

Mr. Wilfred Miller Interview

June 28, 1985

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Wilfred Miller, known to his friends as "Wil" Miller. Mr. Miller is the narrator, and Betty Turnell is the interviewer. This recording is being made at the request of the Decatur Public Library. We are recording in the library on June 28, 1985.

Q. Well, Mr. Miller you recently retired after a long career with the post office here at Decatur. Could you tell us about your work there - how you got started and something about your early jobs there?

A. I'd be happy to. I started in 1935, October the first. I was going to the University of Illinois at that time and the examination came open. I had no idea that I could actually go to work there, but I thought I'd take the examination just to see how I could do. There were over 300 people who took the examination. I was fortunate enough to get a fairly decent grade so I was offered a job. I took the job and started to work October 1, 1935, in the old post office. Many people don't know where that was, but it was located where the YWCA annex is now - on the corner of Main and Eldorado. The old post office was built in the Carnegie style of architecture. Across the street was the Decatur Public Library at that time, also in the Carnegie style of architecture. Perhaps if those were still here, they would

be part of the historical preservation. I worked there one month. The new post office was in the process of being built. Then after one month we moved into the new post office. I started as a substitute distribution clerk. Then I became a regular clerk about March 1 of the next year.

I worked as a distribution clerk about seven years. About that time World War II came along, and, of course, I was in that. I stayed most of the time in New York City working in a postal battalion there. I came back and became a supervisor - on the lowest rung of the supervisory ladder. I was called "clerk in charge" - clerk in charge in the office of superintendent of mails. From there I was promoted to "station examiner", which provides auditing the financial accounts of different window clerks and sub stations. Then at that time the army came out with what they called an "affiliation program." They would go to a laundry and say, "If you will organize a quarter master corps laundry unit in the reserves and meet regularly, that is what we'd like for you to do." They came to the postal service and said, "Will you organize an army postal unit in the reserves?" So our postmaster at that time was very much interested in that. His name was Jim Allen (he retired shortly after that and Richard Ellison became the postmaster, but he was also interested). So I became the commanding officer of a 15 man army postal unit. We were meeting at the signal depot about once every two weeks, and we went to summer camp for two weeks. We trained both in

army postal work and army training itself. We thought we had a pretty good deal. We were sure that we were the last ones who would ever be called into active duty. We didn't even think about that. Well, it turned out that we were the first ones to be called out of the Decatur area. We were activated in 1950 for the Korean conflict. We went to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, and stayed there for about two years - or at least I did - and ran the post offices down there on the army base.

Many of my men went overseas, but I stayed there and kept new people coming in, operating the base.

Then I came back. When I came back, I was promoted to superintendent of the window service at the main post office.

Then we built the Brettwood station and opened it in 1963. I was the first superintendent of the Brettwood station at that time. I stayed there until 1968, when I came back downtown as assistant superintendent of mails and then became superintendent of mails and assistant postmaster. Originally I thought that was as high as I could go. When I started in the postal service, all postmasters were political appointments. I wasn't a politician so I knew that the highest I could get would be assistant postmaster. That changed with the Reorganization Act of 1971. Now it would be a detriment to anyone aspiring to become a postmaster if he tried to use political influence. So my ambition rose a little higher. I thought, "Well, I'm assistant postmaster. Maybe some day

I can get the top job in Decatur". Fortunately that came about when Chan Glosser retired and so I was appointed postmaster in 1977 in February.

It was a kind of family joke. I have two daughters I'm very proud of. I used to kid them by saying, "I worked 41 years and then shot right to the top." That's how long it took me to become postmaster.

I stayed there until this last April (1985) and retired after 49 years and 7 months. I thought that was long enough to work. I wanted to get out while I was still in good health and could enjoy retirement, which is certainly not too hard to do.

It has been a very rewarding career and I enjoyed it. People ask, "Do you miss it?" Frankly, I do not miss the work or the pressures that go along with the job. I was ready to give that up. But I certainly do miss the people because I had an excellent staff of supervisors and a very high quality of employees who worked for the post office. I'm proud to count so many of them as friends, not just employees. It was a very rewarding career. I enjoyed it very much.

Q. That was a very fine overview of a long career, Mr. Miller. It struck me when you mentioned 1935; that must have been in the depths of the depression or very near it. I'm sure you must have been affected by the depression, as everyone else was at that time. Would you mind telling us your salary then?

