

Mr. O. T. Banton

Interviewed by  
Miss Betty Turnell

for the  
Decatur Public Library

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Interview with Mr. O. T. Banton

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. O. T. Banton. I believe your friends call you "Jack", Mr. Banton?

A. Yes, that's right. I got that nickname when I was 21 years of age and it's been with me for 61 years, I believe.

Q. Well, good. Many of our listeners will recognize Mr. Banton as the editor and chief author of the recently published History of Macon County, but writing is nothing new for you, is it, Mr. Banton?

A. No, I was in newspaper business for 52 years - 15 years on the Milwaukee papers and 37 years with the Lindsay-Schaub chain at Decatur.

Q. So you've been a newspaper man all your life... I believe you came from this area, didn't you?

A. Yes, I lived on a farm until I was 17 years old outside of Mt. Zion and I attended school in the village of Mt. Zion in those early days. My newspaper work was started in 1923 when I graduated from the University of Wisconsin in journalism and got a job on the Milwaukee Journal.

I was on the Journal for about 7 years and then was on the Hearst paper up there for about a year and the last 7 years in Milwaukee I was on the Milwaukee Sentinel.

Q. Those were interesting times in Milwaukee, weren't they?

A. Yes. I was city hall reporter on the Sentinel for quite a period and in that position I got well acquainted with the city officials, including in particular Dan Ho<sup>u</sup>fn, who was Socialist mayor for the entire period, I was on the paper. I also got acquainted with Phil LaFollette, and other Wisconsin governors. Phil was quite an interesting fellow. We newspaper boys used to write <sup>critical</sup> stories about him sometimes. Our editors

liked to take pot shots at Phil so we wrote some rather critical stories about him when he was governor. I remember one time I had written one of that kind about him and the next time I saw him at Madison he shook his fist under my nose as if he were really very angry. And then about the time I was ready to stammer some kind of apology or whatever I might have had in mind at the time, he stopped shaking his fist and burst out laughing. Now that method of handling newspaper stories you don't like very well seems to me a better technique than Herbert Hoover and Gov. Walter Kohler of Wisconsin and other ~~office~~ officials I have known in my newspaper career. A fellow who behaved as Phil did you can't get too mad at, and you might not be so rough on him the next time you wrote a story.

Q. He was an astute politician.

A. It was a good technique, I thought.

Q. Your legislative writing there led to this other job, didn't it?

A. Yes, my legislative writing started when I was on the Journal. I was sent over to help cover the legislature for one week. The boys in charge of political writing in those days assigned me to cover a hearing - I believe it was the judiciary committee of the Wisconsin legislature on a series of bills that the socialists and left-wingers, the progressives up there in Wisconsin, had before the Wisconsin Legislature to try to set up a lot of City-owned power plants and city-owned distribution systems. That hearing dragged on for about three weeks and - so I was a rookie at that, of course, but it was a very interesting series and I guess I did a fairly good job of covering it. At least, I wrote a Sunday article that the editors pulled out and used for a Page 1 banner article that Sunday. So for a cub reporter on the legislative scene in Wisconsin I thought I was given a pretty good start there. Well, I had occasion to cover a few governors' press conferences there when Walter Kohler and Phil LaFollette were governors.

So my 18 years of legislative writing with the Lindsay-Schaub chain of 5 daily papers was not entirely new to me when I had occasion to get started on that. That was in late 1948 when Dwight Green was going out of office at the end of that year. Adlai Stevenson came on and was governor during the first session of the legislature that I covered.

Q. Now I don't believe you told us how you got from Wisconsin to Illinois.

A. Oh yes. Ed Lindsay, who was top editor on the Lindsay-Schaub chain of papers, had had me write a few articles - I guess he had seen some of my writing - anyway, he asked me to write some articles on Wisconsin politics, which they wanted to use in their Sunday papers down here. I did one on the LaFollettes up there. I did one on the Socialist National convention, which I covered in Cleveland while I was still on the Milwaukee papers. That was a very dramatic thing, one of the most interesting that I covered in my entire newspaper career. The convention was held in the Cleveland auditorium. The socialists - Norman Thomas was the sort of perennial candidate for president for the Socialists and he was there. Dan Hoan<sup>an</sup> was head of the Milwaukee delegation that went down there. They had a very dramatic convention in Cleveland. There were about a thousand delegates there and they finally had a battle over some resolutions that the left wing of the Socialist party brought in and the right wing of the party weren't going to be able to head off. The right wingers got up and walked off. They went down the street to the old Hotel Hollenden in Cleveland and held a rump convention. Now, whereas, the Socialists, prior to that under Eugene Debs and later Norman Thomas as their candidates, had been pulling more than a million votes in the national election for president; after this split during that convention, Thomas got just a little <sup>under 200,000</sup> ~~over half a million~~ votes. Their national presidential candidates votes just kept slumping off from

that period. So it was quite a breaking point for the Socialist party nationally. And I did an article on that that Mr. Lindsay used, a whole page article.

