

Hall, George and Dorothy

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mr. and Mrs. George Hall Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guests today are Mr. and Mrs. Hall, and since we're good friends, I'm going to call them by their first names - George and Dorothy Hall.

Q. Well, George and Dorothy, did both of you grow up in Decatur?

D. No. I did. I was born and raised in Decatur, but George wasn't.

Q. We'll find out about him later, but, Dorothy, since you were born here, we'll start with you. Can you tell us something about your early childhood here in this town?

D. The town wasn't nearly as large as it is today, that's for sure. We lived in town, but you'd think we lived in the country because we had mud streets. Grand Avenue was a mud street. I was born on Gulick Avenue, and that was a mud street. We had no street cars out there.

Q. When you say "mud", you mean that it was mud in rainy weather?

D. It was very muddy in rainy weather -- I've gone to school in Decatur all my life.

Q. What schools did you go to?

D. I went to Pugh School.

Q. That was a grade school? Where was that?

D. It was on the corner of Grand and Monroe. Since then, it has been torn down. Then I was transferred when I was in about the third grade to the old Marietta School and that was on the corner of Church and Marietta. When I was in the fifth or sixth grade, they decided to build a new school there, and the old one would be torn down. So they transferred us to Gastman School and that's on the corner of Church and North.

Q. That's not standing now either, is it?

D. No, it has been torn down. They have all been torn down except Lincoln School, and Grace United Methodist Church has bought that. It has been condemned as a school. I had the privilege of going through that last Sunday.

Q. That must have recalled some memories.

D. Oh, it did.

Q. What was school like in those days?

D. Far different from today. We didn't have all the extras. Of course, we had no radios or televisions. We had recess - that was the part I liked.

Q. You mainly had studies and play on the playground?

D. Lincoln School had an auditorium and a gymnasium. On bad days we got to go downstairs to the gymnasium. Occasionally we would have someone come to entertain us, and we would go down to the auditorium. We had only eight school rooms then, but so many children came into that neighborhood that they used the basement and I saw that the auditorium was later used as a library, but we didn't have a library when I went to school.

Q. Did you walk to all these schools?

D. Yes - we had no bus - and our family had no car.

Q. But all the children walked?

D. Yes - no matter how far away. When I finished the 7th grade, I went into the 8th grade. We had no junior high.

Q. Excuse me - did you go home at noon?

D. Yes -

Q. So you had to walk four times a day?

D. Yes. Then for the 8th grade I went to the old high school - not the one

that was torn down recently, but the older one, where my father went to high school.

Q. Where was that?

D. It was on east North, about three blocks from where Stephen Decatur High School was. Then I went to the high school for four years.

Q. That was located where the Civic Center is now?

D. Yes. Then I went to Brown's Business College here in Decatur. It was on William Street. It was located upstairs. I finished there, and on my first job I was sent to the court house, where I worked in the Abstract Office. I typed and did office work.

Q. So your business training served you well.

Now, let's talk about George. Where were you born?

G. I was born in Kentucky. I don't remember much about it, but my folks tell me that I was 8 years old when we left Kentucky to come to Illinois. I remember the train trip to Gillespie, Illinois. We lived there a couple of years and moved from there to Danvers, Illinois, and from there to Hopedale and from Hopedale to Stanford. We lived lots of places.

Q. What was your father's business?

G. He worked for the other fellow on the farm. He worked as a farm hand. The grass always looked greener on the other side of the fence.

Q. At least, the corn was greener!

G. We came to Decatur twice. The first time was about 1916. My father and family came to work on a dairy farm four or five miles south of Decatur. We lived there a couple of years and then we moved to Argenta, where we stayed a while. We lived there five years, the longest we stayed any place in my childhood days. I went to a country school one year and four years of high school.

