

Lee, Charles E.

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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FEB 4 1981

DECATUR, ILLINOIS
PUBLIC LIBRARYCharles E. Lee Interview

December, 1980

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Charles E. Lee.

Q. Mr. Lee, have you lived in Decatur all your life?

A. Yes, I was born in Decatur on January 30, 1896, and of course, I've been living here all the time since then.

Q. Well, you have really had a long and I'm sure, an interesting life here. Could you describe the city as it was when you were a boy?

A. Quite different from today because that was known as "horse and buggy days." The automobile was just beginning to be known as something that would run - in my early days. It wasn't until 1917 or 18 that Mr. Ford made the Model T Ford, which in turn put American on wheels, as they said. So that was quite a different set-up from what we have today. As I've said sometimes to young people when they were touring the Gov. Oglesby mansion, which was built in 1874. "At that time there was no electricity, there was no radio, there was no television, automobiles were just starting, there were no airplanes flying." So that the time then was a much different style of living from what we had today.

Q. Do the young people you talk to ever wonder what you did for fun when you were a boy?

A. Well, we have quite a lot of school children coming through the Oglesby mansion, but we don't get into much of that. But of course, we had a number of things we could do. We played more games, I think. We did more outdoor exercising, like skating - things of that sort. One thing we did then which few children do today - we walked. If we needed to walk a mile or so, we walked a mile or so.

Q. In a way, a healthier life than today, wasn't it?

A. From that standpoint, yes.

Q. What schools did you attend?

A. My first elementary school was the Wood Street School, which was located where the Mary W. French School is today - on the identical site. Then I graduated from Decatur High School and from Millikin University in 1917. Our class then, of course, was the war time class, and I served from some time after that in the United States Navy in the United States and in France.

Q. You must have had some experiences there?

A. There again, that being in 1918, I was at a Naval Air Station in the south of France. The planes, most of them, were really flying boats. They were used for submarine patrol. And interestingly enough, the top speed of what we called the H S boats was 90 miles an hour. They were powered by a Liberty motor, which was a 12 cylinder motor in line. So it was quite a different situation in those days from what we have with the advent of planes that can do a lot more than what we did then.

Q. Were you on a plane or on a ship?

A. No, on a station.

Q. On land?

A. The station was what we called "Assembly and Repair." It assembled the seaplanes and repaired those that needed repairing. As I recall, we operated 14 submarine patrol stations in the southern part of France.

Q. I'm sure you must have had some exciting experiences there. Did you stay there until the Armistice was signed?

A. I was in France at the time of the Armistice, yes, and came back to the United States in January, 1919.

- Q. And to a very jubilant country, after the war?
- A. Very much so, yes.
- Q. And then did you decide to go into your career as an attorney?
- A. Yes, even to the extent of taking an exam in France as an ensign and passing it. I could have taken a commission, but I wanted to study law, my father being a practicing attorney in Decatur. So I decided that I would come back to the states as soon as I could. Upon getting back, I entered my father's law office and studied there.
- Q. So you got your law education by practical experience?
- A. That's right. In those days if you had an AB degree from college and studied in a law office for 3 years and then passed the examination, you were certified as a practicing attorney, and that's what I did.
- Q. Well, I'm sure you were qualified with the experience in your father's office. In a way, it was a tribute to your father that you decided to go into law. You knew what kind of occupation you were getting into.
- A. No question about that.
- Q. How has the practice of law changed during your career?
- A. The technical practice of law was still under what was called the "Common Law Procedure" derived from the English. We've changed a good many things since that time. And, of course, the practice of law now involves cases that we didn't have much to do with at that time, traffic violations and that sort of thing, which take up a lot of time of the courts.
- Q. And now the government legal requirements?
- A. Oh yes - all the regulations they have. It really ties things up in knots.
- Q. What type of practice did you go into? Was it general?

- A. Those were the days of Prohibition, when the United States had an amendment to the Constitution forbidding the sale and use of alcoholic liquor. In that case, whenever there was an alleged violation, there would be a warrant issued under a city ordinance, under a state law, and under a federal law. So it was quite a proposition.
- Q. Do you mean anybody who was caught drinking alcoholic beverage?
- A. Selling it or having it in possession, yes - and of course that was so foreign to the idea of Americans wanting to run their own lives that it didn't last too long. Later it was abolished, and the amendment was knocked out. But I had made up my mind that I didn't want to continue with that type of criminal procedure so most of my practice in the years since then has been probate, which is the handling of estates and matters of that sort.
- A. Were there any especially interesting cases you recall? That you could talk about?
- Q. Well, there's one that's not too interesting, perhaps. Under a mechanic's lien law, anyone who furnished material for the construction of a house had a lien claim against the house itself for the money that they put in. In the case in question, which was a house built by a woman in Mount Auburn, Illinois, she had paid the contractor, but he didn't pay all of the supply men. The Lion Lumber Company had a claim of about \$3,000, but the time within which they could file their claim legitimately had passed. Then they came up with the idea that one stick of wood, which was the threshold of the door, would revive their claim. And of, course, that meant that we had to have continued litigation in the circuit court, then the appellate court, and finally to the Supreme Court, which sustained our claim that that did not revive their particular claim on the mechanic's lien. It was interesting and, of course, expensive.