Q. Then he wanted you to come here and work for him.

A. Yes. I had been coming down - my wife and I and our little daughter - had been coming down every year at Thanksgiving to see Mother, who was a widow then who lived at Mt. Zion. Ed told me to come in the next time I came down. He wanted to talk to me. He wanted to know if I was interested in a job but I had to get my wife's permission on that and being a Wisconsin girl, that wasn't easy. But he made me an offer -

Q. That she couldn't turn down either.

A. So we moved to Decatur. I'm sure if I tried to move her somewhere else now, I'd have a divorce on my hands. She likes Decatur now, very much.

Q. That's great! Well, now you've had an interesting career here in newspaper work.

A. Yes, I really have. The first ten years I was city editor on the Review. The staff at that time was five reporters, I believe, and two photographers. I was city editor there during the period of the second world war. Most of the reporters at that time were drafted or volunteered so we put out the paper in that period, as I termed it, by the old men and the girls. About the time I'd get a girl reporter to the point where she had some real usefulness, she'd marry a second lieutenant and he'd be transferred to San Antonio or somewhere and I have to start all over again training another girl reporter.

Q. Then the men came back?

- A. The men came back and I took advantage of that - I always liked writing better than editorships anyway, although editorships usually paid better. So we made one of the more experienced reporters city editor and I became legislative writer for the 5 dailies, which had a total circulation then, I believe, of about 200,000. So I covered all the legislative sessions for about 18 years and that also involved covering the news out of all the <sup>state</sup> ~~legislative~~ offices, including the governor, and covering the governor's press conferences.
- Q. What were some of the outstanding stories or features? You were on some of those commissions, too, weren't you?
- A. Yes. I had written so much about highways and highway problems that when Governor Kerner came to appoint a <sup>17</sup> ~~16~~ member highway study commission in 1963, I was made one of the 7 public members. There were 10 legislative members on the commission and ~~inasmuch~~ as (at that time I had just gone on semi-retirement with the papers here) on the theory that I would be less subject to business and political pressures than any other member, at <sup>Kerner's</sup> ~~his~~ insistence, they elected me chairman - the first chairman of that commission. The commission is known now as the "Illinois Transportation Study Commission" and is still operating. A highlight of that experience was that late in 1964 there was a delegation that went mostly from Chicago to study mass transit as it was being handled in 15 large European cities. I was invited to go along by virtue of the fact that I was chairman of that highway study commission. We visited 15 European cities in 10 countries in 19 days, which meant a lot of airplane hopping. The program over there was very interesting. A professor of transportation at Northwestern University had arranged this trip over there for that group. He had set up conferences with the minist<sup>ry</sup> ~~er~~ of transport in each of those ten countries. They entertained us at these

conference sessions, and usually that included a luncheon and some of those luncheons were very elaborate.

Q. You were well entertained!

A. I know in Paris the luncheon was in a very fine luncheon hall just down the street three or four doors from De Gaulle's palace. We were in Berne, Switzerland, I particularly remember, and Berlin and London. We got well acquainted with two men over there who promoted and got started the <sup>railroad</sup> system ~~was there~~ well known as the "Trans Europe<sup>an</sup> Express". It's a passenger train service jointly owned by about 5 European countries. We rode on that on one occasion. It operates right on time and if you aren't there in time to step on, you wait until the next train.

Q. You had some other activities too, I believe. You were connected with the conservation commission?

A. Not with the Illinois Conservation Commission, but I did cover quite a few of the activities of that commission and its efforts in getting a better program of parks and recreational areas for the people of Illinois. At that time Illinois ranked about 49th among all the states in acreage of state parks for recreation and other aesthetic interests of its people. I did write a series of articles at the suggestion of some of the members of the legislature on "Illinois State Parks". I took my wife along. We visited all the state parks.