- Q. What was country school like? Were all the children in one room?
- G. Yes - a one-room school with all the grades.
- Q. How could the teacher handle all that?
- G. There weren't so many in each grade.
- Q. It was more like tutoring?
- G. Yes. That's right. So I went to Progress School one year - that's east of Argenta and to high school four years. I graduated in 1924.
- Q. Then you came to Decatur after that?
- G. I came to Decatur in the summer of '24. I graduated in June. My folks had moved south of Decatur again - for the second time. I went home there from Argenta.
- Q. You stayed there to finish school?
- G. That's right. I got a job in a grocery store about a week after I graduated from high school. I went to Faries Manufacturing Company in September of '24. I worked there until April of 1925 and then I went into the post office, and I stayed there for a long time.
- Q. So that was your real occupation - the post office... Dorothy, you lived in the country at one time too, didn't you?
- D. Yes, I did. I was about 3 years old when we moved out there. We had a lot of fun. We had a wagon to coast down the hill. We were afraid of gypsies. In those days gypsies would come by. When we would go down the lane and sit on the fence and would see these horses coming, we would run back to the house as fast as we could because we were told that they would carry us off.
- Q. Maybe you can explain what gypsies are. I imagine there are people today who don't know about them.

D. They were people who traveled through the country and would beg or steal whatever they could get. They dressed in funny clothes - long, loose, bright-colored clothes and they used to drive covered wagons. In later years they drove automobiles as they went through the country. Well, none of us was ever taken away... I went to a country school then. We went to a one-room school too for a while. I walked about two miles to that school.

Q. In all kinds of weather?

D. In any and all kinds of weather. I was more or less of a visitor because I had a brother two years older than I. He was old enough to go to school. I wasn't - I was five years old - but they let me go as a visitor.

Q. That was before you moved to town?

D. Yes, that was before we moved back to town. Then I went to Pugh School. That was my first city school.

Q. Now, we're about ready to find out how you two got together. How did you happen to know each other?

D. We met at a post office party. Every year they had a party for the entire force. I was introduced to George by one of his girl class-mates. She had married a post office man.

Q. I believe your family had a connection with the post office, too? Isn't that right?

D. That's right. My father went into the post office in 1906.

Q. So you knew quite a few people there?

D. I knew all of them in those days. There weren't too many people in those days. We knew everyone there.

Q. George, what was your first job with the post office?

- G. It was sorting mail for the carriers. We clerks in the city division had to know the city scheme and we had to know which carrier carried every block. In other words, if we had a letter for 500 West North, we knew that went to carrier #21 and we put it in his pigeon-hole. It was all done by hand. Then we had what we called the "facing table." The mail was brought in there -
- Q. The what table?
- G. Facing. The mail had to be faced all one way with the stamps all one way to go through the cancelling machine. We didn't have to cancel by hand.
- Q. Then I presume you had other jobs as you advanced?
- G. Yes, I was in the accounting department and from there I went to foremanship. I was a foreman for nine years. Then I went back to the accounting department. I ended up as chief accountant. That's where I was when I retired.
- Q. Both of you probably realize the changes that have come about in the post office. What are the most striking?
- G. We've had a lot of changes in the Decatur post office. Now all the mail has to go to Springfield to be canceled. They tell me that they have a big machine over there, and they must have a certain volume of mail to afford to run this machine. So all the mail from towns like Decatur and all the small towns around here has to go to Springfield to be canceled. All the mail put in the boxes here goes to Springfield, is canceled there, and brought back the next morning for the clerks here to work.
- Q. Where was the main post office when you were working? In the position it is now?
- G. No, no. It was on Main and Eldorado - where the Y.W.C.A. is now.
- Q. Were there sub-stations?

