

Slider, R. Lee

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. R. Lee Slider Interview

January, 1984

Side A. This is a recording of the experiences and reminiscences of Mr. R. Lee Slider. The narrator is Mr. Slider, and the interviewer is Betty Turnell. The recording is being made at the request of the Decatur Public Library in Decatur, Illinois, and we are recording on January 20, 1984, at the Rock Springs Center for Environmental Discovery.

Question: Mr. Slider, you are an interpretive naturalist for the Macon County Conservation District. Exactly what does an interpretive naturalist do?

Answer: Well, that's an interesting title. What we do - there are six of us who are interpretive naturalists here. We try to interpret the environment of Rock Springs or Macon County Conservation District properties or the area in which we live geologically, biologically, culturally for our visitors, who may be school children or interested adults. It's like a guide, but we have to do a tremendous amount of research, and then be able to take that information, regurgitate it and put it in a language that everybody can understand. My job is just a little different from those of the others since their backgrounds are mostly in the sciences dealing with biology, forestry, and what have you. I'm really more of a cultural interpreter, but there is no slot for that so my job is to take the information about people who have lived here or in Macon County or in this particular area and interpret their feelings and moods and how they participated within their environment, what they did to change it, and how much their environment influenced them. It's all part of the story.

Question: That really sounds fascinating, and I know we want to know more about all of that, but before we come back to that, why don't we hear something about your childhood and early life? I believe you grew up in this area. In Decatur itself?

Answer: Yes. I was born and raised here in Macon County and Decatur. I spent four years in the Navy and went off to see the world, came back, and went to Millikin University.

Question: What were Decatur and Macon County like when you were growing up?

Answer: When I was a child, it was the tail end of the great depression, and I have visions of what Decatur was like. I can just barely remember street cars, which have been gone a long while. Community transportation in those days was mostly by bus. The transfer house was the focus of the community since most people used the downtown area. Mass transportation was well used.

I remember a lot about World War II, and my father going off to war and coming back unexpectedly. I remember ROTC young men marching in the streets. I remember the war trophies from Rommel's African Corps that were set in the middle of Eldorado Street in front of the armory. All of the kids crawled all over those things. Japanese midget submarines were brought to Decatur and scrap drives - we took part in those when we were kids, and ration cards and ration points.

I remember my father had a 1932 Chevrolet "Coop." When the war broke out, he put it up on blocks because he couldn't get a letter for gasoline. (You had to have A, B, or C cards for the window.) I guess we were pretty poor at that time. He finally sold the car. What upset him most at that time was that it had half a tank of gas in it. That really upset him because he didn't get the money for the gasoline.

After the war, I was in the higher grades - junior high and high school - Decatur High. That school, St. Teresa, and Lake View, which was just built at that time, were the only high schools. I have pretty happy memories of those years.

I see the city in the late 40's and early 50's as bustling and growing, with people trying to put their lives together after the war.

Question: There was a lot of optimism then, wasn't there?

Answer: Oh yes - a lot of new businesses. Later was the time of the "Organization Man", but that was a time of optimism.

Question: You went into the Navy. What time was that, Mr. Slider?

Answer: It was at the tail end of the Korean War. I had just gotten out of high school. I didn't feel I would gain as much in the army. I knew I would have to go one way or the other. I thought the Navy would give a greater opportunity to see things I had never had a chance to see. I said, "I went down to the post office to mail a letter and never came home for four years."

I joined the Navy, went off, and went around the world before I was 21 years old. I visited places and saw a lot of different people and cultures. I think at that time I became aware that there is much more to our world than a teen-ager would normally imagine. I realized that the world is very complex. I had a desire to learn as much as possible. I always had an interest in history. Having a chance to visit Rome and other places of ancient civilization was very educational. I gained a lot that I use even today from those years in the service.

Question: So you came home. How did you eventually get in this field?

Answer:

After I got out of the Navy, I wanted to be in the Park Service. I was in California - San Diego. My wife and I both worked for one of the aircraft companies. We had no intention of coming back here, but the firm where we worked had a lot of government contracts. The overtime was cancelled, and as a result we both lost our jobs.