Q. And an ingenious way to try to reopen the case. Were you involved in the State Legislature?

A. I was a member of the State Senate from 1929 to 1933. As a Republican, I ran for reelection in 1932. That was the time the depression was on. People were mad, they were broke, and they were out to defeat President Hoover, and they elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In doing so, most of us who were Republicans were being defeated, as I happened to be.

Q. Maybe it was a difficult time anyway, during the depression. Was the state legislature involved in some sticky problems then?

A. Some rather interesting things that might be worth speaking about. At one time I attended a dinner in the YMCA, which was a state meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I was sitting along side the State Commander, a lawyer from Chicago named Cohen. As we were sitting there, he called my attention to a young man who was coming up to the head table. He said, "I want you to meet this fellow," and up came a very fine looking young man. Mr. Cohen said, "Mr. Lee, I want you to meet Mr. Oberta." Well, that didn't mean too much to me, but it turned out that Mr. Oberta was associated with the gangsters in Chicago. He was known as "Dingbat Oberta." During the time I was in the Senate, I sat next to Frank McDermott, who was a democratic senator from the stockyards district of Chicago. His wife was very much disturbed at that time because Frank was running for re-election, and the man who was running against him was this Dingbat Oberta, who had been nominated by the Republicans. Mrs. McDermott was very much disturbed because she thought they might take her husband for a ride. As a matter of fact, they didn't and he won, but it's rather ironic that the Republicans in that district could nominate a man who was known as a

shooting gangster and who wound up himself being taken for a ride and killed.

Q. But still, it's reassuring to know that he didn't get elected.

A. That's right. You'll have to give credit to people for that.

Q. People were at least aware of that. Do you have any more interesting cases?

A. Since we were ~~many~~ ^{talking} of Decatur, another experience was rather interesting as it ties in with our American system of politics. I was in the office of Clarence Buck, who was Director of Agriculture for Illinois. When I started to leave, he called to me, "Senator, who is J. T. Ward over your way?" Well, the wheels went around in my head a little bit, but I couldn't come up with anything. I said, "If you'll tell me in what way you're interested, perhaps I can come up with something." He said, "We're going to appoint a superintendent of stallion registration for the state. He'll be in charge of registering Jacks~~on~~ ^{and} stallions, the horses and mules of the state." Then things began to click. I knew of a man we called Tobey~~x~~ Ward, who had been a stockman, that is for horses and mules for a long time. I said to Mr. Buck, "If this is the man you're talking about, and I'm pretty sure he is, I would say he's one of the best qualified men I would know." This next statement will be a little rough, but it's what he said. He said, "Qualifications, hell! Who is behind him?" Well, I happened to know for some reason that the head man in the Millikin National Bank was interested in him. I don't know if he owed them money or not, but when I came back to Decatur, I talked to Mr. J. M. Brownback, the vice-president of the bank at that time, and I told them the story. I said, "It looks to me that a little push in this matter will get

J. T. Ward the appointment as superintendent of this particular department. The upshot of that was that they got busy and I guess put a little pressure somewhere, and he was appointed. I thought that was very interesting in connection with our American system of politics - not that the person is the best qualified, but who is behind him?

Q. Right - it is an illumination on American politics and probably hasn't changed much since then.

A. Still, politics mean jobs in America. It's still that way.

Q. Right! Well, we know that you were also Mayor of Decatur. When was that, Mr. Lee?

A. I was appointed as Mayor in 1936 to succeed Harry Barber, who had been elected Mayor but had resigned. At that time, under the Commission form of government - a Mayor and four commissioners - when there was a vacancy, these commissioners, who were in a position to appoint a Mayor, approached me, and I agreed to take the position and was appointed. I served the three years and a little more - so that I ran for reelection in 1939. I was elected, and I served for four more years.

Q. Very good!

A. And during that time I had the interesting experience of being elected president of the Illinois Municipal League, which is the overall league of cities and villages in Illinois. Then for two years I was president of the American Municipal Association, which was a national league of 42 state leagues of cities. That, of course, was quite interesting.

