

Robert H. Dumas Interview

February 13, 1986

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Robert H. Dumas, City Librarian at the Decatur Public Library, where we are recording on February 13, 1986.

- Q. Mr. Dumas, this year is an anniversary for this oral history project. When I came to Decatur ten years ago, one of the very first things I did was to ask if you could use help in oral history. I was delighted when you agreed. This is the 64th program of the series. It has really been a pleasure to work with you.
- A. I want you to know, Miss Turnell, that I have been delighted with you and the project you have had. I think that, over the years in the future, this might turn out to be one of the more important things we have done here in Decatur in the last ten years.
- Q. I'm very glad to hear that because I have really enjoyed meeting all these people and hearing these stories. It's been a great deal of fun ... This year, however, also brings us a feeling of sadness because you have told us that you are going to leave the Library after twenty years of service.
- A. Well, I figured that it's about time that I get out of here—just ahead of the posse and the tar-and-feather crowd! I've always felt that I never wanted to retire, ever. I thought that I might someday want to work part time—but I've gotten very tired in the last year or so. The Library's changing. The library world is undergoing a kind of renewal at the present time. And new things need to be done

at the Library that require a new perspective or new expertise. I think the Board would like to work on this. I think any new projects or plans should be drawn up by someone who is going to implement them. So I thought this would be an opportune time for me to depart.

Q. I understand all that, and I'm sure you will not actually retire. You'll always be doing some project, I'm sure, or some deposition, even if it isn't library work.

A. Yes, I'm sure--even a different kind of library work. The thing that brought me into library work in the first place was working with collections and people. For the last 25 years or more, I've had very little contact with the public and comparatively small contact with the collections, though I try every day to get out and work amongst the collections a little bit. But the major part of my day is spent in an office reading reports and writing memoranda and shuffling paper of one kind or another. It's really not the kind of attraction that lured me into library work in the first place, though administration has its attractions--I don't mean to say it doesn't.

Q. Let's talk about your life before you came to Decatur, even telling us about your childhood.

A. My childhood was fairly unexceptional. I grew up in a small town. I may be one of the last generations that can say I grew up in a small town. It was in the state of Maine in northern Maine, where winters are extremely long and very harsh. It's kind of a remote area where I grew up--a kind of frontier community in many ways, as I suppose most places in Alaska are frontier. The community was

only, at the closest point, six miles from the province of New Brunswick. The lines of communication, I believe, were greater between Canada and Presque Isle, Maine, where I was, than between southern Maine and Presque Isle. Aroostook County, in which Presque Isle is located, is called "The County" in the state of Maine. It's the largest county and every once in a while people will talk, facetiously for the most part, about seceding from the state of Maine and creating its own state because people feel neglected and isolated, and they feel unappreciated by the rest of the state of Maine because of this isolation.

When I first joined the Army, I was joking--I had my basic training with the Tennessee National Guard--and I was rather joking with the people from Tennessee. They had small knowledge of the ways of the North. Those people were from eastern Tennessee--from the hills and mountains of that state--and had little knowledge of the North and the winters. I first went into the Army in September, and winter came on rapidly. We had our basic training in Massachusetts at Ft. Devons, and I was joking with the people with a straight face about the difficulties of getting into northern Maine in the winter time, and I described in detail how I went about it. I could take the train up to Bangor, and take a bus from Bangor to Macwahoc, and from Macwahoc to Houlton, up through the dreadful Hainesville Woods. I told them we had to take a dog team and I described in some detail how the team was hitched up with the dogs, with the harness and the lead dog. I didn't know a thing about it, of course, but I extemporized to the

best of my ability, and they swallowed all of it because they could believe anything about the horrors of Maine, really. At the end of the basic training it was getting close to Christmas. My leave would start on Monday, and I wanted to start on a Friday night to go so I went to see the company commander, who was a brother-in-law of my platoon sergeant. I guess National Guard units are very closely knit so I went to ask if I could get off on Friday instead of Monday. As soon as I asked, he said, "Oh, yes--you're the one who has trouble getting home through the Northern woods." I said, "Yes." "Sure you can go!"

It was a dreadful lie, but I enjoyed it so much.