We decided since there were so many people in southern California that we couldn't find a job there. We came back to Decatur. The night we arrived I was convinced by my father-in-law that I should start at Millikin University. So I did. I had never planned to go to college because we didn't have the money, but now I had the G.I. Bill. That was one of the best things that ever happened to me personally.

I went to Millikin for four years. Then our children came along, and I had to make a living. I went to work for my father-in-law. He was one of the owners of Longbons Roofing and Sheet Metal Company. I worked there for seventeen years. After that I was in the construction business and reached the point of becoming vice-president of the firm, but it wasn't a job I really liked. I thought I was successful at it, but it just didn't satisfy me.

In the meantime I kept my hand in history because while I was in college I did change my major to history and political science with a minor in industry. I still felt I had something to offer and I got together with some other people in the community, and we started the Macon County Historical Society. I think it was back in '59 - along in there. It had been dormant for years. I belong to another organization that's still around, called the Civil War Roundtable.

About that time, when I was active in the historical society, we found that most of the history of Macon County seemed to start with the time that the settlers came here in the 1820's. Yet people kept talking about Indians. The books that were printed then said there were never any Indians around this part of the country or any history of them. And yet there seems to be so much evidence that there had been. I became very much interested in pursuing that aspect of our unknown history.

I had an opportunity then to work with a rather famous archaeologist, C. G. Holland from the Smithsonian Institute on the now extinct Oakley Reservoir.

We did archaeological surveys on that area that would be flooded. By working with him through the Historical Society, he discovered that there were about 50 to 100 pre-historic Indian sites just in that area alone. From that I began to learn about archaeology and was introduced to the survey of Champaign which was the group within the state of Illinois which represented all of the universities working in the field of archaeology in the state of Illinois. We found in those years that there is a tremendous amount of information literally being dug out of the ground about our pre-historic past but as time went on, we discovered that right here in Macon County we can trace man's activities back to about 12,000 B.C. - much beyond anyone's wildest ideas and that the evidence is just under our feet. Much of it is still there if you just know what to look for and where to look.

Then I trained myself with the help of professional archaeologists by working with others who had been studying this area in regard to the

Oakley Reservoir and then with the State Museum in Springfield. I trained myself to be what I suppose you'd call a "para-archaeologist." I also worked on projects that I felt could be used in the schools in showing what historical sites in our particular area look like today - where these activities referred to in other books actually took place. Where are those places? What do they look like? Is there real evidence they were here? Would not this be a better way of teaching local history than just out of a book that seems to be very dry? So a lot of people have helped me along the way - like Florence White from the Historical Society who used to be principal at Spencer School - a dear lady. She gave me many opportunities to use her school as a testing ground for these presentations that I did. All of these folks in the Historical Society were marvelous. Many of them are gone now. People from the Illinois State Museum, for example - people like Bruce McMillan who is now director of the Illinois State Museum. In those days he was the anthropologist there. He was very helpful.

Others who used to be there were Bob Hall, Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois Chicago Circle Campus and Stuart Struever and others famous in the field of archaeology in the United States were very helpful to me.

Question: You have had a real love of history for a long time. I believe you do impersonations of some of these historical characters. Isn't that right?

Answer: Yes, now, we do. To get into that I'll just back up a little bit.

While I was doing all this work in the early 60's, we were very much concerned in this community about the Oakley Reservoir. It would increase the water supply for Macon County and Decatur, which was still growing

at that time. If this was coming, then a lot of archaeological sites would be destroyed. There would be a lot saved too.

A good friend of mine, Norman Greenberg, who runs Rambo Drug Store now was on the County Board of Supervisors. He was much impressed by other supervisors, like Webber Borchers, for said, "If this reservoir is built, the land around it should be set aside, not like Lake Decatur, which is divided up in individual property areas with houses all about. This should be set aside in a wild state for future generations."

This made a lot of sense. Norm started a movement to form some kind of county park system that would be the recipient of that land. We also took it a bit further and said there were various other places in the county that would not be affected by the reservoir but that also should be saved in the community - for example, the Oglesby mansion and the old Warnick tavern southwest of town and certain vistas and wooded areas that may be destroyed because of the expansion of the community.

