

Donald Muirhead Interview

November 11, 1985

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Donald Muirhead. We are recording in the Board Room at the Decatur Public Library on November 11, 1985.

Q. Well, Mr. Muirhead, I believe you are a farmer - maybe retired now, but you have been, I'm sure. Where is your farm located?

A. I live on the Elwin-Mt. Zion black-top about four miles south of Decatur. I've lived there for 19 years. Prior to that I lived in Long Creek Township. We left because of the expansion of the airport, taking 40 acres of land plus the house we lived in for some 35 years before that.

Q. Was that a bad experience - to have to give up your farm?

A. Well, of course, it wasn't anything surprising. I knew the airport would expand, but of course it is a rather traumatic experience to have to leave a place where your children grew up and you started your married life and your farming. It was difficult.

Q. How long were you in active farming? I believe you are now retired - or semi-retired, aren't you?

A. Yes, I'm retired. I started farming in the spring of 1934 and retired in the spring of 1979.

Q. You grew up on a farm?

A. Yes - I grew up on a farm west of Decatur.

Q. Could you tell us something of your early childhood?

A. I was born on a farm south of Harristown, where my grandfather and my father were born as well. We lived there until 1922,

WHEN MY FATHER BOUGHT A FARM NEAR Blue Mound, and we moved there in 1922. So for some ten years I lived south of Harristown.

I remember quite well, by the way, our coming to Decatur by the interurban out of Harristown. The barn of the interurban was right west of the courthouse - in that immediate block west. It was quite a treat to us to be able to come some 15 miles into Decatur in those days.

Q. That really was an experience for a young boy coming to a city.

A. It surely was.

Q. What was life on a farm like for a child? Did you have a lot of chores?

A. We milked quite a number of cows, of course by hand in those days. It would run about 6 to 10 cows and a lot of horses. You farmed entirely with horses. Then all kinds of garden work and weed cutting and so forth. So even a small boy was kept quite busy keeping the farmstead going.

Q. How many children were in your family?

A. I have two brothers and two sisters.

Q. So you had some help?

A. I had some help. I was the third - two brothers older than I and two sisters younger than I.

Q. I'm sure you had some fun along with the work. What did children do to have fun on a farm?

A. You know, that's an interesting thing because it never was any problem for us to entertain ourselves. It was interesting to me that almost nothing we did cost any money. You hunted, you fished, you played in the barn, you played in the pasture and places like that. While obviously some of the things we might have been better off if we hadn't done them, nevertheless, it was fun and we were able to entertain ourselves quite well.

Q. Did you ride horses?

A. I rode horses almost daily and quite a number of times a day, particularly as a young child.

Q. Where did you get your schooling? In a one-room school?

A. I went to a one-room school through my entire eight years of lower schooling. One of my fondest memories is of a teacher that I had as a six-year old, an eighteen year old girl. Of course, to me she was not young in those days, but now it seems to me that it must have taken a terrible amount of courage to come to a school like that. I've idolized that lady ever since.

Q. She did a good job of teaching?

A. She certainly did.

Q. How did you get to school?

A. We had to walk, of course. Now we were fortunate in that the first school south of Harristown was only a quarter of a mile away. That was the Ben School. At the new farm my father bought at Blue Mound, we walked a little over a mile - about

a mile and a couple of hundred yards. We walked morning and night except on real bad days my father would take us by horse and wagon or buggy.

Q. After you left this school, where did you go to high school? In Decatur?

A. I graduated from high school in Blue Mound.

Q. You feel that your first experiences prepared you for your education later?

A. Much - yes. I was quite impressed with the fact that the older youngsters in a one-room school were primarily responsible to see that the younger children were taken care of. We automatically assumed that responsibility. Not all of us did as we should - nevertheless, it worked pretty well.

Q. So you think there is a lot to be said for that kind of cooperative education?

A. No question about that although of course, I don't know that it would be too practical today. In the days that we're talking about, it's the only way it could operate.

Q. Well, you've been in farming long enough to have seen some tremendous changes. We probably don't have time to go into all the changes that have taken place in farming. You've already mentioned horses being used in the early days. What are the changes that seem most striking to you?

A. I think what has changed most is the cost of operation - probably number 1 - and secondly the speed. I started farming entirely with horses. To give you a brief idea, in those

days, to break ground with an old gang plow, you could plow about five to six acres a day with a team of four to six horses. Now it is not unusual for a tractor to be able to plow fifty acres a day. There might be another illustration in cultivating. We could cultivate with a team and a one-row cultivator about ten acres a day. Now it isn't difficult to cultivate 150.