Q. We owe you a lot in Macon County.

A. Well, Macon County is one of ~~five~~ <sup>four</sup> counties in Illinois now that has what they call a "County Conservation District." It's the buying up of acreage - green areas, historic sites and other interesting old buildings or what have you - for the future use and enjoyment of the people of the county. Of the counties that aren't doing that, all these green areas are very rapidly being subdivided into little septic tank ~~residential~~ residential colonies. As

I said in our campaign to get that favorable referendum vote ~~on that~~, that any industry looking over Macon County or other counties and finding a program like that here <sup>would be impressed</sup> - they <sup>district</sup> bought 2500 acres and developed it to quite an extent and plan much further development - ~~but~~ that program in Macon County I'm sure has made every industrial, business, and residential property more valuable.

Q. It really has enhanced this area.

A. It should be attractive to an industry that was looking for a site for a branch plant or it should help hold industries in Illinois that might be thinking of moving some place where their employees wouldn't have that kind of outdoor attractions.

Q. Well, Mr. Banton, you must have had a chance to meet some very interesting personalities in connection with your work in Springfield.

A. Yes, there were quite a number over that 18 year period. I remember in particular Paul Powell and Orval Hodge. Both of those were good friends of mine in spite of what happened to them in their late careers. Powell was Speaker of the House of Representatives in Springfield. He started in that capacity under Stevenson's administration. Paul was very loyal to Stevenson and was very effective in getting Stevenson's program through both the legislatures that Stevenson had programs before. In those days the legislature met every two years - so each governor then with a 4-year term would have two legislatures to try to get his programs adopted. Paul had been a member of the legislature for about 5 or 6 terms then and was a very able fellow, very effective. He could always swing a whole batch of votes for any bill he would ~~get down on~~ <sup>take</sup> the floor and make a speech in behalf of. That enabled Stevenson to get some bills through that he wouldn't have gotten through if he hadn't had that help from Paul. Well, Paul was also speaker once when the Republicans had a majority of one in the lower house. Paul's getting to



be speaker that time was quite dramatic. It ended up with his getting one vote from a Chicago Republican who later got himself in other trouble. ~~Then~~ I think Paul was speaker three different times. In those days the officials threw a party for the press correspondents in Springfield. The first one I attended was one that Paul gave. The correspondents later had a party for the governor and the state officers. But I just wanted to say <sup>about</sup> ~~in behalf of~~ Paul that he was pretty old-fashioned in some of his political ideas. He believed in the spoils system and he believed in being rewarded for both the things he did both for and against the bills over there for people who were willing to pay for it. That's how he accumulated the fortune he accumulated, a part of which was found in a shoe box<sup>s</sup> in Springfield ~~and~~ in his hotel room. When the story appeared in the paper that I was going into semi-retirement, I got the nicest letter from Paul Powell that I got from anybody. Now that was the kind of fellow Paul was. That was why he had so many friends. You couldn't go down to his home town in Vienna, Illinois, today and say derogatory things about Paul Powell without their throwing you out, ~~somewhere~~.

Orval Hodge was from Granite City and his folks were in quite good circumstances down there in a mercantile business. His wife's folks also were rather well-to-do. Orval operated in pretty lavish fashion, but we press correspondents didn't suspect anything wrong about Orval because we knew he was wealthy and could afford to do these handsome things he did. He always gave us nicer Christmas presents than the governor did, but we figured he was just that kind of fellow. He wanted to be popular with the press in so far as he could. We wrote bad stories about any officials that got themselves in real trouble, and they knew we would. That's why we didn't suspect anything wrong with Orval until it broke open all at once.

Q. You have had an exciting career then with your newspaper work. I'm sure you've had honors and distinctions. Why don't you tell us some of the awards you've had?

