Mr. Hugh Baker Interview

June 28, 1985

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Hugh Baker. The narrator is Mr. Baker, and the interviewer is Betty Turnell. This recording is being made at the request of the Decatur Public Library. We are recording at the library on June 28, 1985.

Q. Well, Mr. Baker, I believe you have lived in Decatur all your life, haven't you?

A. I was born and raised in Decatur. I lived in Chatanooga, Tennessee, for 12 years - from 1933 to 1945. I was with the Mueller Company in Chatanooga. Then I was traNSFERRED BACK TO Decatur with the Mueller Company. I'm really a native of Decatur. I was born here and went through the schools here.

Q. Where did your family live?

A. My family moved to Decatur in about 1890 from Iowa - that was my mother and father and two brothers. They moved and located on a farm south of what was then the Sangamon River - long before Lake Decatur was built. Their farm was located in the area which is now that South Town Shopping Center, I believe they call it. The farm included that shopping center and a part of the South Shores subdivision. Specifically, their farm was from the old Franklin Street Road on the east to the railroad on the west - the South Side Drive on the north and what is now Imboden Drive on the south.

Q. That was all country then?

A. Oh yes, that was all farm land. Dad's farmhouse was just about where the True Value Hardware Store is now. Actually, there were two houses - Dad's house and a smaller house for the hired help.

Q. We've had some remarkable changes since your family lived there?

A. Yes - one of the first changes in that general area was associated with the Mueller Company. They had a plan to develop a city - their own Mueller City south of the Sangamon River. They bought up all of the land along the river from what was then called the St. Louis Bridge Road (which is now 48, the road to Taylorville today) on the west, all the way to Sand Creek on the east. They owned all of that land except for two parcels. There was one area of 40 acres that they were never able to buy and another of about two acres they were not able to buy, but Dad's farm became a part of that deal. He sold it to the Mueller Company as a part of the general purchase of that entire area. However, after he sold it, he continued to operate it for several years.

Q. Did the Mueller Company want to set up a town in competition with Decatur?

A. Yes - they had envisioned a separate town something like Kohler, Wisconsin, Hershey, Pennsylvania - Mueller, Illinois - a company town. I've seen the drawings on it. It was all laid out on paper.

Q. What made them give up the plan?

A. I don't know. Of course, they did build one plant in that area. It was Originally the Mueller Pottery Plant. Later it became Plant 3 - It was an ammunitions plant during the war. That was one concrete step of the development.

One deterrent was the change in the way people lived. Automobiles had a lot to do in changing the plans. Public parks had a lot to do with it. The Mueller employees had plenty of opportunities for recreation and for using their own personal time. There ceased to be the close-knit feeling of employees. I think all of that contributed to the decision to abandon Mueller town.

Q. Of course, with the change in transportation, automobiles brought people much closer to Decatur than before.

A. But continuing, - there was all that farm land that Mueller owned. Incidentally, it was a separate corporation that owned the land, not the Mueller Company. I believe the name of it was "The Mueller Land Improvement Trust".

Q. Owned by the Mueller family?

A. Owned by the Mueller family - correct. By the Mueller family, but not by the Mueller Corporation. That's exactly the difference. After my father completely retired from the farm, he was named farm manager for all of that area - for the Mueller Land Improvement Trust.

Q. They may have felt that the land was at least as valuable for farming as it would have been otherwise?

A. I don't know about that. I can't think they ever made much money out of farming it. Much of it was poor land - pasture land, rolling. For example, Dad's farm was a dairy farm. It wasn't a grain farm.

Q. Then it wasn't the rich land we see elsewhere in Macon County?

A. No - it was pasture land. Only a part of it was really good, productive farm land. On that productive part, Dad would grow corn and other grain, but it was primarily or entirely to feed the cattle for his dairy. It wasn't to sell on the open market as grain farmers do now.

Q. That was a fascinating story, and we want to hear more about it, but right now, let's go back to your early childhood - your brothers and sisters.