Q. And an honor, too! to have those awards. Well, what issues were facing Decatur when you were Mayor?

A. At that time the Supreme Court, in reference to Negroes, held that they should have separate but equal rights. So we had the bath house on Lake Decatur, which had just been completed, and understandably, the Negroes wanted to use the bathhouse, and that was beginning to cause some difficulty. So I got together with a committee from the colored group - Dr. Ellis, who was a very fine doctor, was the chairman of the group. So we looked around and decided that we would build a separate bath house, conforming to the Supreme Court's definition, in the location where the Decatur Yacht Club's boats are now listed along the lake. The ground in question had been city ground, had been turned over to the park district. We approached the park board, and they said, "Yes, that sounds all right. We'll go along with it." But later when it developed that the location was adjacent to some of the most exclusive residences in town, the County Club outfit and the Eastmoreland, the park board changed its mind and decided against going along with us, which was a very unfortunate thing because we had developed a very good relationship with the colored population. That was one of the early times when race questions came to the fore.

Q. Did they just disband the idea of the bath house?

A. Nothing further was done about trying to do anything about the problem.

Q. That's too bad. Of course, later the civil rights movement and came in and changed things.

A. It changed the whole background, and rightly so. Those of us in Decatur, as I look back, had no race questions. We had colored children in elementary school, in high school, and in Millikin, and we thought nothing about it. They were our friends, and we went right along. But of course, that wasn't true of everybody.

Q. Were they on athletic teams?

A. Yes. Fred Long and his brother Harry at Millikin, were outstanding athletes. Fred was a big man, probably weighed 250 pounds. He served as center on the football team at Millikin for some years, but that was during the time when the team, going on a trip to some other spot to play a game, the hotels would not accept a Negro at all, and they had to make arrangements for him to be taken care of in private residences. It shows what the situation was in relation to race. That, of course, was a good many years ago.

Q. Were there any other issues you recall when you were serving as mayor?

A. Well, we had, of course, many things we were trying to do. I was superintendent of the Police Department. Not long after I was sworn in, I found out that the Police Department had never been given a chance to get special education. What we did, I guess, in those days was to take a young fellow, give him a billy club and a gun and a cap, and say, "You're a police officer" - without very much background. So we got started and began to have some of our men take the special courses at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington. We had one man take the special finger-print course - Gerald Sheehy ~~Sheehy~~. In turn, when he came back, he was able to handle the finger-print situations. Then on the traffic division - because, of course, traffic was quite a problem in those days, we had it shaped up so that all the members of the traffic division were given a chance to go to Northwestern University for the special traffic courses which they had there. I was very glad that I had an opportunity to do something about that. At that time, about '39 or '40, was when parking meters were just beginning to start. And the newspapers suggested that we put parking meters around their office building, which we did. But it didn't do very much to help the problem because there were too few of them. So then the problem was to decide what to do more to control parking in the downtown area, because then, as even now, a lot

of the parking spaces in downtown are taken up by the people working downtown, to the exclusion of the people who want to come downtown to shop - and that is still true. So we decided that we would go ahead with the proposition. A group of downtown merchants asked if they could have a meeting with me. I thought there would be a committee of maybe 4 or 5, but it turned out that there were 23 of the outstanding merchants of downtown, who met with me at that time and they were pretty hot under the collar. Several of them, Bill Van Law, who still has Van Law's Carroll's Harley Store, ~~Archie~~ Archie Gregory, who was president of the First National Bank and several others said they were going to take the matter to court. Well, I explained to them what the deal would be.

- Q. Excuse me - you mean they didn't want to have parking meters?
- A. They didn't want to have parking meters at all. I explained to them what the deal would be. The parking meter company would put the meters in on a six months' trial basis. They would give us 25% of the gross income, for that period. At the end of six months, if we didn't like them, they would take them out. As I explained it to this group of men, it looks to me as if this is a deal to find out. We don't know - you don't know nor do I what the parking meters will do. The interesting thing about it is that they worked - at that time - and the same men who had been so much against it, all came to me later and said they were wrong and were glad to work along with me. You get a lot of experiences when you're sitting on the Mayor's chair in any city, and of course that's true in Decatur.
- Q. I'm sure of that! You've mentioned a few of the people who were prominent in Decatur or had a deal at one time or another. Do you want to mention any others?