My childhood really, though, was unexceptional. As a boy I did the things all boys do. We would build rafts in the Spring, unbeknownst to our parents, and float down the Presque Isle stream towards the Aroostook River on the flood waters. We would go skating in the winter time on the Presque Isle stream as well as on the ice rinks in town. Out at Quoggy Joe there was a little tobaggan run and a bob-sled run. A friend of mine who lived just up the street, an older boy, had a bob sled, and we would go out there occasionally and bob sled. So in many ways it was a kind of typical childhood.

Winter would set in around November. I remember skating up the rapids on the stream one Thanksgiving--that's seven miles upstream, and the river was already frozen over enough to allow us to skate on it. I also broke through the ice up there where the rapids were and the ice was thinner. I got my feet all wet.

The sorts of things we did were for the most part the sorts of things boys do in small towns where they have to make their own entertainment.

Q. What about your schooling?

A. I went to the public schools of Presque Isle. I lived right across the street from the grammar school I attended. It was the Gouldville School. I told people it was the Ghouville School. I would sing the school song--Ghouville, not "Gould" but "ghoul." I lived right across the street from the Gouldville School, but I still managed to be late a good deal of the time. I was the despair of my teachers, I guess.

When I was in high school, I had about a mile and a quarter to go. There was no salt on the roads. The ice pack would be about a foot or a foot and a half during the winter, and the air would be very dry. You would walk along in that sub-zero weather wind blowing in from the north. It was just desperately cold. The ice and snow under your feet would creak and squeak as you walked along, and it would just make you that much colder to hear this squeaking. I always said that as soon as I got out of school, I was going to go away, and I would never live where it was cold again. Here I am!

Q. After your schooling at Presque Isle, then what?

A. Then I went to the University of Maine in Orono, and after I graduated, I returned for graduate study at the University, during which time I also taught a couple of courses. I hadn't intended to do this, but right at the start of the semester, one of the faculty on the

English staff had passed away from cancer of the liver, and they had no one to take his place. The remaining faculty shored up, and a couple of the lower level classes they hired me to teach. That was a welcome source of revenue also!

I spent the year following that on my thesis, which was on Hemingway. Then I was drafted into the Army. I had visions of going to Europe; and since I had been rejected in all of the previous call-ups, I was getting near the age when this would be the last opportunity they would have to draft me. I cooperated with them by memorizing the eye chart. I decided that I'd like to have the Army pay my way to Europe. Well, they sent me to Korea!

I wasn't even aware that there was anything going on over there at that time. They managed to ship me over there, where I was an infantry man on the lines for a year or so except for a brief period when there was a supply sergeant for the company rotated, and I was put in his job for a while. Then I was back on line for a while, but by this time things were winding down and there was very little action after that. For the first six months I was there, there was more action than I really enjoyed.

After the Army I came out and went to the Graduate School of Boston University with the idea of getting my doctorate. While I was living on the back side of Beacon Hill, I stayed in a kind of Bohemian section of Boston at that time, enjoying myself tremendously; as you can imagine a country boy from Maine would be in that kind of milieu.

Boston University had been relocated shortly before that, in the post-war World War II years, out on Commonwealth Avenue; and it was a brief jaunt across the Fens to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. I used to go to the museum once or twice a week sometimes in the afternoon or between classes. On my way over to the museum I would pass by the Fenway Simmons College School of Library Science. I frequently wondered as I went by what on earth they taught in a school of library science--what kind of courses. Eventually, after thinking about this innumerable times as I went past the school, I thought I would go in and get one of their catalogs. So I did. I went in to get one of their catalogs and the lady I asked said she wouldn't just give me one of their catalogs. She wanted to call Mr. Boudreau. And Mr. Boudreau was a member of the faculty who was taking over for the director of the school at that time. He was out of town it seems. I left the office after talking to Mr. Boudreau and found that I was enrolled in Simmons School of Library Science for the following term. I never did know what happened. It was the most fortuitous thing--very lucky that I fell into something that was so peculiarly suited to my temperament and background. I've been very lucky ever since.

- Q. Very good! After you were graduated from Simmons Library School, then what?
- A. I went to Baltimore to join the Enoch Pratt Free Library staff on the advice of my faculty advisor at Simmons. It was awfully good advice. He said to change my job for the first few years every

couple of years until I learned the business. He said, "You've learned something here, but you're a long way from being a librarian. What is going to convert you into a librarian and make you know something is a variety of experiences. So try to get variety."