On the other hand, with the tractor it takes to plow the 50 to 80 acres a day that they really can do, you're talking about a cost of something like 70 to \$100,000. Horses generally cost around \$400, so there's a lot of difference.

Q. Did rural electrification make a big difference in farming?

A. There's no question about that. In the early days when I started farming myself, we did not have electricity. Of course they had it in many areas, but we lived in an inaccessible area at that time. One of the interesting things I had to do in the busy season was to get up about 3 o'clock in the morning to pump water by hand for my livestock before I went to the field. While I'd rather hate to do that now, I didn't think too much about it then. It wasn't too long before I bought a gas engine to operate that pump and then later electricity, but I didn't buy the gas engine when I started farming in 1934. Those my age know that that was the heart of the depression. There was just simply very little money around. If there was any, I didn't have it.

- Q. When did rural electrification become pretty general?
- A. I can't answer that specifically, but I'd say in the late 30's. That was the start of it. Of course it took quite a while to get it in gear. We were in a place where we could not get REA - rural electrification. We were on the Illinois Power system when we did come in.
- Q. After electrification came through, it must have made quite a difference in the life of farm women?
- A. Oh, no question about that - the refrigeration, the ability to do all kinds of things much easier made a great deal of difference in the way they were able to do their work and take care of things.
- Q. Farm life now is really equal to life in the city - or sometimes better?
- A. I cannot envision living anywhere but on a farm. I still live on a farm even though I'm retired. There are many advantages to it. I remember making a statement once in talking about the cultures of the country. Rather with tongue in cheek, I remember saying that if you didn't get up in the morning and watch the dew on the grass and the corn growing in the field, you were culturally deprived - of course, that's obviously a little ridiculous, but to me, it is really a part of my culture to do that. I still get up early, although I don't know particularly why.
- Q. What type of farming do you follow?

- A. When I started, it was all-purpose - hogs, cattle, and, of course, grain. We later came almost entirely to grain farming, and that's a prime interest, although I like to keep up on all phases of farming.
- Q. Have there been changes in the kinds of crops you raise?
- A. Of course, tremendous changes in productivity. The change in the crops? Now, soy beans are relatively new. My father was one of the first two in the county to raise soy beans commercially. Now, they were raised before that for hay, but not commercially. A. E. Staley came out and asked my father if he wouldn't plant - I believe it was 20 acres - in soy-beans for Staley's. Of course, he did and obviously soy beans became quite prominent, both in bushels and source of income for farmers.
- Q. What future do you see for farming in this area? Does the prospect look good?
- A. My belief always has been and still is that in the long term that it's a good life and that a person can make a reasonable living at it. At the present time because of the strength of the dollar, the low exports, and the tremendous production, I think it's bleak probably for the next 4 or 5 years, but in the long term, I think it's what a person ought to do.
- Q. Do you have children?
- A. I have one son and two daughters.
- Q. Have they gone into farming?

- A. My son has taken over the farm when I retired. In fact, I was in partnership with him for 14 years prior to my retirement after he graduated from the University of Illinois. Then after I retired, he took over. My daughters are not directly interested in farming.
- Q. It must be a great satisfaction to think that your grandfather, your father, and now your son have been in this business. It's been a real family tradition.
- A. That's correct. I still enjoy helping my son. I ran the combine quite a little bit this fall and did some other work for him. I don't charge him for it - I do it just because I enjoy doing it.
- Q. Are there two houses on your farm?
- A. No - he bought a farm just prior to my retirement, and he lives about 15 miles northeast of me - up near Cerro Gordo.
- Q. So it's very convenient. Thanks for telling us about that, but we know that farming isn't your only interest. You are interested also in public affairs. What are some of your interests in that field?
- A. Yes, I've always been interested in public affairs. It was almost an insistence of my parents that a person have the responsibility in his community to help in any reasonable way he could and still make his own living. I've operated in pretty much that way. I've been interested in public affairs since the mid 1930's, which is now fifty years.



Probably my two greatest experiences are my service to the Red Cross as a volunteer, which covers 45 years, starting about the mid-thirties, and then my service on the State Board of Education from its inception as a result of the 1970 constitution change (We were appointed in 1974), and I then retired from that after having served as chairman for the last two years in 1981.

