cow. We had our own cow and our vegetables. We got by.

Q. Eventually, the depression ended.

A. Yes - a little story about that. I went to church in Latham, Illinois - the Baptist church there. Times were hard, and the people came out from the church, several of them, and we had a little prayer meeting so that I could find a job. I got a job on the WPA and they put me to work in a ditch. I worked in that ditch a day and a half. At noon at twelve o'clock, my brother-in-law came up to the bank of the ditch and wanted to know if I wanted a job in Decatur. I went to Decatur with him, and I got the job. I never was out of a job from then on. I worked with these people two or three years, and then I got a job with the Express Company.

Q. So the Railway Express was your main work until you retired?

A. That's right. It seems to me that I began to work for them along about '33, part time. But in 1935 I was awarded a full-time job. So it was 33 years that I worked for them full time.

Q. Is that company still operating today?

A. No, they are not. I believe their last day of operation was December 1, 1975. They took bankruptcy. I had two boys working for them. The younger boy stayed with them till the last, but the older boy got a job with the post office in Kokomo, Indiana. He was fortunate to continue his employment.

Q. Maybe we need to tell what it was and what it did - what your job was?

A/ The Express Company? It was various jobs. We were privileged to bid on jobs.

When I first went to work for them, it was a 24 hour operation 7 days a week. When I started, I worked 8 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Q. You said "jobs" - what exactly was their work?

A. In the first place, we worked a lot of trains. People don't realize the number of passenger trains that went through Decatur in those day. Before I went to work for them, they had begun to eliminate some of the trains, but there was a time when over 50 passenger trains went through Decatur every 24 hours. People can't imagine that, see? We also had a terminal, of course - the terminal railroad - the electric line. During the day they ran a car every hour.

Q. They sometimes called that the "interurban"?

A. The interurban, that's right. We had service on it. We had service on all the railroads.

Q. Now, the basic job - the purpose of the business - was to carry freight?

A. Yes, that's right. It was an old company - I think about 150 years old when it finally was dissolved.

Q. They carried all kinds of freight from small packages to very large ones?

A. They would give you a price on anything - almost anything from small packages to all kinds of live animals people wanted to ship. I remember one night working as foreman, and I got a telephone call from Taylorville. They wanted me to be prepared to water a hippopotamus. I didn't know how much it would take to water a hippopotamus, but I got a hose out there and got ready. They would haul anything.

Q. Was it a circus?

A. I think it was going to a zoo somewhere.

Q. I'm sure you had other experiences?

- A. Oh, yes. Most of the time it was just driving a truck on the city streets. We had routes set up in a certain part of town.
- Q. Would you pick up packages?
- A. Yes. People would call it. They would have a package, a box, or a trunk to ship someplace. We picked it up, took it down to the depot, billed it out, and sent it on to its destination.
- Q. Did the Railway Express men ride the trains?
- A. Yes, I had that job too, part of the time, I worked the Banner Blue, between Chicago and St. Louis. I would have to "deadhead" to St. Louis to start my route -
- Q. Now that means - ?
- A. It means taking a passenger train going down prior to my time reporting for duty. Then I would go to Chicago, stay all night, and the next day come back on number 10 or number 11, going to St. Louis. Then I'd have to go back home, and I'd be home two days.
- Q. Was your job to guard the packages?
- A. That was part of it. We had to be armed. We had to carry a gun, and of course a lot of paper work had to be done. They would throw the freight in a big pile and we had to sort it out to put it in piles so it could be distributed.
- Q. You rode the freight trains?
- A. No, they were passenger trains.
- Q. But where did you have these packages?
- A. Oh, we had a special car on the train. Sometimes there would be three or four cars. Then you'd have to have a helper, of course, to take care of all those cars.

Q. So you were busy checking and making sure that everything was ready?

A. Yes - sorting and making ready that what went off in Taylorville, or Monticello, or Chicago - We sorted it all, if it would go south or north.

Q. Then you would throw the packages off at these places? When the train stopped?

A. That's right. Coming out of Chicago those stations are real close together. I don't remember them now, but there is Oak Lawn and those suburbs of Chicago. They all had papers, and the trains didn't stop there. So you had to have this bundle of papers in the door. At a certain spot you had to throw that package out as you went 60 miles an hour through town. You were pretty busy until you got out to about 170th Street or about there.

Q. You said you had to carry guns. Did you ever have any need for them?

A. No, I never did. I never had that experience.

Q. There wasn't a big problem then with theft?

A. No, not a whole lot. I guess there was in the early days, but I don't remember that our men had any experience with it - robberies or things like that.