So I went to Pratt as an adult branch assistant and after about a year, I think it was, I became a Young Adult Assistant. I was trained first in the adult services by Marian Hawes, who had a national reputation in adult education and then in young adult work by Margaret Edwards, who was one of the saltiest, most forthright, clear-headed people I've ever known in my life, one of the truly genuine great librarians I think of my time. No nonsense about Margaret Edwards! She put me into a course of training, and I stayed with that for another year and a half.

Then I left the Pratt Library and spent a year as a general reference librarian in a regional branch in Los Angeles.

Then I went to Dallas, where I had an excellent opportunity which would come to a person of my limited experience only once in a lifetime--of becoming the coordinator of young adult services for the Dallas Public Library--one of the major libraries in the country which was just beginning to awaken after a long period of dormancy. The young adult program was about a year old. So I had an opportunity to shape that program. I stayed there for five years, and I'm very proud to say that at the end of that five years that program had an international reputation. Our publications were distributed all over the world. It was a very gratifying thing for my ego! It was

professionally gratifying also, but mainly it was a great ego trip by the time I left there. It was extraordinarily hard work--working 12 or 13 hours a day and working on Saturdays and frequently going in on Sundays. We were tremendously understaffed, but the fact that we were doing things that other major libraries in Detroit and San Francisco could not begin to touch was sort of a fuel that kept me afire all the time.

Then, mainly because I was in somewhat of a huff, I must confess, I left the Dallas Library. My father had had a heart attack in the meantime, and I hadn't been home in a great deal of time. I had a two week's vacation. I wanted three weeks. The standard for professional librarians throughout the country has always been four week's vacation. I asked for an extra week without pay, and I was told after due time that the city personnel office would not approve it even though I had worked enormously long hours that I had never charged the library for. I left in due course.

My next position--something I had intended to do in the long run anyway--was to leave the specialized services and to go into the more general field. I became the head librarian in Dedham, Massachusetts, which is a small library in a community of 25,000. I selected that to learn the ropes of general administration. It was a small enough library that I could handle it, I felt, and yet it was large enough to give me the necessary experience at a variety of administrative tasks. After four years there, I came to Decatur.

Q. Well, great! We've been delighted to have you here. When you arrived

in Decatur, what kind of city did you find?

- A. It's very odd, Miss Turnell. I must say that I was not taken with the city. I have to admit that. It's gotten to be home to me in the last 20 years. I had received a call. I don't know where my name was ever gotten, but I received a letter from Art Sappington, who was president of the Library Board at that time. I don't know where he got my name. I wasn't particularly looking for work. I had told some friends of mine that I was ready to make a move. Anyway, I got this letter, and I talked it over with my wife, and she said, "Well, she didn't care to live in the Midwest." I said, "I don't care to live in the Midwest either." We were so happy in New England. Naturally, that was my home. Why my wife was happy there I don't know because she's from Southern California. I decided to come out and look into the job anyway because it seemed like a good opportunity professionally.

I arrived on the scene. I had a most unfortunate experience with Ozark Airlines. They had oversold the flight when I got into Chicago so I wasn't able to catch my regular flight. The Board had arranged to greet me when I came. They had arranged a conference with the city council that I wasn't able to make.

Anyway, I got another flight into Springfield, and Art Sappington drove over to pick me up.

When I got up the next morning at the Ambassador Hotel and looked up the street, it looked like an empty city. I'm not quite sure why, but I think it has to do with the breadth of the streets in Decatur.

They were all empty. It was early in the morning when I got up. In the far distance, you could almost see the northern horizon as you looked north on Main Street there. I was impressed with the desolateness. There weren't any trees or plantings as there are now.

Later that morning, I met with the search committee--Art Sappington and Bob Grohne, who was on the board and formerly the mayor of Decatur, and Bill Olson. We sat around in the coffee shop and discussed the meeting. Then I went over to see the library. On my way over, I picked up a newspaper. The library had monopolized the headlines--in great big black letters--"Library fails audit" or something to that effect. Anyway, I looked over the library. It seemed very small and crowded--how crowded it was I didn't realize on that first cursory look. I saw Mr. Sappington later, and he said, "I guess you've seen the paper."

I said, "Yes, indeed, I had seen the paper." And he said, "That's one of the problems facing us." There had been a good deal of financial problems earlier in that year. The library had gone on abbreviated hours and had had to furlough much of its staff. There had been enormous problems.