- A. I was thinking of the woman who was in charge of the American Red Cross in Macon County during the first World War - Inez Bender. I always remember the work that she did. She put in a lot of her time and effort very efficiently. But I remember the epitaph that was applied to her by the newspaper in later years - where she was designated as a "useful citizen." To me that's a pretty good definition in America.
- Q. Yes - it's a real honor, even if it doesn't sound very flowery. It really is what makes the country work, isn't it?
- A. Yes, it is.
- Q. Well, you've told us something of the problems Decatur faced when you were Mayor. What do you think the problems are today?
- A. Of course, the basic problems are pretty much the same in one way. I mean, you have your traffic troubles, you have your crime deals, which we had at that time, but not as much as now. One thing we didn't have, and that's rather interesting, in my thinking. During the time I was at Millikin, graduating as I did in 1917, there was no drug problem. There was very little alcoholic problem. Probably some of the boys would get a little beer occasionally, but not to any great extent. And, of course, there was no drug problem in the high school or the elementary school, which we rather generally know is one of the big problems today. So we had quite a different deal then. We didn't have to face up to the drug problem or the alcoholic problem they seem to have today.
- Q. And of course they didn't have mass communications as we have today so that ideas didn't spread as fast. Perhaps people learn what is going on in other places and that brings about -
- A. Of course, in those earlier days we were practically confined, in our major source of information, to the newspapers, because we didn't have radio,

we didn't have television. In that sense, it's quite a different background from what we have today.

- Q. Well, I know that you haven't retired from the practice of law. You're still in business. Do you have any recommendations for people who have retired?
- A. Well, yes. I tell people, whether they've retired or not, the older people - and I've said this consistently when I've had occasion to advise them - when there is a death of the husband or wife, the survivor, in my opinion, should stay in the home location as long as they can. I have no feeling against nursing homes, but I do feel that as long as older people can stay under the same conditions they had before that they are better off.
- Q. Of course, you are in a very favorable situation, since you are self-employed. It's the people who are forced to retire, I suppose, who face problems when they are suddenly cut off from what they've been doing all their lives and have to take care of their leisure time.
- A. It's quite unfortunate. I've had the privilege of being a member of the board of the Commission on Aging, a branch of the city setup under the Office on Aging here. I happen to be on the committee that is now faced with running the downtown drop-in center, the senior citizens' deal, and I know that the problems of the senior citizens are pretty definite. I do not favor - of course, in my case I can practice law as long as I think I'm any way useful - but I think it has been a great mistake to have mandatory retirement at 62 or 65 because we lost a great deal of good service on the part of the men or women in those positions. But that seems to be the way it's set up, and of course, the younger generation coming along think they should have jobs also, which they are entitled to. It presents a problem.
- Q. Well, let's talk about the young people. Do you have any suggestions for young people today?

- A. If I get the idea - and this isn't being a pessimist - of most of the men who are in the position of employing young people, too many are interested mainly in how much they're going to make and how much vacation they're going to have and not so much interested in doing the work that's really required. That seems to be the major complaint that the business people employing young people have today. And, of course, many young people today think in matters of salary, that they are going to have to start out at the same salary their fathers were making after 30 or 40 years. So it's a problem of what is going to work out in that respect.
- Q. What do you think about the future of Decatur?
- A. I'm bothered. I think most of us are about the downtown situation - whether or not the final word is going to be that the big stores will all leave the downtown area I don't know. Sears has talked about it, but so far they haven't left. Montgomery Ward say they are going to stay. But we've got a lot of vacant spaces down town. My own feeling is that as long as I can buy what I need downtown I'm going to do that, rather than go out to the separate malls, wherever they may be. But it presents a problem, and I know that city officials and Chamber of Commerce men are working to improve the situation, and I'm hoping that it will work out better.
- Q. If we can get enough of those "useful citizens" who will pull together, maybe we can bring it through.
- A. I'm not entirely pessimistic. I think it can be done. It may necessitate a different approach in filling up the downtown spaces for stores. But I think if we can use reasonable intelligence, we can work out something that will be a great improvement in the downtown area.
- Q. So in general you are really not discouraged about life today and perhaps even somewhat optimistic about it. Right?

- A. Yes, in reference to the future of America I don't think we're on the downhill grade and in Decatur I think we can work out the problems to much better advantage than we have so far.
- Q. Very good! Thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us. You certainly have had a long and interesting life and you, too, should have an award as being one of those "useful citizens."
- A. I've engaged in a good many civic organizations as I've come down the line, and I'm glad I've had the chance to contribute a little. I remember a quotation of Abraham Lincoln in which he said he hoped after he was gone that the world would be a little better place because he'd lived in it, and I hope sometimes that is true as far as I'm concerned.
- Q. Well, I'm sure it is and I'm sure Decatur is a much better place because you've lived here. Thank you very much!
- A. You're welcome.
- Q. You've been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Charles E. Lee, former Mayor of Decatur. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.