Q. Did you change from this traveling job to an office job?

A. Yes - I worked around in the little towns as their agent - the manager - in Pana, Taylorville, and Tuscola. I was the agent over there for a while. When I retired, I was chief clerk in Decatur.

Q. Why do you think the business folded?

A. The elimination of passenger trains I think had more to do with it than anything else. As they eliminated trains, they had to buy trucks and go over the road to transport their stuff, and it was terribly expensive. Then they had some competition with United Parcel. They were building up pretty fast.

- Q. That's similar, isn't it?
- A. Yes, it's similar, but they don't have the service we had. We would pick something up, and it didn't make any difference if it was prepaid or collect. We'd pick it up and collect on the other end when we delivered it. United Parcel doesn't do that. Everything has to be pre-paid. I believe the packages can be picked up only at businesses. You have to have so much business to guarantee they'll make pick-ups. We would go out and pick up a 5 pound package if they wanted it.
- Q. They ship by truck, don't they? or air?
- A. The United Parcel?
- Q. They don't use trains, do they?
- A. No. In the 40's, we went Air Express, too. We had business on the air lines and business overseas. We were world-wide. It wasn't just the United States. We had offices in every free country in the world.
- Q. It was just a change in the times?
- A. That's right.
- Q. How do you feel about retirement?
- A. I got pretty jittery the first few months - not going to work. But I've been retired now over 15 years so I've pretty well settled down.
- Q. What do you do?
- A. In the summertime I garden and take care of the flowers in the yard - that's about all. In the winter time - I might go back a little bit. I have six children. They were all born at home. When Margie was born - that's the girl who works in the library office, you know? - That's when we were out on the farm during the depression. We lived out about three or four miles from town. My wife woke up at four o'clock in the morning and said I'd better

get a doctor. We didn't have a telephone but I went to my neighbor's and called the doctor and called my mother, who lived seven miles away. It was in January - the 21st of January. We had had a January thaw, and the doctor got stuck. The baby was born, and I delivered the baby. He didn't get there until about an hour and a half or two hours after the baby was born. But she seemed to be getting along just as well as she could.

Q. So you did all right?

A. I guess so ... Then in 1951 or 52 my wife had cancer and died, the first of August in 1952. The kids were all married by then except Margie. In 1953 I re-married, and my second wife and I have had thirty years together.

Q. Very nice!

A. Yes - I feel that the Lord has been good to me. My wife is in very poor health, but my health has been pretty good.

Q. What do you think of Decatur as a city?

A. I love Decatur. I've lived here long enough that I think it's a great city.

Q. I suppose you have grandchildren?

A. 27 of them. I had 28, but one of them was killed in a trucking accident in '79. I guess I have about that many great-grandchildren. And we're expecting a great-great-grandchild in May.

Q. Do you think these children and grand-children and great-grandchildren are going to have a good life here?

A. I hope so. I'm concerned about the nuclear bomb situation - very much. I think it could happen.

Q. But you yourself have lived through many perilous times, haven't you? And things have come out.

A. That's right. It seems to me - in my early days (I was born in 1903 and the Wright brothers got their plane off the ground just one week before I was born). I have lived through all the advancements in air travel and the automobile (I was 6 years old before I rode in my first automobile) and I remember that hearing an automobile coming was very unusual. Kids would run for the road to see it go by). Radio - I remember the first radio I heard was in Springfield, Illinois. The folks had sent me over there with some stock to show and at the Farm Bureau tent I heard a radio. I went home and told my dad I heard this radio from Chicago. He didn't believe it. He said there was a wire somewhere. He wouldn't accept it.

It seems to me in those early days, we had it hard - we got up early and we worked late. The women had it harder than the men. I know my mother and my first wife in the first years we were married had to cook over a wood or coal stove. There was no electricity, no refrigeration, no air conditioning. They had to carry water in to wash and carry it out after they got through the washing. I don't know how they did it. I still sometimes feel guilty about the way the women had to work in those days.

Q. But they didn't know anything different, did they?

A. No. they didn't know anything different, but I think they got old pretty young.

Q. So you do think people have a better life today?

A. Oh, I certainly do! We have things so much easier - and I'm afraid we take it too much for granted.

Q. Well, Mr. Siburt, you really have had a very full, a very exciting, and very satisfying life.

A. That's right. I was 80 years old the day before Christmas.

Q. Well, it's been very good to talk to you, and we thank you for sharing your reminiscences with us.

A. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

You have been listening to the recording of the experiences of Mr. James Siburt. This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library.

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