At any rate, I was so impressed by the search committee, who were so up-front and seemed so knowledgeable and had such a firm idea of what should be done with a program laid out, that I went home and told Barbara, "I think we ought to go." She said, "Well, whatever you want." I said, "It's close to Detroit and close to Chicago. There will be things we can do."

We haven't really gone to Detroit or Chicago much in the last 20 years, but it seemed like a good idea then--so we came. We've been very comfortable in Decatur. I must say I was impressed from the very start with the friendliness of the people in Decatur. It really didn't take a long time for roots to start going down.

Q. Were you in the same building we are in now when you came to Decatur?

A. No -- at that time the library was located in a Carnegie building on North Main Street right next to First Federal Savings and Loan--on the corner of Eldorado and North Main. It was a large sandstone building. It looked substantial--Oh, Lord! but it looked substantial.

But when I began work, I found that there was one room that was crowded nearly to the ceiling and over half filled with books in boxes in storage--because there was no room for them on the shelves. There were enormous problems. It was taking from six to eight weeks for a person to register to receive a library card. The reason for this is that there was over a two year backlog in registration work. There was an enormous backlog of books unprocessed in the catalog department. There were only four or five people in technical services to handle the work. There was a cataloging chief clerk. There was no cataloger. He had been furloughed and had taken another job. There were a couple of people in the book processing unit; one of whom never came back to work. She was still on furlough at that time. There was a clerk-typist, Mrs. Vogeler, who was responsible for typing all of the cards for all of the catalogs in the library and one person in the order department

to order all the books. Well, they got the books ordered, but nobody knew what was on order because they had them all automated. They used a bookkeeping machine to prepare the orders. They typed them all out and sent them to a data-processing department, where they would be printed up on IBM cards and then run them through the bookkeeping machine to print out orders. They had all these order sheets, as they called them--pages that had the lists of books ordered, but no alphabetical list of everything ordered.

One of the first things I did was to do away with the data processing in order work and establish a card file. Then the card file gave us control over the items on order. Because another problem existed--no official catalog of the library's holdings--and its technical services--the cataloger wouldn't know what was already in or how another book had already been treated previously. we might get a second copy of a book and if they didn't remember getting it, they could catalog it and then enter it in a different way or classify it with a different number. We had three different editions of Grantly Dick-Reed's book on childbirth in the library at that time and every one of them had a different class number. One of them was under "Reed" and one under "Dick - Reed," which was correct since it was a double surname. Problems of this kind were numerous. The catalog was completely unreliable for this reason. We got the order forms going, and I established that each department would keep an order file in addition to the one kept in the order department and that every time a book they had ordered came

in, they would have to compare it to make sure that the right number of copies were coming. If a book didn't come in after a certain length of time they could ask about it. When it came in, they would have an "orders returned" file and they would have a little guide as to what was in the library until the card got into the public catalogs three weeks later or so. In this way they could give better service.

But the main problem I had was to reduce that backlog in order and circulation work and to see that people could get library cards when they came in. So we rewrote the entire circulation routines and simplified them. There used to be so many files and because there were so many files there was inadequate time to maintain them. There was an "overdue" file. Then there was a "delinquent file" after three weeks when a bill was sent. Then there was a "messenger file" because a messenger used to go around trying to get the books back from people. Because of so many files to maintain, they would get behind. Then they would create new files waiting to be filed into the proper file. So they had files upon files of things waiting to be sorted waiting to be re-filed into the main file. That was what took the time while they searched to see if a person was eligible for a card by checking all the delinquency files.

So we did away with the messenger. He wasn't collecting anything anyway. And we reduced the number of files to just an "overdue" file--period. Then we filed those cards behind the registration cards. Once a person had gone delinquent, he could never get a

card again unless he paid his fines. If he didn't pay any fines, then we arranged with the Decatur Credit Bureau to receive our delinquent accounts instead of having a messenger trying to collect them.

Then we simplified the routines themselves for cards to be issued and simplified the forms. In less than a year we had gone from two months down to giving a card when a person came in the door for which many people were grateful.

In those days, Miss Turnell, the library was on a circulation period where the books circulated for four weeks, but were really all due on one day--on Thursday. So you had all the way from four weeks and six days to read a book. Then they all came in at once. Naturally, Thursday was the busiest day in the library. We had enormous peaks and valleys of service. The staff simply couldn't contend with it, but there was no way to get around it with the circulation system. We had, which the Roger-Fry Circulation Study said was the most expensive and inefficient system in the United States--quite a distinction!