A. O.K. I think I said that they moved from Iowa - Mother, father, two brothers in 1890. Not too long after that, in 1895 to be exact, my two brothers died. They had diptheria, died two hours apart. They had the

first anti-toxin that was ever given in the state of Illinois. It was of no value because it was given too late.

Q. How old were your brothers?

A. Four and six. An interesting part of the story is that at that time children's funerals all had to have a special children's hearse - of course, horse-drawn and the undertaker had difficulty in finding two children's hearses. They just hadn't had to cope with two funerals for children at the same time. But they finally located a second child's hearse, and the funeral procession, so I'm told created some interest in the town because of seeing two children's hearses in the procession instead of the usual one.

Q. Hearses in that time were quite elaborate, weren't they?

A. I have seen some old ones and the ones I have seen were. Some even had glass on the sides, with curtains drawn. Of course, I didn't see the procession - that was before I was born - but I have seen one or two from that period.

Q. But what a tragic time for your parents! What a trauma they must have gone through! You say they died of diptheria?

A. Yes -

Q. That tells us something of childhood diseases at that time. As you said, they were trying to control diptheria by the vaccine.

Were there other children between these brothers and yourself?

A. I was the next child who came along - way late. In fact, it was 16 years after they died. By that time my parents had left the farm entirely, although they still operated it. They moved to Decatur but still operated the farm with help that lived on the farm.

He would drive out to the farm by horse and buggy each day that the weather would permit. Actually he participated just as a farmer and then would drive back to town in the evening.

Q. Did he ever take you out there?

A. Later on, yes - many times. In fact, in summertime I would spend a week or two weeks there, and in wintertime I would go out and spend a weekend with the family that lived on the farm.

Q. Did you do any chores on the farm?

A. Yes - I did most everything. I milked the cows and helped in the fields some. Farmers then would cut the corn into silage or insilage - cut it up into small pieces and blow it up into a silo. As that was blown into the silo, it had to be tamped down to get the air out of it. Someone inside the silo just kept walking around in circles, and that was one of my jobs - I guess because I had big feet.

Q. Was it dangerous?

A. No, there was no danger involved. It was well ventilated. The corn that was blown in was under control in that it was directed from a pipe. Another man in the silo would direct the pipe to keep it away from the walkers. There were usually two walkers - just walking in the silo.

Q. That is amazing! But you didn't decide to become a farmer?

A. No. Dad got completely out of the dairy business, and I don't know when. I would have to guess. I remember being at the auction when he sold all of the equipment and all of the cows. By that time I had been given two cows. They were sold at the auction.

Q. Was that a sad time for your family?

A. No

Q. You had made up your mind that you had to do it?

A. They were definitely relieved to be completely free.

Q. Was your father of retirement age?

A. Yes, but he didn't retire then. He was in a form of contracting and real estate. He built homes and sold them. He bought homes and rented them and resold them. It started out as a kind of hobby and developed into a fairly decent small business.

Q. I wanted to ask you if you ever had any other brothers and sisters after you were born?

A. No.

Q. So you were really an only child.

A. Yes - I grew up as an only child and arrived late in my parents' life.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. I went to grade school at Mary W. French - I went to junior high at Roosevelt and senior high at Decatur High School

Q. So you came up through the Decatur Public Schools?

A. That's right.

Q. Why don't you tell us now about your own career?

A. After graduating from high school in Decatur, I went to the University of Michigan. I graduated from Michigan in 1933. My official academic degree is in marine engineering and naval architecture. But if you think of the time that I graduated - in 1933 - that was right in the height of the depression, and the shipping industry was doing absolutely nothing. It's kind of interesting to think that in my entire engineering class in Michigan, there was only one person in that class who had a job when we graduated. The rest of us were well-educated unemployed people.

Q. It's rather interesting that you chose marine engineering and architecture - here in the middle west. Did you have a love for water?