So Norman and several others, like O. T. Banton, Gilbert Bond from Blue Mound, and Bob Stroyeck, now gone, and Margaret Bringer, now deceased, and many others got together - really in Norm's basement. We went out to find out how to start a county park system.

We decided that the best thing to use was a new law called "The Illinois Conservation Act." I think it was passed in 1964.

We went out and talked to everyone we could talk to. We got out petitions and got it on the ballot. We spent about \$164.70 in advertising. In 1967 it was on the ballot and it passed in this County 2 to 1. The Macon County Conservation District came into existence.

In the years after that time I acted somewhat as an unofficial advisor. I went to work for the District in 1978. Since my time here I've been able to devote my time fully to historical pursuits, and also to learn about the natural aspect of things from my colleagues. Since that time, as we do research we're still working on some of those ideas we had back in the early 60's - using audio-visual effects, in the schools, trying to get the ideas we're trying to teach across.

As a result, I find myself doing living history - impersonating. We have here at Rock Springs the old Trobaugh log house. We think Joseph Trobaugh was the man who built it. According to the records, he was an actual person. He came here, but he didn't make a big splash. He isn't written up in the history books except just mentioned briefly, like many others. But we have changed him from what he actually was into an Everyman, who lived in Macon County, probably from 1837 to the point where we are impersonating him in 1860. So he fits a person of my age. We dress him up as closely as possible with the clothing of that particular period - the 1860's and assume his life style, what we imagine his dialect or speech pattern would be, his terrible habits he would probably have (to make him human), and he recites or enacts what he has seen of Decatur and Macon County from the time he came here - what he has done and how he is affected by the changes in those particular years of his history. This is not explained well in our written histories because written histories tend to be disconnected. We have to take the schools, the churches, the government, the bar, and we have to look at them in sections. Our way of presentation has an holistic approach, just like a narrative, someone talking today - about what we're doing now, in this

interview - only we're leapfrogging backwards into a period of time that is beyond any living person's range of memory.

Question: I saw you do one of these presentations, and I know that audiences love it. I imagine that children especially enjoy it.

Answer: They get taken aback by it. Melody Arnold, who plays my wife, is a feisty thing. Her name is Nancy Trobaugh, and she keeps Joseph on the mark. We try to make her a woman of that period, subject to the same kind of prejudices, etc. of that time. By the two of them bickering together the presentation is made much more realistic.

Then when we go into our impersonations (after we tell them who we really are), sometimes the children are shocked by our forcing them to think and feel as if they are in another time period. They have become time-travelers. We do not refer to the 20th century at all. While they have the knowledge of their own life styles, we force them to look at a different life style and see maybe how they would react if put into those circumstances. So it has become not only an appeal to the eye with the impression of the costuming, the clothing, but also it affects them audibly since we talk in a different way. They also have a chance to participate in some of our programs out here, which are geared to rural life of the middle 19th century.

Then they learn by doing. So by appealing to all of the sensory organs, it is blocked in their minds, and they are able to realize that there has been a great change in life styles and environmentally. The area around us has changed since that time. This becomes a bench mark for them. Today we are living in a fast-moving society. This society has lost all its bench-marks. The family is threatened. Institutions are threatened. People move around a lot. Those things we used to take for granted aren't always the same.

So we need these bench-marks. We need things to refer back to. Where have we been? How do we know where we're going if we don't know where we've been? So that's the reasoning behind some of this.

Question: Let's talk a little more about the Center. You told us how it came about, which was a marvelous story, and you indicated exactly where it is. What are the services offered, the reasons people come, and maybe something about the people who come?