So we found that changing the circulation system would have required enormous initial expenses that I couldn't see that we were going to recoup--that is, cost them out--over any reasonable length of time. So we were forced to keep that system. But every Friday we would mail out enormous numbers of overdue notices. We had one person in the library circulation department who could type. If she was absent--ill, on vacation, taking a holiday--no work requiring typing could go forth. That was another bottle neck.

So we rewrote all the job descriptions and reorganized the staff in the library and required typing of all the clerical staff. At the same time we were able to upgrade the salaries very considerably. I made a deal with the board that I would keep a close haul on the number of positions if they would pay competitive salaries, and indeed I had told them before I would come that unless the library would improve radically its salary scales, I could not take the job because I could not run the library by myself. The board very soon in that first year rewrote new job descriptions, reorganized the staff; and then on the basis of that the board did begin a program of increasing salaries sometimes as much as 25% to make them competitive nationally. That meant that we could hire good people too--not only good people but before we weren't really hiring anybody. Professional librarians were very hard to get in those days so on our salary scale we simply could not hire people very easily at all so that there was a great staff shortage. Frequently the type of people who applied left a good deal to be desired, I think. So we were able to be very competitive after that with a professional staff. Shortly after that, they raised the salary scale of the assistants and then of the clerical staff. The whole thing was ratified by a personnel company in Chicago that was hired by the city of Decatur.

So things went along very well there, and we were able to get good people in the library with the necessary skills. I think that was very important.

As I was saying, the overdues would go out. They would be prepared on a Monday or a Tuesday. Then on Wednesday and Thursday the phones would ring off the hook with people saying, "I brought that book back."

Indeed, in many cases they had, but the circulation routines were such that we just lost control. By re-writing the circulation routines and simplifying them and doing away with these enormous files upon files that had accumulated, we were able to bring the number of telephone calls down to what would certainly be normal--two or three calls when the overdues go out. That's roughly what we're getting now.

I think that since those times there have been a lot of changes in the library--improvements I would call them. They have been across the line--in technical services, introduction of a work catalog that would allow us to be consistent in cataloging. The card catalog has been completely refiled because of the inconsistencies in filing and misfiling which had rendered it terribly inaccurate. You couldn't find things in the public catalog in the old days. So we've made a number of changes of that sort.

But the biggest changes, I think--in those areas obvious to the public--have been in the transition from the old to the new building. I'd like to tell a little about the old building's problems and how they were ameliorated by moving into this building.

The old building, a building that was originally constructed in 1903 with a Carnegie donation, architecturally was in the Greek revival style out of sandstone. It gave the impression of massive

dignity and massive structural solidity. In fact, that stone block front was just a veneer, and the building was not as substantial as it appeared superficially. In the 1950's it was enlarged slightly at the rear in order to accomodate a young adult section when the young adult movement was just getting started in libraries.

Later there was a major problem with termites in the '50's which required a major shoring up after the termites had been destroyed. This shoring up resulted in creating new obstacles and reducing the general usability of the library because of the columns that were required to prop up the building. A year after I came--or two years--I realized that there was a great need to add more periodical literature to the library's collections and there was no room to shelve it so I ordered some shelving, and I came in one Sunday to put the shelving up in a section of the reading room where the magazines were located. I had the shelves halfway constructed when the floor shifted beneath me--gave a slight drop. It scared the devil out of me, and I immediately dismantled the shelving that I had put together and put the stuff back in the basement. Then I roped off that reading area so that people were not allowed in the area for the remainder of the time we spent in that building. I noticed on the second floor where my office was that across from the office was a children's room. It was visibly depressed in the center. There had been a subsidence of time, maybe as a result of the termite damage. I wound up frequently wondering what floor my office was going to be on at the end of the day. One of the things the board had asked me to work on as a part

of their project was a new library building. I had been working on it ever since and this gave added urgency to my need to forge ahead on this.