A. Well, I think number 1 would be the silver gavel given by the American Bar Association early in 1960 for the newspapers and other news media that had performed best, their committee thought, in translating to the public efforts by the Bar Association to improve <sup>judicial</sup> ~~own~~ selection of ~~judges~~ in the various states, and court administration. Now in most states the Supreme Court had both judicial and administrative powers as related to the various levels of their court system. But that took time from the court judges that shouldn't have been taken and under the court administration program the Bar Association was sponsoring they would have a court administrator in the state and it would be his job to handle the administrative chores that were rather heavy. There was held in the old Edgewater Beach Hotel in late 1959 a conference on judicial selection and court administration - the first such national conference that had ever been held and attending that was a speaker who was a retired chief justice of the Supreme Court in Great Britain and also the top man of the Supreme Court in Canada. Lord Goddard was the man from London - a very interesting old fellow, who made some very fine talks to the group. I was the only down state newspaper man invited to attend that conference as a participant. All the 4 Chicago papers had men invited to attend as participants - so there were five newspapermen as participants in that conference. I didn't try to cover it as spot news at the time at all, but later I wrote a series of full page articles that the newspapers here used on Sundays on that conference. Some of my lawyer friends in Chicago saw <sup>the</sup> ~~that~~ series and ~~they~~ suggested to the editors down here that they submit <sup>the series</sup> ~~that~~ in the American Bar Association's "silver gavel award" contest. They got up a brochure on those articles and entered it. We were one of four papers in the United States that won silver gavel awards in that contest. I was quite elated when the President

of the American Bar Association went out of his way to let me know that if there had been only one silver gavel awarded, it would have been mine.

Q. Great! I believe you did get your own gavel to keep, didn't you?

A. Yes - inasmuch as I had written all of the material that the Lindsay-Schaub papers had entered in the contest, they not only gave a silver gavel to the newspaper, but they gave me a personal gavel.

Q. I'm sure you treasure that... Let's go back to the history of Macon County for a moment. I'm sure people would like to know the outstanding points you remember from that. We could stay all afternoon talking about that history but could you give a few highlights?

A. Yes, I'll try to do that. To me early history is more interesting than history that I'm closer to in present day life. I find quite intriguing the beginnings of the white man's program here in Macon County. The first log cabin built here was built in 1820 over south of the Sangamon River near what is now the site of Mueller Lodge. It was built by a gentleman named Downing, whose profession was trapping and honey gathering. I presume he robbed the bees' nests he found in the trees and sold the honey. Well, his wife got scared of the Indians and she was looking for a chance to move back down south. Southern Illinois was settled before central and northern Illinois, and there were more Indians here than there were down Vandalia way. Another family came here in 1824 - the John Ward family and so Mr. Downing sold his cabin to the Wards and moved his wife back down to Vandalia. Well, the population built up rather slowly here in this immediate area, but by 1829 there were enough people here that they decided they wanted to form a new county. It was a long way to travel to Vandalia to the State House in those days or even to Shelbyville, the County Seat. Shelbyville<sup>County</sup> used to be a very large area and included the area that is now Macon County. So they sent a delegation of three down to the legislature in Vandalia in January of 1829 with a petition to authorize the formation of a new county. They had

no trouble getting it through the legislature and the bill that provided for the formation of a new county here also stipulated that the county be called "Macon" in honor of a distinguished North Carolinian and that the county seat be named "Decatur" in honor of Stephen Decatur of naval fame in early American history days. It also stipulated that until a county seat site was selected that county ~~business~~ <sup>business</sup> be conducted at the home of James Ward down near what is <sup>now</sup> Mt. Gilead cemetery ~~nowadays~~ and at that time was the intersection of two stage coach routes, one from Terre Haute to Springfield, and the other from Vandalia and points south through the <sup>is</sup> area and on toward Chicago. Inasmuch as the log cabin there wouldn't have been big enough to have had an election, which they had ~~at~~ <sup>in</sup> that period, and meeting of a jury, especially a grand jury, it is assumed by early historians that all <sup>county</sup> ~~business~~ <sup>business</sup> was transacted in James Wards' blacksmith shop.

Q. Where is that in terms of modern Decatur?

A. Down near Mt. Gilead cemetery. Well, there were two settlements in those days - the Ward settlement south of the river and the Stevens settlement north of the river. Stevens Creek out here was named for that family settlement. The Stevens settlement was mostly people from the East and the Ward settlement mostly people from the South. The Stevens settlement did, however, include the Lincolns, who lived here for a year, and the Hanks family, but outside of them that settlement was mostly all Easterners. The two didn't get along very well. They had one meeting at which they tried to pick <sup>a</sup> county ~~street~~ <sup>seat</sup> site and they got into a fist fight and one ~~of the~~ <sup>man</sup> ~~Ward settlement people~~ was so badly beaten up that he died. So things were a little bit rough on the take-off of the county.