- Q. Let's talk about the Red Cross first. What changes have come about in the operation of the Red Cross?
- A. Oh, it's tremendous. During my first experience with the Red Cross, Mary Love was its executive. She's been dead for several years. The office was at the southeast corner of Central Park. We went upstairs. Of course, she did other things beside serve as the executive of the Red Cross. I served in a great many capacities including county chairman, and I was on the Area Advisory Council. There I was one person from Illinois in a 16-state area for that. I've had a great love of the Red Cross and have found those experiences of 45 years I'm sure even more rewarding to me than to the Red Cross for my services.
- Q. Have there been any emergencies that you recall when the Red Cross has been of service in this area?
- A. Yes - the cyclone in Clinton and Wapello is one I remember immediately. Clinton and Wapello - that area - has had tremendous floods up there. Of course, we sent people up there.

Then in the small areas of Macon County we have been fortunate in not having very many serious tornadoes. We've had

some in a minor way, and in each of those we were involved.

My interest primarily was in inspecting several areas in southern Illinois for the Red Cross - where tornadoes were concerned. I remember Murphysboro, Mt. Vernon, DuQuoin, and areas like that.

Q. And what did the Red Cross do when they came in to help?

A. They would send a person in to make an assessment of the damage as far as their area was concerned, which was trying to get people back on their feet again. That person would then make the assessment report to the area office, which was in St. Louis. Then they would send some experts and the type of people who were needed - and, of course, money.

Q. To provide a place for them to live if their homes were destroyed?

A. They would help them get re-situated if their homes were destroyed and give them some small amount of money to help them get back on their feet.

Q. Many people, when they think of the Red Cross, think of the blood bank.

A. That's correct.

Q. When did that start? Do you know?

A. I couldn't give you the year. Louise Mueller and Dr. Herbert Bavor (they are both deceased now, I'm sorry to say because they were both great people) were really responsible. If I were guessing I'd say something like the mid 40's. I might be wrong. Louise Mueller was a tremendous asset in that area and served it for many years.

Q. How does the blood bank work?

A. We're in the Peoria area. They send blood bank personnel in here once a month with a receiving group and generally once a month and I think it still operates that way although I've been off now for about three years. Of course, we take blood out of the county. Now that is relatively new. I don't mean it hasn't been going on for a number of years, but originally it was just a kind of spasmodic thing whereas now its a regular operation. Of course, there are worlds of blood given.

Q. They don't have a problem of getting people to volunteer?

A. I wouldn't say they don't have a problem, but I would say it isn't severe. It's something you have to keep after.

Q. So you think anything that people can contribute to the Red Cross is money well spent?

A. I certainly do. I don't think there is any agency, as far as I'm concerned, that gives as near the dollar received out to where it should go as the Red Cross.

Q. I believe you also said you were interested in the field of education - the administration and so on.

A. Yes - my first interest in education obviously besides being a student and later a parent was to serve on a non-high school board. That was in the mid-30's - I believe 1937 if I'm not wrong. Our meetings were in the old court house. Cora B. Ryman was the superintendent of schools in those days. Now that position is called "regional superintendent," and she was our secretary by law. We served those areas of the county

that did not have schools within the non-high school district.

Q. You mean they didn't have high schools? They had elementary schools?

A. Yes, they had elementary schools, but they didn't have high schools. It was primarily an area surrounding Decatur that other areas hadn't taken in. Of course, that was disbanded when the reorganization took place in the late 40's.

Q. So you arranged for the schools that didn't have high schools to have access?

A. They could go to any school they chose and we paid a pro rata cost for that child's education to that school district. Of course, we had taxing power the same as the school district did. We made an estimate of the number of students and an estimate of the pro rata cost and of course that's what we levied the tax on.

Q. Did the family have to take care of the transportation?

A. Yes - there was no transportation at all in the time I'm talking about, except provided by families.

Q. They didn't have school buses?

A. No, they did not.

Q. How did that change?

A. When the reorganization took place, then school buses came on board and transported outside of a mile and a half. They still do that, by the way.

Q. Were there any other issues other than providing high schools? What were some of the big issues when you were on the board?

- A. Our problem in the non-high school board was to be sure the pro rata cost was correct. I don't mean to imply that a school district would be dishonest, but sometimes they would misunderstand what they were supposed to charge for and what they weren't. But we paid the pro rata cost wherever it was actually correct.
- Q. You oversaw the way it was done so you could verify it?
- A. We were the first non-high school board that brought in auditors to check each of the school districts before they submitted their bill - either before or after whichever they were able to do.
- Q. Did the system work?
- A. Yes, it did. I think it was about the only system you could have at the time we're talking about.
- Q. Were there other issues you were faced with other than the cost?
- A. No - because they had a total choice of where they went. There were no other issues .
- Q. Your area of responsibility was just the non-high?
- A. Just the non-high area.
- Q. Do you keep up on the issues in education today?
- A. Yes, I do. I still as a matter of fact get the packet from the State Board of Education prior to their meetings, which is twice a month, and keep abreast of what they're doing and trying to do and find it most interesting.
- Q. It seems just from an on-looker's viewpoint that one solution to the high school problem was to have schools that were fairly consolidated closer to the students. Is that right?