At that time there were some vacant buildings downtown. I was asked by the board whether they would be suitable. I investigated and found that they would not, indeed, be suitable. One of them was the old Montgomery Ward building later occupied by a furniture store, Swartz's, downtown. Before that it was occupied by a department store, Meyers. I had looked into these and found them unsuitable. We had worked with the City Planning Staff to find some other location and had been largely unsuccessful although we had projected a location at the southern end of Water Street in the area just south of Wood. We thought those areas if torn down might provide a suitable location for the library. But about this time Art Sappington asked me what I thought about the Sears building, which had been recently vacated. I told him I didn't know, but I thought it was well worth investigation. We had an architectural firm look into the weight-bearing ability of the floors in the Sears building, and we concluded that, indeed, it would meet the requirements for a library. Mr. Sappington wrote to the Sears Roebuck Company to see if they could accommodate us in some way--make a gift of the building. Well, they couldn't make an outright gift, but they did make us very good terms and so we went to the City Council and asked their blessing on the project, and we received it because it was such a great bargain. In addition, we received a sum of money from the federal grant program--the public library service and construction act grant of about \$300,000. So the building and the cost of remodeling cost something like \$300,000--

which was considerably less than it would have cost to remodel and upgrade and expand the building we were in then. The cost of that was set in the neighborhood of 2 or 2¼ million dollars. So this was a cheaper alternate to expanding that building and far more satisfactory.

So we concluded to do this. A separate corporation was set up to buy the building, since we couldn't go to a bond issue on that--there wasn't time--and to lease the building to the library. The library's long-term lease for the building furnished collateral by which the private corporation was able to borrow money from the local banks to remodel and fix the building up for the public library. Afterwards, when the time was available, we had a bond issue referendum from the citizens which enabled us to get from underneath a heavier debt burden to a much lighter interest rate. So it all worked out financially very well.

Now in making the move it took close to a year for the financial paper work to be done and the contractors engaged and for them to let sub-contracts and for the entire thing to be done. We sold the old building to the First Federal Savings and Loan.

Then came the day of moving--at long last. We had projected moving in November and then we had to change our minds.

Moving a collection of 212 or 213,000 volumes at that time is a daunting prospect really. We developed a plan after a good deal of thought about how we were going to do it. We decided that we would close down the library for three weeks. Then during those three weeks we would make the move. It was proposed that we invite everybody to take out as many books as he could and then to return them to the new library. We decided against this, however, simply because the prospect of re-shelving those books when we would expect a large influx as a result

of moving would just be enormously difficult and something we could not contend with. So what we finally did was to hire a moving company and then we went around and marked every shelf in the library with masking tape and then we had those books loaded into boxes. We took the numbers on masking tape from the shelves and put them on the boxes. In the meantime we had marked every shelf in the new library with a number. All we had to do when we got here was to take the box of books with its number and bring it to the shelf where the appropriate number was listed. So the movers would load the boxes, the boxes were put into the trucks, the trucks driven to the new library and the books brought to the area listed. We had large sequences of numbers to guide the boxes--1 through 500 on this floor in this area, 500 through 700 in this area, etc. Then the entire staff was responsible for unloading the boxes and for loading the shelves.

The cataloging department was busy. We had greatly expanded our public catalog. There were three times as many cabinets now. Although the old cabinets were emptied of their shelves, and the shelves brought over and redistributed to the new cabinets, the new cabinets had already been made up and sub-divided alphabetically so that the old shelves were emptied into the new in accordance with the previously devised scheme.

It did take just about three weeks. We planned very well on the time scale there so that we were able to accomplish the moving. Then we opened the new building.

What we did, Miss Turnell, was to go from a building of 20,000 square feet (actually closer to 16,000 usable square feet) to a building that

had 60,000 usable square feet. And we made the transition to a building that had more service desks to serve the larger area. We made the transition with no increase in staff. I wondered how we were ever going to manage, quite frankly, and the fact that we were able to manage is nothing but a credit to the staff for shouldering an enormous burden. There were a thousand and one things to do that first year in the new building. Our services were able to take off and were greatly augmented. The staff was able to cover more service points and address a much larger service program all because they were agreeable to subsidize by doing a great deal of work at home that would ordinarily have been done here at the library. So the people of Decatur owe a great debt to the staff of the library for the way in which they met the challenge and overcame it.