- G. Yes, I think at one time we had nine sub-stations in Decatur.
- Q. Dorothy, what job did your father have?
- D. He carried mail for about 14 years and then he was transferred inside. He was out-going mail clerk at first and then he advanced to foreman of the mailing division and when he finished, he was superintendent of mails.
- Q. You mean the main postmaster?
- D. No - superintendent.
- Q. What is that job?
- D. He took care of the clerks under his level to tell them when to work and when to leave - set their schedules. But I can remember when we had so many trains through here and interurbans and later busses. We also had a horse-drawn vehicle that took the mail down to the depot. And he always carried a big revolver on his hip. I don't know that he ever used it, but he did have it. But at one time we did have a shooting behind the post office, and a man was killed.
- Q. What caused that?
- D. I really don't know, but I was called in on jury duty. They relieved me quickly when they found out that my husband was an employee of the post office.
- Q. Was the murder related to the post office?
- G. I don't think so.
- D. No, I don't believe it was.
- G. Probably jealousy of someone hauling the mail or something like that.
- Q. It just happened that it was behind the post office?
- G. That's right.
- Q. It wasn't a big mail robbery?

D. No - I don't think our post office was ever robbed.

G. No, I don't think so.

Q. When was the present post office built?

G. We moved in there in 1935.

Q. I'm sure it was thought to be a magnificent building. It still is a good-looking building, isn't it?

G. Yes, it's real nice. We're very proud of it.

Q. Can you think of any other changes since the old days?

D. I can. A lot of people don't know that you have to take an examination to get in there.

Q. A civil service exam?

D. Yes. A lot of people don't know that. But they used to have to take an examination every year on their work. George used to study at home. He had a case with all these cards - over 1,000 - that he had to know where to put them. And you were graded on that exam.

Q. What did this relate to? Names of towns?

G. No - streets. In my case it was the names of streets. When we had the mail trains, those fellows had to know the names of all the towns - the small towns - and what roads the mails had to be put on. But in my case I had only the carriers, and I had to know what block each one carried.

D. And another thing, they carried all of their mail. They didn't have these little go-carts or automobiles. And what they couldn't get in their sacks the mail carriers strapped them on. And they carried all that.

Q. All that load! It must have been very physically difficult - and in all weather?

D. In all weather. At Christmas time you could hardly see the carrier.

- G. That was early when they did all that. Then we got what they called "relay boxes."
- Q. What are those?
- G. The carrier would "case his mail" - get it ready for delivery. The carrier has to put the mail in order. So we had relay boxes on different routes. Some had two relay boxes. So the carrier would fix up their mail, and a truck would deposit it in a relay box. Then the carrier would work his mail to the relay box, and then pick up another load.
- Q. At least, it was a relief from carrying it all in one load!
- D. And they used to have two deliveries a day for residential and three for business.
- Q. Yes - we have become so used to only one delivery that we forget we used to have a little better service in that respect. But I think few people miss it.
- D. And at Christmas time the hours were terrific. He has worked around the clock.
- G. Back when I went into service, the public hadn't been educated yet. People always waited until the week before Christmas before they mailed their mail. Everything was dropped in at the same time, and we couldn't keep up with it. Now, people start mailing early, and they don't have any trouble. One thing, at Christmas time when I first went into service, we delivered every package that looked like it might contain a Christmas present. No matter the size or how little the package, we had our trucks go out and deliver that on Christmas day. That's when we spoiled the public.
- Q. That's right - and somebody had to work on Christmas day to do that.
- D. We had to give up our family Christmas dinner because we were never sure since my father worked in the office as well as George. We just couldn't have it.

- Q. The public just didn't realize some of the sacrifices that go on behind the scenes. Do you think the system has been improved enough? What else can be done? What do you think of the improvements that have been made?
- G. I hesitate to say - but I don't think some of the changes have helped.
- Q. In what way?
- G. The service is not always too good, I realize that, but one of the big problems is transportation. We don't have the transportation we used to have. There is no train going through Decatur any more, and we don't have the "Star route -
- Q. What's the "star route?"
- G. That's a motorized truck that went from town to town.
- Q. Did they stop that because of economy?
- G. The trains were subsidized by the government and we had railway mail clerks on the trains who worked the mail on the way to towns and cities. Now we don't have that any more. It's all done away with. Now we have big sorting machines in towns like Springfield. They call these towns "sectional center" - Springfield, Bloomington, Centralia, Champaign, Effingham. Decatur didn't get the job. We should have had it, but we didn't get it. Now all the mail has to go to these centers, and from there it's delivered. If there's a train going from there, it's put on a train. Otherwise, it's put on Star Routes - trucks.
- Q. So they do use some trucks?
- G. Yes, but they have to run out of these offices, and that's why our mail is delayed some. It has to go to Springfield and then be delivered to other towns - like Maroa.
- Q. How does the mail go from here to Springfield?