A. Yes - I did. It was a very sought-after profession at the time I started. Only two schools in the United States taught marine engineering - Michigan being one of them - so their graduates were much in demand then, but that situation certainly changed during my four years at school.

Q. Lake Decatur had been built by that time - wasn't it built in the 20's? Did that make any difference in your plans?

A. No - but since I didn't get into marine engineering or naval architecture, I was anxious to do anything and would gladly do anything. My first job, I guess, other than odd jobs - was with the Mueller Company in the engineering department in their plant at Chatanooga. They bought the Columbian Iron Works in about November of 1933. I got a job then starting January 1, 1934, at the Chatanooga plant. That was mechanical engineering, which was not too different from marine engineering. That was a good base for mechanical engineering. I was very comfortable in mechanical engineering with the Mueller Company.

Q. How long were you in Chatanooga?

A. 12 years.

Q. Did you enjoy Chatanooga?

A. Very much! I liked Chatanooga very much. I liked the people, the area, the climate. I married in Chatanooga. Our two children were born there. My wife's family still has connections in Chatanooga.

Q. But you decided that your future was really in Decatur?

A. No - the Mueller Company decided that. I was up here on a business trip - I periodically came to Decatur and to the other plants when I was operating

out of Chatanooga. Well, I was in Decatur on one of these trips and Everett Mueller just casually said, "We'd like to have you move to Decatur. When could you do it?" I said, "Well, I don't want to do it, but I can do it most any time. He said, "How about next Monday?" So next Monday I was in the Decatur office instead of Chatanooga. It took quite a while to relocate the family.

Q. How did your wife take that news?

A. I think she had mixed feelings. In the first place, she had never been north in her life except for brief visits. She had never spent any real time in the north. She recognized that she was leaving her family - mother, father, two sisters, all of the friends she had developed, and going into a strange, unknown land climate and people.

Q. And Yankees at that!

A. Yes. But the surprising thing is that she fell in love with Decatur - the minute she hit here. She has liked it right from the start. She fortunately met some awfully nice people, and they developed into good, long-lasting friends. She very quickly assumed the feeling that Decatur was her home.

Q. And the children too?

A. Yes - They were real young.

Q. They really grew up here. Well, Mr. Baker, let's go back to the farm for a moment. You said your father was in the dairy business. There have been many changes in that business, haven't there? Can you tell us about some of them?

A. Yes. Probably the greatest change was from all hand-milking, which it was at the start - all during the time Dad had the dairy - to mechanical milking. But there was also a great change in the distribution of the milk.

Milk at that time was distributed directly from the dairy to the consumer, the customer. Even before cartons or even before bottles, milk was delivered in the bulk, even to consumers. In the delivery wagon, Dad or whoever was delivering milk had small containers, which they would take, usually, to the front porch of the customer. And there would be, usually, a lard can with a coin under it. So the procedure would be to pour a certain quantity of milk into the lard can and pick up the nickel or dime that was there. That's the way all the milk was delivered at that time. The consumer had to furnish his own container.

Q. Was the milk pasteurized?

A. No - this was all raw milk. One of the secrets of trying to keep raw milk free of bacteria was to keep it cold. One of Dad's procedures was to rush milk from the minute it was milked. He had runners that would run it from the dairy barn to his creamery, which was roughly 200 or 300 feet away and get it cooled as quickly as possible. He wouldn't even wait for a large can of milk to be accumulated in the milking barn.

Q. He cooled it by ice?

A. He cooled it by ice.

Q. Where did he get his ice?

A. OK He had a large ice house. Much of the ice the men cut from the Sangamon River when it was available. It wasn't always dependable, but whenever he could, he would get ice from the Sangamon River. It was a big ice house. It had a slope - we would call it a conveyor now - that would take the ice up to the top and shoot it back down when it was used - packed in sawdust. There was a sawdust house right next to the ice house. First of all, as the ice was put in, starting at the bottom, packed with sawdust all

around it and built up layer after layer to the top. We would start using it from the top. As it was used, the sawdust would then be shoveled into the adjacent sawdust house, right next to it, for use again next winter. When that wasn't sufficient, there would be a trip into the old Polar Ice Plant to get a full wagon load of ice. That was a full afternoon's job for someone - to go in to get a wagon load of ice when it was needed.

