

Dr. W. D. Hatfield

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Dr. W. D. Hatfield Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Dr. W. D. Hatfield, generally called "Hap" by his friends. I thought that was a shortening of "Hatfield," but he tells me that it's a shortening of "Happy Houligan," a term that one of his grade school little friends gave him when they were children. So he is now known as "Hap" by his friends.

Q. Well, Dr. Hatfield, how long have you lived in Decatur?

A. We came to Decatur on January 1, 1924. Retired in, I think, about June, 1958. Should have retired in '57, but I stayed on an extra year.

Q. They wouldn't let you go! 1924 you came here - where did you come from?

A. Highland Park, Michigan. It's surrounded by Detroit. It's one of these suburbs that have never gone into the city. I went there as superintendent of the new water filtration plant. They had their own water. They didn't buy their water from Detroit. They had their own filtration. It was a new plant and I went there as superintendent from where I was teaching at Montana State College at Bozeman, Montana.

Q. You really made quite a long move then.

A. Yes - I taught physical chemistry and organic chemistry out there. That was the first position I had when I got out of the first world war.

Q. Now, we're tracing your career in reverse. We've gone backwards now in time through your first position and your teaching career in Montana - to the first world war, you said? What did you do in the war?

A. I didn't get in until it was almost over. I went to college in my home town of Jacksonville Illinois college. I graduated in 1914, with a B.S. degree in chemistry. Also, I graduated the year before, when I was a junior in college, in piano at the conservatory of music there. I didn't know if I wanted to be a musician or a chemist. "I'll just leave it to fate," I thought. "Whoever gives me the best assistantship or further study, I'll take." It so happened that I went to the university with the Illinois

State water supply. I was over there for four years and graduated. I got my doctor's degree in 1918. So that is the education I received.

Q. So you were in the war only a short time?

A. Yes. I was commissioned a lieutenant in the sanitary corps about in July, 1918, and went to officers' training. I got out of officers' training some time in October, got orders for overseas duty and went to Allentown, Pennsylvania. When I arrived in Allentown, it was the day of the premature celebration of the Armistice.

Q. So you got in just for the shouting!

A. They didn't know what to do with ten or fifteen of us sanitary engineers so they sent us all around the various airfields to take care of the sewage treatment plants that had been built. I was sent to Post Field, Oklahoma, which was the air field that operated in connection with Ft. Sill, a large artillery field. It was a very interesting place. I was there about two months when the man who was the chief engineer for the artillery post went to Washington, and I was moved over from the airfield to take charge of the water and sewage from both the field and Ft. Sill. They were building a new water works there, that came from Lake Watonka. I was held over in the service until September to put that plant into operation.

Q. You were really fortunate to have your service in the army coincide with your work.

A. Yes. When I got out of the Army, the only job that opened up at that time was teaching out at Montana State. I never thought I wanted to teach, but that's the way it went. When I was at Fort Sill, we were married and Clarinda and I enjoyed six or eight months of army life in a regular army post - rather unusual. Then we were in Bozeman for a year and I had this chance to get out of teaching into what I call practical work. We went to

Highland Park, Michigan, and were there for three years and then came to Decatur as superintendent of the new sewage treatment plant for the filter at Decatur, and so I've been here since 1924.

Q. Was this a going concern when you came or did you have to start it?

A. I had to start it. I'll have to give you the history of the sanitary district.

Q. Was that the time of building of Lake Decatur?

A. No, Lake Decatur was built about two years before we came.

Q. Is it a part of the system?

A. No, the sanitary district has nothing to do with Lake Decatur. The city built the lake. The sewage in Decatur was unusually strong because of the new plant that Mr. Staley had built. It was grinding 10,000 bushels of corn a day out there, and the waste had polluted the river downstream for a good many miles. Farmers claimed some of their cattle had died from drinking the water, and they brought suit against the city and the state ordered them to treat the sewage. But they were ^{bonded} ~~bonded~~ to the limit and ~~they~~ couldn't afford to treat the sewage, so Judge Baldwin, who was a judge here at that time wrote and had passed a sanitary district law in 1917. It allowed the city and the area around the city to form a sanitary district and issue bonds so they could afford to build a plant. I suppose the city had spent most of its money on the dam. So that the city was bonded to the limit and that's the reason that the sanitary district was formed. Following that, ~~the~~ Urbana-Champaign was the next district formed under that law and then Springfield, Peoria, and some 15 or 20 other larger cities in the state.

Q. So when you came to Decatur, you really had to start the whole system from the beginning?

A. The system was designed and was being built. It was designed by Greeley and ^{Hansen} ~~Anthony~~ of Chicago. The first intercepting sewers were built and then the

sewage treatment plant. I came on January 1 and the plant wasn't completed. We didn't get ;it started - until along in May or June sometime - in 1924. So I put the new plant in operation. Do you get the idea? I put the new plant at Ft. Sill in operation, then I started up a new plant in Highland Park, then I came here to start a new plant. And you might say I have continued starting new plants. When I retired, I had quite a nice consulting experience over the years putting new plants in operation in numerous places in this country and particularly up in Canada. The nicest trip we had was for six or seven months down in Trinidad, putting some new plants in operation that a Boston ^{of engineers designed and} firm built. So that has been a nice experience.

Q. It must be a thrill to start something and see it get into operation. Do you often have headaches when trouble develops?

A. Well, there are headaches but I used to tell people when we have problems - and we've always had problems at the sanitary district - that there wouldn't be any jobs worth anything if we didn't have problems - if they could be run by just ordinary people without special education. It was the problems that made the job worthwhile. I didn't think when I came here that I'd be here more than four or five years. To give you an idea of what the problem is - the industrial development of Decatur has been largely along the lines of food processing - Staley's where they grind many thousands of bushels of corn a day - 100,000 or more - and Archer-Daniels-Midland, which grinds also the same amount of soybeans. (Staley also grinds almost that many soybeans.)