- G. By truck. We have trucks going three or four times a day going to Springfield.
- Q. Do any trains have mail cars?
- G. No.
- Q. Does mail go by plane?
- G. Some does. The dropping of domestic air mail stamps happened after I left the service.
- Q. You think these changes haven't helped the transportation of the mail?
- G. No, I don't think so.
- D. It's helped the worker because they used to work six days a week - also on Sundays and holidays.
- Q. And, as you said, the load isn't so great because they don't have to carry so much - or have as long hours.
- G. If I had my way about it, I would improve the carrier situation.
- Q. How would you improve that?
- G. With all due respect, I'll say their attire isn't as appropriate. It may be more comfortable, but it doesn't look as nice. When I went into the service, the carriers had to stand for inspection - and they looked like carriers.
- Q. They still wear uniforms, don't they?
- G. Well, partially, yes. They've gone to shorts, which may be all right for summertime, but I don't like the looks of it. They don't have to wear a cap like they used to. Some of them do, but they don't have to. Back then, they stood inspection. They wore the uniform, their shoes were shined, and they really looked like mail carriers and they were proud of it. That's one change I would make.
- Q. You'd shape them up a bit?

G. I'd try!

Q. What about women in the force?

G. We had a few before I retired. If they can do the work, I'm for them.

I think we have some pretty good lady carriers. Most of the rural carriers are ladies.

Q. The ones who drive the rural routes?

G. Yes.

Q. Do they have to pass a test to be a carrier? What about size and physical ability?

G. They have to be physically fit to get the job. And they have to pass an examination. Then they get on the "carrier clerk list", and they are chosen from that.

D. But they used to have penmanship, and English and arithmetic -

G. When I took the exam.

Q. Do you think the exam is easier now?

G. No, it's probably more difficult.

Q. It would require more ability to use the mechanized services?

G. It might.

D. We have more college-educated people in the service now than they used to have.

Q. The post office has a monopoly over first class mail, but what about mailing of packages and freight?

G. To the United Parcel Service? We lost the parcel post business. We don't have too much of that any more. Our rates went up quite a bit and that brought about the change.

Q. It let private companies come in?

... Well, George and Dorothy, you must have lived through the great depression of the 1930's.

G. We did!

Q. What was it like?

G. Well, it wasn't really too bad for us because we had a job. We had a steady job all through the depression, but people in our neighborhoods lost their jobs and lost their homes. We were about the only ones on our street who kept our home during the depression. We had some payless furloughs and had to take a cut once in a while but we always had a job. No one got laid off.

Q. When you say a "payless furlough" you mean a vacation without pay?

G. Yes - time off without pay. Our substitutes had a pretty hard time because there wasn't enough work for them. One substitute clerk I'm thinking about only got 16 hours of work a week, and he got 16 hours on one day. He worked two shifts on Sunday. That was his 16 hours - two 8 hour shifts.

Q. Could a person live on that?

G. Not too well - but that's all he got.

Q. What's the difference between that depression and the times people are going through today (in 1982)?

G. Now, for one thing, they have unemployment insurance. I understand that lasts for 6 months now and maybe you can have it renewed. But then, if you didn't have a job, you didn't have anything. There wasn't anything to fall back on. That's the big difference, isn't it?