Answer: Very good! Well, as many people say, we're one of the best-kept secrets in Macon County. We've been in existence since 1967, but I would wager that probably three-quarters of the adult population of Decatur does not realize that we exist - even though we're on the bottom of their tax bill. The district has grown slowly over those years because what they first had to do is to purchase the land - that is, individual farms, wooded areas, wet lands, dry-lands, and what have you and put them together in some kind of contiguous forms. Over those years Rock Springs was put together - now more than 2023 acres, plus or minus. We have Friends Creek Regional Park up near Argenta, and we have the Griswold Conservation area, which includes the one blue mound there at Blue Mound. We have Fort Daniel Regional Park, which is just east of Spitler Woods. We have the Sand Creek Reservation, which lies near Mt. Gilead and borders on the Elwin-Mt. Zion black top.

Most of these areas, other than Griswold, have large forested sections. In the time that these were put together Decatur was undergoing great growth in the suburbs. Decatur was growing, and Mount Zion was growing toward one another. Sand Creek, for example, is now a buffer between them. Rock Springs, on the southwest corner of Decatur

was very much threatened with being developed. But the District's being here stopped the development and set these wild areas aside. As a result, by preserving habitat - the trees, grasses, and allowing the land to grow back with trees - (a good portion of Rock Springs was land fill. They dumped old buildings here, or they first mined gravel here.) But now these scars are healing. Nature has a tendency to heal itself. It provides habitat for animals. After we came into existence, all of a sudden the deer population began increasing in Macon County, as well as other wild animals.

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Cassette Side B:

In the years after the District started putting the land together and the trees grew up, providing the habitat for a lot of different animals that just weren't here before. In fact, it has not been too many years ago that we started having a deer season here in Macon County. That didn't exist for years and years. So I think we have done part of the Act that the Conservation Act provided for by providing for a place for nature to occur. We can't just go on plowing everything up. Granted, a lot of people don't feel that way. They feel that we have taken land off the tax rolls, but most of the land we have is very marginal - not suitable for farming, simply because it was always forested. The soil is too thin. It might grow some crops. It did back in early pioneer times. But now it is eroded and just unsuitable. Oh yes, it would be nice for houses - but then, again,

we still have to have a place for the other visitors here on our planet with us. As a result, we have provided that.

Less than 1% of the total land in Macon County belongs to the Conservation District, and we're letting it grow back. In fact, we're even helping it in some respects. In some of the field systems here we have replanted prairie grass. It will never look like the prairies that were once here - long since destroyed - but it's beginning to give the impression of what it was like here in Macon County. As a result, a lot of the "critters" that lived in the prairie are starting to come back to the prairie.

People! People, of course, are an important asset to this place because now they have an opportunity, every one, to come out here or to any one of our areas, not just to picnic or to take a walk in the woods, but to have a chance to see some of these things.

In the years before the District existed, if people wanted to walk along the river, they had to go onto other people's property. Some people get up-tight about that. A lot of peoples - especially urban dwellers and their children - didn't have an opportunity to see what our environment actually is - not only in the area they are living in, but the environment of the country they are living in. By providing programming by the "natural" staff here, especially for the primary grades, we have been fairly successful, at least in those grades, in getting many, many children out here. Many, especially children from the inner city, come out here very wary because this area is totally foreign to their city environment - the alleys, the streets, the traffic, the muggings and what-have-you that occur. They come out here and surely

expect alligators, bears, tigers, everything. Many want to hold our hands. They are that frightened of the unknown - not to mention that perhaps their parents are, too. But there is nothing to be afraid of.

By their visits here - short as they are - an hour at a time - we are able to interpret to them some aspect of their natural surroundings. They have a chance to see their natural surroundings.

One of the unfortunate things about living in a city is that and tied up in industry and business, crowded neighborhoods and so on, is that we have a tendency as a people to think this is the real world, because this is what we perceive, this is what we see around us, and the real world is that - where you work, where you go to school, where you sleep, where you live, with grocery stores, streets, entertainment. That's the real world.

But it isn't. The real world is how nature controls the world where we live. We can't make the sun come up or we can't make it go down. We can't really affect the rain, much as we like to think we do. Sometimes when the electricity goes off, many people in the community panic. However, a lot of people living among us never had electricity and still don't get excited when it goes off. But we have a lot of people who think the world is coming to an end when the electricity goes off.

We are so dependent on the world we have built around us that we have lost sight of the world that really exists out there. If everything stops, can we survive?