The first sheriff was named Warnick and there are still Warnicks here as well as Austin's and Smiths and <sup>descendants as</sup> others ~~of the~~ early families. Long Creek had some very interesting people. There was a Baker family there - the Reverend Martin Baker was probably the most outstanding minister in Macon County. They had him give the <sup>invocation</sup> ~~dedication~~ when Theodore Roosevelt was here for the <sup>dedication ceremonies</sup> ~~of~~ Millikin University.

The community built up fast <sup>after</sup> ~~the~~ the railroads came here in 1854. There was quite a rivalry as to whether the Illinois Central would get here first or the Great Western, which later became the Wabash. The <sup>Great Western</sup> ~~Wabash~~ beat out the Illinois Central by about four months. The building of the bridge across the Sangamon River down here by the Stevens Creek area was quite a project in those days - a lot of pick and shovel work and scrapers drawn by horses and that sort of thing. <sup>They</sup> ~~we~~ had a German crew working on the east side <sup>of the creek.</sup> They had to import a lot of workers in those days because there weren't enough settlers here to build up crews like that. There was a crew of Irish on the west side. They used to get into some battles and one time there was a report that the Irish had killed about a half dozen of the Germans. The sheriff got out and had a wild chase. That proved to be not quite as bad as originally pictured.

Well, things built up pretty fast after the coming of the railroads. Up until the railroads came, the community was mostly just a local settlers' inner circle. They couldn't produce any grain or meat or live stock for shipment to Chicago or St. Louis because it was just too costly to get them there over the kind of roads they had in those days. With the coming of the railroads everything changed, and the community grew from then on very rapidly.

Q. What do you think of the future of Decatur, Mr. Banton?

A. I am among those who are not interested in seeing Decatur grow too fast or too much bigger than it is now. Future generations may say I was very old fashioned in that idea, but rapid population growth brings some attendant headaches that are very expensive and change the social pattern in some ways

that are questionable whether it's an improvement over the life the community had had prior to those changes.

- Q. I'm sure you must be enjoying your retirement. Your work on the history was part of that, wasn't it?
- A. Yes, the sale of that book landed on me much more heavily than I had anticipated, but we've sold over 3100 copies now and have less than 50 left.
- Q. Good. I thought we'd better mention that it is available. If there are only 50 left, that means they'll go fast.
- A. I'll be glad to autograph them. There is some talk of a second printing, but nothing definite has been decided about that.
- Q. What else do you do in your retirement. Do you do any newspaper work now?
- A. I did write quite a few articles for a magazine over in Springfield for a period of several years, but I haven't written anything for that for sometime either. My hobby is fishing but with the kind of Minneapolis winter we've had this year, fishing is no good, not even ice fishing. It's just too doggone cold to go ice fishing this kind of weather.
- I might let you in on a little secret, I suppose. I'm writing another book.
- Q. Great! And what is this?
- A. It's "Highlights of 52 Years of Newspapering."
- Q. Great! When will this come out?
- A. I don't know if it ever will come out. It depends on how good a job I do. I have two purposes in mind - three, in fact. One is to write for the fun of the family. Then if someone thinks it's good enough to publish and sell, that could happen, and the third reason I had for writing was to get out from under cabin fever in this Minneapolis winter we're having.
- Q. Where do you write? Do you have someplace to write?
- A. Oh, I have a den upstairs.
- Q. It gives you an outlet.

- A. You see, over these 52 years I kept scrapbooks of the more interesting news stories and feature articles I wrote in my newspaper work and those are my source for the highlights of the book I'm working on now. I'll have to do some cross checking for some dates that I need and a few things like that, but for the most part I'll be able to write right out of these clippings.
- Q. I'd like to be one of your first readers.
- A. I'll be glad to let you read a few chapters any time you want to.
- Q. Very well. It looks as if you may have retired from your newspaper career, but you are leading a very full and active life.
- A. Well, I should be thankful to have as good health as I have at 82. I'm able to shovel snow, although my grandson has been rescuing me from that.
- Q. What about your children? Do you have grandchildren?
- A. I have four grandchildren.
- Q. Do they live here in Decatur?
- A. Yes - two of them do. I also have seven great grandchildren and that makes me feel real old.
- Q. But you have fun with them?
- A. Yes, indeed.
- Q. Well, thank you, Mr. Banton. This has been a great experience and we appreciate your sharing everything with the people of Macon County.
- A. Well, Macon County is a very fine county and I hope I have contributed to it.
- Q. You have contributed a very great deal.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. O. T. "Jack" Banton.  
This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.