Q. Going to the delivery of the milk, when the customer provided his own container,that wasn't very sanitary, was it?

A. It was as sanitary as they made it. That was their responsibility - to provide a sanitary receptacle for the milk as it was delivered. Most of Dad's customers were good clean people - but there were opportunities for contamination.

Q. When did pasteurization and the control of delivery come in? Do you know?

A. I don't know about pasteurization. One of the big steps Dad was involved in was delivering milk in bottles instead of in the bulk. Then the delivery wagon would be filled with cases of bottled milk and he would deliver one, two, four, six bottles of milk instead of in the bulk. Then that went through a change because originally each bottle was filled by hand and capped. Dad finally got a bottling machine that filled them by machine.

Q. When the customer got a bottle of milk, what happened to the bottle?

A. He would put his empty bottle out. We would only give the amount of milk equal to the empty bottles they had. If they had three bottles out, they got three bottles of milk.

Q. And according to the money too?

A. By that time most of the milk was handled by tickets. Each customer would buy a sheet or package of tickets. They would leave the tickets.

Q. Did your father have to sterilize the bottles when they were collected?

A. Yes, he had a steam outfit especially for sterilization.

Q. So that took care of that problem. Let's talk a minute about delivery. Did your father have his own delivery men?

A. Oh yes -

Q. The wagons? Can you tell us something about those?

A. I don't know of anything especially interesting. It was just common practice. The delivery wagon would be loaded directly from his own creamery and ready to roll as soon as the delivery man had breakfast. When he was finished with breakfast, the delivery wagon was all hitched up, loaded, and packed with ice, and he was ready to head out.

Q. Let's talk about other products. Did your father make products such as cottage cheese - some people then called that smearcase?

A. The only butter or cheese we made was just for the use of the family. We did furnish cream. Milk and cream -

Q. Did you furnish skimmed milk?

A. I don't remember any skimmed milk being furnished to consumers. The skimmed milk was either fed to the hogs and the pigs - and Dad was not in that business, but he kept some just for his own use - or the skimmed milk at times if there was an over supply was taken in and sold to one of the commercial creameries like Berson.

Q. You didn't sell butter, but you made it for your own use?

A. That's right. We didn't ever sell butter that I can recall.

Q. There are many advantages to living on a farm, aren't there? - fresh butter and your own products.

A. Yes, but at that time it was an awful lot of work - hard work, particularly in dairy farming.

Q. So you can see why your father wasn't too sad about giving up the business?

A. No. He had awfully long hours. Dad had a very large dairy - the largest in central Illinois. He regularly milked about 60 cows. Once he got up to 80 cows, and milking that many cows by hand - takes a lot of hands. And you have to do it within a time period.

Q. About what time did he have to get up? And how long was his day?

A. Oh, I think he got up about 4 o'clock and started milking almost immediately. It seems that they were finished with most of the milking by seven and then again in the evening it started again about 4 o'clock.

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Q. Well, Mr. Baker, during that time I believe World War I broke out, and we were in the throes of the first world war. Your father surely was affected by conditions during that time?

A. Yes. He, of course, was a great supporter of Liberty Bonds and that type of war effort. He was active in those drives. But the major part of his war effort was due to the fact that during that time there was an epidemic in Decatur - not the flu epidemic but sickness in babies and small children. They thought that milk was the cause. The men on what would now be called the City Council pressured Dad to become a city milk inspector and see if he could find cause - if there was one - in the area of milk causing this illness. He resisted it for a while but finally felt that