We were unable to have any public programming in the old building. We had one program--the "Books Between Bites"--sponsored by the Friends of the Library which was sponsored in 1965. I should here give a great pat on the back to the Friends of the Library. Several years prior to my coming they had been actively lobbying for a new library and preparing the community for the need for a new library. They had the only program that was being offered in the old building. When we moved into the new building, we greatly augmented public programs with story hours and reviews and a larger program of book discussion groups. We started having such programs as "Christmas in September," where various organizations would bring in craftwork in September and exhibit it and show how they did pottery or ceramics, knitting, weaving, etc. We had these demonstrations and also a showing of the wares that were going to be available for Christmas. Then we had all kinds of new programs. From the first

year in the new building until now the number of programs and the attendance at these programs have gone up steadily--approximately 500%. That would have been impossible if we had stayed in the other building. The other building was crowded; when we had 18 or 20 people in it, that was a busy day. Eighteen or twenty people are completely lost in this building. There are seldom that few people in it. We don't even begin to notice a crowd until there are forty-five or fifty in it. Circulation has gone up by 50%, since we moved in here. We did a survey in 1977. This was done by the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois with the help of the Friends of the Library. We found out that our in-building use of materials was nearly equal to our circulation outside the building. This is amazing. There were other libraries participating in that study, and no other library came remotely close to our in-building use. That is directly attributable to the cheerful surroundings, the open look, the agreeable staff, the general ambience of this building. It would never have been possible in the other building. I think that I should here say that the architects who did the remodeling did a remarkably good job at color coordination and maintaining the openness of the library and making it warm and inviting. They did just a beautiful job.

Q. Mr. Dumas, what were your hopes for the library when you first came here?

A. Well, there was a whole constellation of things that I wanted to do, part of which were based upon a number of things which the search committee of the board had specifically enumerated as part of what

they wanted done. They wanted the confidence in the library restored; they wanted the drastic decline in circulation over the past few years reversed; they would like a new building; and they would like to see staff morale improved. Shortly after I came, that formed a hard core of what I wanted to do as finite objectives in the short term. But there were other things I wanted to do in the way of a general service program.

Shortly after I came, the Friends of the Library had a dinner to welcome me. At that dinner I said my aim as a city librarian would be not to create a temple of beauty or a temple of truth or any great idealistic edifice or have great idealistic and beautiful things in my mind. These are very good to have and I would not ignore those aspects which contribute to the spiritual and aesthetic life of the community. But I did not think the public library should have aesthetics and spiritual things as its primary goal. What is required from the community is good financial support and what is owed to the community is to pay back this financial support by also contributing to the economic life of the community. This is what I would hope to do--to make the library a practical force in the life of every person in the community.

Q. And how has it worked out--in your estimation?

A. We've made strides toward it. That was my goal, and I think we've made strides. It's something that will not ever stop, of course. That was a goal, and you don't ever reach it as you do a new building. You always work towards it, and I think we've made significant strides. We have increased the circulation, and what's more to

the point--is where the circulation has increased. There was a great decline from 1962 to 1973 in the use of the library by school age patrons of the library. This partly resulted from the growth of school libraries under Title II at that time. Students were able to get what they needed for school and frequently for recreational reading as well at the school library. It was more convenient, and the school served them well, and so there was a decline of 40% in our patronage by school age patrons. At that time I was wondering whether children's services would continue to be viable. Since then, children's circulation has been growing in the library very significantly. But at that time it hadn't and yet our circulation was going up, which means that that decline was largely the result of the growth of school libraries. By reversing it we were now serving our adult community in a way they hadn't been served before because our circulation almost immediately started to show an increase, especially in the central library.

I was looking over the long term as to where the circulation was growing. You look at it periodically because of the techniques of collection maintenance which we introduced here. I've always regarded libraries (as I said at that dinner the Friends had) to have at their heart a need to merchandise their material. It's a merchandizing operation. That means you have to have something people want, and you have to know what people want. In line with this operation, we early on, as I had in previous libraries, looked at where the circulation was coming from or where it was growing and trying to gauge the circulation to see if it was a proper function of the size of the collection. That is, we were

looking at turn-over, as you would in a store. We found out that turn-over was very high in certain areas. Primarily, the turn-over was greatest in the 600's, which includes books on how to raise your children, gardening, books on home economics, on how to repair your house, fix your car, books on how to cook, dressmaking, repairing of clothing, things of this sort. This showed the greatest turn-over of any collection in the library. So I said, "Well, let's build it up." And the more we built it up, the more the circulation increased. The turn-over would not go down. And we've been working on that ever since as well as on some others. In the 330's, there is a category that deals with investments, savings, estate planning, real estate--managing to buy or sell your house--these too have grown at an enormous rate over the years. We've built the collections, and the turn-over rate of this material stays very high. So by looking at what was going out in the library and trying to adjust the collections to reflect the circulation we kept meeting more and more the practical demands, as I suspected we would, of the people of Decatur. So this has been true that over the years we have contributed in a very practical way to the immediate concerns of the people--raising children, improving your home life, gardening, things of this sort.