Q. You had a child then, didn't you?

D. One - one little girl.

Q. Was it hard to bring up a family then? But, you said you didn't suffer.

G. That's right. She was born in '28 and the depression hit about 1930 or 31.

D. We owed more on our house than we could sell it or rent it for. We did have to miss payments. We had our pay cut and it wasn't too high in those days. But we did have a job, and we did keep our house.

- Q. Of course, when you say the pay wasn't good, we have to remember that the prices weren't high, either. Can you recall any illustrations of the prices then?
- G. A loaf of bread was 5¢. How much was a gallon of milk, honey?
- D. I don't remember about the gallon of milk, but I remember that butter was high.
- Q. Did they have oleo then?
- D. Yes - but you had a little pill with the oleo and you had to do your own coloring - mixing.
- Q. That was because the people who sold butter didn't want to have oleo look like butter?
- G. Yes - that's it.
- D. You didn't have to color it if you didn't want to.
- G. It made it look more like butter.
- D. Today your oleo is manufactured into squares and cubes, like a pound of butter. But it wasn't so in those days.
- Q. So even though times were hard, anyone who had a job could get by because prices were lower.
- D. But many had to move in with their parents and some young people had to move out of their homes and rent them.
- G. If you had no job at all, you just didn't have anything coming in. It wasn't like it is now.
- Q. What about the war? Did you work in the post office during that time?
- G. I was in the post office from 1925 to 1971. I didn't have to go in the service - I was too young for one war and too old for the next.
- Q. I'm sure Dorothy thinks that was fortunate --- Well, what do you think about Decatur as you look back over the time you've lived here?

G. We've seen a lot of changes.

D. Our first little home - everything north of that was country.

Q. And that was where?

D. In the 700 block West Harper.

G. And 2200 blocks north. Everything north of that was country. Now we live 3100 north, and the city goes way beyond this.

D. And my husband had to work nights and just beyond us one block they had horses and cows. They would get out occasionally, and one night I heard an awful noise. I was afraid and turned the lights out and looked out and it was a cow in our front yard - eating our grass. Another time a pony got loose and was in our yard eating our grass. And all north of us was country.

Q. It wasn't exactly like city life then?

D. We had a modern home. At first we had a cess pool, but later the sewer came through.

Q. And you had water and electricity?

D. We had those.

G. And we had better bus service then we have now. I rode the bus quite a bit. We had night busses. My hours were from 1 in the afternoon until 9:30 at night, and I would ride the bus home after work - for 13 consecutive years. Now we have no night busses. If you don't have a car, you have to walk home.

Q. So that is a change.

G. We had Sunday busses then too. I don't think that change is for the better. I don't know why bus service isn't better.

D. People use their cars now.

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

- D. The city is growing in population, but not in industry.
- G. We've been hurt by Hickory Point Mall, of course. All these stores have moved out, and we don't know if they'll ever move back to the city. I doubt it - and our city is hurting because of that.
- Q. Like many other cities.
- D. We're not the only ones. In New York and other large cities, you see a new portion and an old portion and a newer portion, showing where they've grown out.
- Q. But you think Decatur will continue? There will be a Decatur?
- D. People without services.
- Q. Well, maybe these services will be provided when people really need them. If we become too dependent on gasoline and oil and these aren't available, people will have to find other ways of getting along won't they? It's true that we have seen many changes, haven't we?
- G. We keep increasing our restaurants - places to eat - and how they can all keep going, I don't know - but they do. A new one opened up over on Main Street just the other day.
- Q. Because women are working and they don't want to cook so much at home?
- G. I wonder if that's the big reason? I don't know.
- Q. Well, we certainly appreciate your telling us some of your experiences. We've covered a lot of territory - a lot of time. It's interesting to see the changes since you were born here, Dorothy, and the time George came - up to the present time. You really have had a good life, haven't you?
- G.D. Yes - better than most. We've had one daughter and never any trouble with her and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Q. You have had a happy life, and we're glad you shared it with us. Thank you very much.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. and Mrs. George Hall - George and Dorothy Hall. This is Betty Turnell, for the Decatur Public Library.