he had to do it as a part of his effort in World War I. He first of all inspected every dairy that delivered milk in the city of Decatur. And he found some things and helped the farmers' improvement. There was no litigation or anything of that kind. Dad always carried working clothes with him. He would just slip on his working clothes and pitch in and help the dairyman solve the problem, whatever it was. Sometimes it was cooling the milk earlier. Sometimes the dairyman didn't get the milk cooled quickly enough. There were some sanitary conditions that had to be cleaned up. He started there. By that time milk was also being sold through grocery stores. He discovered that some milk was staying too long on the shelves in grovery stores - that is, in the coolers. In some cases it wasn't properly cooled. So he investigated all facets of the production and distribution of milk, and the epidemic cleared up. I don't know if his efforts had a single thing to do with it - it might have been time for it to work itself out, but he spent an awful lot of time at that job - early in the morning and late at night. That led him to build a small laboratory in our home. He would bring in samples of milk and test them in this laboratory. He did that because it took too long to get the results back from a regular laboratory. By that time more problems existed. So this way any samples he took during the day he could process that night and have the answer by the following morning. That continued all through World War I. At the end of World War I he said, "The war is over. Let's call this thing quits." They talked him into staying on as a half-time job. So he spent half time as milk inspector after World War I. Than he went back to his interest of building homes. And he still had the farm - managing his own dairy then.

Q. Well, we've talked about your father. What about your mother? She must have been very, very busy too.

A. Yes. Mother had been a school teacher in Iowa. She didn't ever pursue that career after they moved to Decatur. She was strictly a farm dairyman's wife and did the chores around the farm as women all did in those days. She helped any way she could - cooked the meals and took care of the house.

Q. Would she get up at 4 o'clock when your father did?

A. She had the same hours as Dad.

Q. Did your hired people eat at your house?

A. Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't. I mentioned earlier that Dad had a second house - a tenant's house. Most of the people lived there and they would go back to their own house to eat. At times that family also fed the other hired people. But there were times when some of the hired people ate at Dad's farm house.

Q. Of course, your mother didn't have to fix harvest dinners for a dairy, did she?

A. When they would harvest the corn and fill the silos there would be a big crew. I remember they would have tables outside for that gang. But it was usually just one meal for that extra "floating" help.

Q. But it was a big job for your mother - and the other women. We can look back on those times andthink that life on a farm has become much, much easier. Electricity must have made a big change.

A. A big difference. We had kerosene - lamps and lanterns at first. Dad did put in a carbide lighting system in the house and I believe it was also piped to the creamery. I don't recall that it was actually in the

dairy barns, but I believe it was in the creamery and the house. That was a carbide gas lighting system.

Q. Then he finally got electricity. When was that?

A. I don't remember when that was.

Q. When you look back from that shopping center, it must bring back memories to you.

A. I don't know that I was that close to it - too young when Dad was real active, and I was only partially involved with it - part of the time during the summer, sometimes on weekends, maybe a few days at vacation. Oh, I've spent nights there but I never spent more than a week.

Q. At least we know what tremendous changes have come about.

How long did you work for the Mueller Company?

A. 43 years.

Q. And then you retired. Have you enjoyed your retirement?

A. Very much. When I first retired, I was very busy in civic activities. I was on 9 civic boards. I hadn't done my duty on those boards when I was with Mueller Company. So I decided when I first retired to make up for that and for a few years I was awfully busy.

Q. In what areas?

A. Primarily in health. I was president of the Decatur Mental Health Center. I was on alcoholism committees. I was on the Salvation Army board. I'm still on the Salvation Army board, but I've gotten out of most of the organizations now.

Q. Do you have any hobbies?

A. I expect my biggest hobby is the things around home. I enjoy taking care of the yard, maintenance work for the homse. Probably that's the biggest

hobby. I try to play a little golf.

Q. And your family, of course.

A. Yes.

Q. Mr. Baker, it's been a real pleasure to hear your reminiscences. You have given us a great insight into life that wasn't so long ago but very different. We certainly appreciate it. Thank you very much.

A. I hope I haven't rambled.

Q. Any ramblings have been very enjoyable. So thank you.

A. My pleasure.

Q. You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Hugh Baker. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.