We've not neglected, however, those aesthetic and spiritual elements because every section of the library's collection, without exception, has shown an increase in circulation. So I think we're doing something all the way along to make the library meaningful across a full spectrum of library services.

Now, I would also like to say that out there are people. It's not only the collections being used, but you have the question of who is using the collections? Are we just serving a narrow section of the community more and more? Last year I set out to see if I could find that out. When we computerized our circulation, which is really a milestone in improving the efficiency of the circulation department--When we computerized it in 1977, we introduced a capacity for charting the circulation in much more refined segments than before. At the same time we were able to get a better handle on who was using the library. We divided the patronage of the library into male and female, into white-collar and blue-collar, housewives, retired persons, children (male and female), school age. We took the city and divided it into the postal zones. 62521 is a large one, so we subdivided it into south of the river, north of the river, and Muffley area, etc. That was the largest postal zone. So we can determine what part of the city people come from. So I took the April circulation as a sample. I charted the circulation for years just in April. I charted it by male and female. Then I charted it by occupational status and by geographical location--that is, how many books went out to people in these various areas. I found with only one exception that our circulation and service had increased in every single one of these categories except one--and that was the circulation to people in the downtown area. The downtown area by and large has been shrinking in its residential abilities over that seven year period--so that accounts for that.

But except for the downtown residences, our circulation has increased in every single area, every occupational area, both sexes, and in every geographical location except that one.

Q. You certainly should be congratulated. It's an amazing story. Anyone just walking into the library can be impressed--has to be impressed--by the number of people and the variety of people using the library. Just by looking at them you can see they come from many different backgrounds. There are people who one might ordinarily think might not be readers or might not be at home in the library. I think you have done an amazing job of pulling people into the library--people from all walks of life and various ages and certainly different interests.

A. Thank you very much, Miss Turnell. I must say, however, that you say "I've done it." But I told the board when I first came here that they had to raise the salaries because I couldn't run the library by myself. That is just as true today as it was then. What has been accomplished has not been a personal accomplishment. Running even a small library involves a great many people. What has been done here--and a lot has been done--is not by myself. There have been contributions by me, I hope, but also by the staff, by the Friends, by the board and in the city department by colleagues over at Rolling Prairie. Contributions have been made by a great many people. People of Decatur owe a debt of gratitude to a great many people and not just to me.

- Q. I realize that. We couldn't have an enterprise this big and varied without a great deal of help, but a group has to have leadership, and I'm sure the city of Decatur congratulates itself on the leadership you have provided.
- A. Thank you very much!
- Q. We'll certainly miss you! Do you have any idea of your personal plans for the future?
- A. I tell everybody I'm going to sleep for a couple of weeks! Then I'm going out to see the desert in bloom--something I've wanted to see for years, but it comes at a time when I'm busiest here in the library. Then we'll go on to California to visit my wife's folks. Then I'm planning on taking a six weeks' or two month vacation in Europe. Then in the fall possibly we'll join the Peace Corps.
- Q. You really are ambitious! Of course, your training here has encouraged you to look at fields like that--but it might be more rugged!
- A. It might, but it seems a worth-while thing to be doing.
- Q. We certainly wish you well in all your enterprises... There is one question I've always wanted to ask you ever since I learned your name. Are you a descendant of Alexandre Dumas?
- A. I tell everyone he is my son! I don't think there is any relationship. I don't really know the dates. I've never really been into the pursuit of genealogy. My great grandfather, I do know, was born in Quebec in 1847 so I think

the dates are wrong for any connection with the novelist.

Q. Well, maybe when you are on your trip to Europe you can look into that!

A. Maybe I can!

Q. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us. The history of the library really mirrors the history of Decatur in many ways.

A. It does in many ways.

Q. We thank you for not only your contributions today and sharing your experiences here but for all the contributions you have made over these twenty years you have spent here. We appreciate it very much.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Robert H. Dumas, City Librarian. This is Betty Turnell.