Well, to get them familiar with this world is one of the things we do, but we also provide unorganized recreation for people - so they

can come out and just take a walk, a walk through the woods, a walk through a meadow. They can sit in a meadow. They can sit under a tree, and maybe not see another person. There is something in our bodies that finds that very relaxing, and we find many people come here - business men, for example, doctors, lawyers, what-have-you, just to relax. It's better than "take two aspirins and call me in the morning." It's better than taking a lot of tranquilizers to get away and get back in the real world.

Cross-country skiing is being offered, especially this winter (1983-84) now that we have some snow. That provides people an opportunity to get out and see nature in a season when they normally wouldn't go out because it's too hard to walk in the snow. The skis provide that access to seeing what's going on in a different season. There are those, though, who do walk in the winter and enjoy nature. Deer are much easier to see in the winter than they are in the summer when they're hiding.

So the District and its properties then provide that ability for the people to go out, free of charge, and see nature as it exists in central Illinois.

As the years go by, then the trees will get bigger and more varied. This will eventually turn into an oak-hickory forest and will be much prettier than it is today as it's growing to that point. So the real beauty of the woods of the midwest will become apparent in about fifty to seventy-five years. We probably will never see it, but our children and children's children will, and all of those "critters"

and their progeny will exist for them to enjoy. If we didn't save them now for them and take care of them now, then it won't be here for the future.

Question: You may have covered this somewhat, but let me ask again. Do you see a change in the way people have viewed nature over the years? - Say in the time when you were growing up to now?

Answer: Yes. That is always good for a discussion. When I was growing up in the 50's and 60's, this was a time, as you said, of optimism. This was a time when everybody was doing different things. We were free to do different things and had unlimited resources to do those things and we did them in this country. We built a standard of living unmatched. We were a consuming nation and a throw-away society. These were terms that are very popular. There were warnings that were thrown at us, but we didn't pay any attention to them. The resources we are using are finite. There is a limit to what we can do. But as long as it's cheap and abundant, we don't care. Gas, natural gas, was running out. Gasoline oil was becoming hard to come by, but not in this country. Then the Arabs turned the oil off, and we came to our senses. I should also add that a revolution was going on in agriculture. We were finding that you could put all kinds of chemicals on the farm and increase your yields. We found that we could stop the weeds, and we could also stop the bugs that were chewing up our crops. But we were also paying for it in that a lot of the material, especially nitrates, put on the fields were washing down into Lake Decatur, and we were drinking them, creating a problem for ourselves and our bodies. Every day we find more and more chemicals in our food causing problems in our bodies - cancer is up, heart disease

rates are high, but I think we're coming to our senses now. The environmental movement of the late 60's and early 70's (We preceded the environmental movement here in Macon County, I'm proud to say) but during this time it became apparent that, on a national scale, we were doing a lot of bad things to ourselves. A lot of studies started in the schools. These are resulting in good, hard data that proves that a lot of our fears were correct. We are trying to change our ways. So I feel that now in the universities and schools and especially in what we are trying to teach there is a more tolerant attitude toward nature, that to survive as a people we must come to realize that we share this planet with the trees, the grasses, and the animals. Even though we built a technological society that seems omnipotent, that seems so at our control that we can even control the air around us, that we felt now that we were isolated from nature. That is no more. We are not isolated from nature. We have to be aware that it's an integral part of our very survival and that we have to learn to live with it. We cannot be above nature. We have to live with us. So people are slowly coming around to that realization. Oh, yes, there will be die-hards, those who will not recognize that fact, but we're going to have to, to survive.

Question: Well, that really is a thrilling story. It shows that your efforts are paying off, that you are bringing pleasure to many thousands of people who wouldn't have had the opportunity otherwise.

We certainly appreciate all that you have done and all that you have told us, Mr. Slider. We thank you very much for all your experiences and reminiscences. We want you to know that we appreciate what is being done here at Rock Springs.

Answer: I hope future generations will appreciate it too!

Question: I'm sure they will, and thank you very much.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mr. R. Lee Slider. And this is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library.