The sewage treatment plant when I came here was built almost three times as big as you would need for a town of 30,000 - so it was designed to take care of 90,000. The plant developed faster than anyone anticipated. Mr. Staley, senior, the old man who brought the plant here, said it would be a 10,000 bushel plant. By the time I got here it was 30,000 and it wasn't any time before it was 100,000 bushels a day. So that's what really made the job interesting. It made it difficult but interesting.

Q. And then new companies came in later?

A. They started the new plants.

Q. Have you noticed many changes in Decatur over the years you have been here, Dr. Hatfield?

A. Well, it's always been a very up and coming industrial city. When I came here Mueller and Staley's were here. It wasn't very long before Archer-Daniels started. Of course, during the war the Caterpillar Company built the military engine plant here, which is now the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. Caterpillar later came back and built their own plant here in Decatur. The large companies are the Muellers, ADM, Staley's, Firestone, and others. The industrial growth has really been tremendous. I spoke earlier of the sewage treatment plant being much larger than was originally needed for the city. It is interesting to note that the present treatment plant is designed for 290,000 people. The city of Decatur, according to the sign, is 90,000. In other words, ^{the sewage treatment plant is} over 3 times the size of the city.

Q. What do you think of the future of the city?

A. Well that's going to be interesting. The down town is going to have to be rebuilt and will be. It will change from stores to doctors' offices and various civic activities. There will be many smaller stores and maybe a return of department stores. Wards are still, I think, going to be down there. What happens to the place where Sears is now, whether they go we don't know. They say they're going.

Q. As you say of your own position, all of these problems add interest to the future and to the job... Why don't we talk about your own personal interests? You said you like music. Have you kept up your music?

A. Yes, I still play a good deal on the piano. While Dorothy, our helper here, dresses and takes care of Mrs. Hatfield, I usually play the piano for an hour or two hours.

Q. What kind of music do you like?

A. For me it's classical. I don't play jazz. I've tried to and I have one or two things I used to play for fun. I usually get a little tired of them. I prefer something a little more complicated in design and style - mostly classical.

Q. I know you've mentioned your travels. You've combined your business and travel.

A. I've been lucky. I've always been active in the national and state societies of the engineers and chemists and the sewage treatment trade groups. I was elected president of the national federation of - it was called the federation of sewage works associations in those days, but they didn't like the word "sewage" so they changed it to "water pollution control." It happened that just at the time I retired that I was president. They had a system whereby the president, the vice-president, and the past president over the three years practically made the state organization. Whenever the state organization had a meeting, the president, the vice-president ^{or annual meeting} or the past president would attend the meeting to keep the national organization in touch. So over those three years Mrs. Hatfield and I were free to travel almost all over the United States to all the state association meetings. Quite often we were able, for example, to attend the Arizona meeting, then take a little vacation and then attend the New Mexico meeting. Then the next month we'd be out in California and attend the California section meeting. So over the years we just about covered the country, which was unusual. Most men, when they are president, are busy and have to fly in, stay for the banquet, and fly out. We would drive in, spend two or three days with them, and it was very nice for me and I think very nice for the association.

Q. Yes, you could give them extra time.

A. Then I had quite a nice business starting up new treatment plants.

Q. You've already mentioned that you did quite a lot of travel in connection with that.

A. I was very lucky in getting connections with a Toronto engineering firm in starting up with problems in a new plant in Toronto which they had designed. With that firm I started up quite a number of new plants - in London, Ontario, and Winnipeg and Calgary - rather large plants. On those jobs I had the type of work where I went for a week four times a year for two years. So we were traveling up to Canada four times a year, to London or to Winnipeg or to Toronto or Calgary or somewhere over a period of twenty years with quite a lot of very interesting work. Then of course the six months that we spent down in Trinidad with an engineering firm in Boston - Metcalf and Eddy. They ~~built~~ ^{designed and the World Health Organization} ~~one of these foreign works engineers have~~ - ^{built the} three plants for the larger cities in the islands. So I was down there for six months.

Q. So you've had a wonderful opportunity to get to know people in different sections of the world in addition to helping them with your business.

A. In addition to our travel, our oldest son, after he got out of college, was with the Caterpillar Tractor Company over in Peoria. He was in the treasury department which means he worked with the distributors and their finances. He wasn't an auditor or anything like that. It was a matter of advising on finances. He ~~finally~~ was sent over to Geneva for ten years. Well, he was in Geneva six years and then in Grenoble, France four years. During that time the Caterpillar Company sent the family back home every other year. That was a good excuse for us to visit them during the other years. Over that time we were there four or five times to visit them for a month and then take a trip to Norway, Sweden, Belgium - or rent a car and take a moto trip around France and Germany.

- Q. Well, it sounds as if you have had a very fine retirement. Do you have any advice for people thinking of retirement?
- A. Well, I don't think retirement is bad at all if they have any interests. I had, of course, unusual opportunities to continue my work. Instead of quitting work, I really started working for myself as a consultant. Then I had music and a good many interests. Here in Decatur I had a good many public interests. Here in Decatur I was active in Boy Scouting for a number of years. I was president of the Scout organization and on the camping committee for many years. I was connected with the city planning commission and the system that allows people to make exceptions to the rules. I was on that board for several years. So I've been active in municipal and public affairs.
- Q. It sounds as if you have had a really wonderful life, Dr. Hatfield, and I thank you for sharing it with us. We appreciate your telling us of these experiences and your background.
- A. I've enjoyed it very much.
- Q. You've been listening to the reminiscences of Dr. W. D. Hatfield recorded for the Decatur Public Library. This is Betty Turnell speaking.