- A. Yes - except in a sparse area - obviously there would be no problem in Decatur, but still even today there are many areas with too few students. However, the problem is that the distances the children have to be transported are tremendous. It's pretty difficult. There are quite a few students in the state of Illinois now who are on the bus two hours a day. If you increased that - as a matter of fact, I think two hours is too long. That's a problem you get into with consolidation, for which, by the way, there is quite a movement these days on the part of the state board - to get more consolidation. Some of it will work - some of it won't.
- Q. The criterion seems to be, from the viewpoint of the people fighting for a change, the number of pupils who should be in a high school. They don't like to have fewer than 500 or so?
- A. I think that's correct. What they are saying is that each school district totally - and that of course includes elementary as well as high school should be from 1000 to 1500. There are some areas where that simply won't work.
- Q. You think another and even more important criterion is the length of time a child has to spend on a bus?
- A. I certainly don't think you can minimize it. When you have a child, particularly a small child of 8 or 9 years old to be on a bus two hours a day - day after day - school day after school day - it's a traumatic experience for them, and I don't think it's productive at all.
- Q. It might be a little traumatic for the bus driver too!

A. I would suspect so.

Q. Then there will have to be some adjustment between the goals of the people who want bigger schools and the people who are sending the children.

A. That's the way the political system works, and in the area of the political system there will have to be some kind of compromise.

Q. Were you interested in any other area of public affairs or politics besides the ones we've mentioned?

A. Yes. I was a member of the Macon County Board of Supervisors from 1941 to 1957. I've been interested in the Democratic party a good share of my life. My interest has flagged in the last few years simply I suppose because of age. So I haven't been very close to it for several years.

I've served in a number of other capacities. I was at one time chairman of the Illinois Association of County Officials. In 1952 I was chairman of the "Farmers for Stevenson" organization in Illinois. That was, of course, Adlai - although he was "Adlai Junior", he was senior to me because we have Adlai Junior now, as far as I'm concerned.

Q. So you have been involved in politics to a degree. What were some of the duties of the County Board that you mentioned.

A. Now, I was a supervisor in the days we're talking about. That's a little different than they operate now. The supervisor had the responsibility within his township or her township and the County Board. In one sense you're a member of the County Board

and in a completely different operation you're a supervisor of the township. You administered relief, kept the records, were a treasurer, etc. within the township.

- Q. You have been very active in public affairs all your life, and yet it does seem as if sometimes the public doesn't take quite the interest and responsibility it should. For example, the recent school board election shows that people are a little bit lackadaisical it seems to me. What do you feel is the situation?
- A. I think the more complicated that society gets - and of course it is getting more complicated because there are more people - the responsibility increases for the individual to take a serious interest in public affairs. Now, it doesn't have to be political. It can be in any area of volunteer work or even in your immediate neighborhood of helping your neighbor. But it is absolutely essential that we realize that we cannot live by ourselves any more. Now it was fairly common if we go back 150 years for someone to live out in the middle of the woods with almost no contact with his fellow man. They produced their own food, they could get their own meat. They even educated their own children. But that simply won't function like that today. Therefore we have to take an interest. I think every person, every adult has some ability that would be helpful to some area of public affairs. It is disturbing that the school election did not draw out more voters. I can't help but wonder what would happen if all of a sudden we were told that we can't vote any more, that some one else is going to do it for us. We'd get all upset. But



there is reason to feel that/<sup>a</sup>world of people aren't as interested as they should be.

- Q. We would hope that it wouldn't have to be a big issue coming along to arouse the public, that they would take an interest in the day to day operation as well as the solution of big problems that come along?
- A. Yes, I think that's correct, and it's interesting, I think, by the way, that the low vote in the Decatur school elections and in the other elections as well indicates that things are going rather well. If there were a big fracas over something, then there would be a big vote. Nevertheless, that's not a very good reason not to vote - just because there is no serious issue in the mind of the individual.
- Q. Isn't that reacting to panic rather than reason?
- A. That's correct.
- Q. We think that is a good note on which to end, and we hope that your experiences might be a help and a model for people who are coming along - those who want to see the country operating on a good level. We thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us. We appreciate that very much, Mr. Muirhead.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Donald Muirhead. This is Betty Turnell.