A. It's rather surprising, I suppose, to a lot of people, but I began work for 65¢ an hour, which was pretty good in those days. I have a check - the payroll used to be signed by the postmaster here locally - of course now it's all electronically done through the data centers and computers - but the postmaster used to sign it locally and the payroll was made locally. Of course the cancelled checks were stored. About a year or two ago we were cleaning out some of the old records in one of our storage rooms. We came across some of these old cancelled checks which had long served their useful period. I looked through these and found one of my first checks. For two weeks - actually a little more than two weeks - we were paid twice a month - full time work - and for two weeks salary or a little more than two weeks I received \$76.34. That was take-home pay. But shortly after I went to work, in about a year I got married. My wife was also working. I was making somewhere around \$2100 a year, and she was making about \$1800. So we were making about \$4000 a year, and we lived very comfortably. It was very nice.

Q. Could you live on your first salary before you were married?

A. Certainly. Even 65¢ an hour was not starvation wages because all the other prices were relative to that.

Q. You could get a dinner for 50¢?

A. I remember definitely going over to Springfield a number of times to a place that used to be called "Pillsbury Mill".

They had a list of 8 or 10 entries - all for 55¢. That included everything. It's kind of unbelievable.

Q. Yes, it is. Now you mentioned your work with the army. This was not a part of your regular job when you organized the postal unit for the army?

A. No, it was recommended and approved by the postal service. We did the organizing and we met once every two weeks on our own time. We got army reserve pay for that. I don't remember how much it was, but we thought it was pretty good at that time - until we got notice that we were activated and on active duty! We weren't exactly anticipating that.

Q. Otherwise, it was just pin money coming in?

A. That's what it was.

Q. Then, I think most civilians forget how important mail is to the services.

A. We were very popular people when the mail call came. The men were circulating around the post office to get their mail. And of course it was much more important than that when it was overseas. It was an interesting experience down there. We had manœuvres at different times in the Ft. Bragg area. We were simulating combat conditions so we operated little postoffices in the field.

Q. You went along with the men?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. How did you get the mail?

A. We had vehicles - trucks - and we would drive back and

forth from the post office to where the maneuvers were. It was an interesting experience and we had a lot of fun doing it.

Q. Another point I was thinking about as you were reviewing your career was the change in buildings - from the old to the new. There were some attractive features about the old building, weren't there?

A. Yes, but Decatur had outgrown it. The main reason, I'm sure, was space. The old building had just been outgrown. They needed a bigger building. Even then, in 1935, the changes were significant as to the kinds of post offices being built today. They say, "They don't make them like that anymore." If people remember or take the time to look as they come through the lobby of our post office here, they'll see marble walls, terrazzo floors, a set of beautiful murals painted by top-flight artists depicting the history or background of central Illinois, including Lincoln. These are registered in the archives of the National Historical Society, so I'm sure that nobody would dare paint over those murals in the post office.

Q. Did they come from the old building?

A. No - they were painted right on the walls in the new building. It's a beautiful building on the inside. Again, we have outgrown it. Decatur has mushroomed since 1935. For that reason, we have an annex over on Cerro Gordo Street in the 400 block and, of course, we had to build the Brettwood

Station. That alone tells us that we have outgrown it. I'm sure that eventually there will have to be some expansion to provide services for Decatur.

Q. They tore down the old building?

A. Yes. It was torn down.

Q. I imagine that in today's climate of historical preservation it might have been saved.

A. Yes - I imagine it might have been saved because it was one of those old ornate Carnegie style of buildings - the same style in which the old library was built. Exterior-wise, it was beautiful.

Q. But not too practical?

A. Not practical - that's right. When we had the Brettwood Station built, we dedicated that building and Senator Paul Douglas was there. He came down to help in the dedication services. At that time we thought that building would be adequate for fifty years, but we are outgrowing that too. As you know, Decatur is expanding towards the north. So we are a little tight in the Brettwood Station. I'm sure that will have to be expanded before too long.

Q. It certainly is a reflection of the growth of the city and the way things have changed.

A. Some interesting things have happened in the post office in the last 50 years. Most people don't realize what goes on behind the scenes. Distribution - what's that? Well, the first thing you have to do to even keep the job as a distribution clerk and it's true to this day is the

requirement to memorize every street and every block of every street in the entire city and to know which carrier carries that area, so they can step before a distribution case and rapidly distribute the mail. Some of them can do it very rapidly. Our production in Decatur is excellent in that respect. So that's the first thing you have to do is memorize all that - and it looks impossible to begin with, but it isn't.

Q. That is one place where a machine can't take the place of a man?

A. Eventually it will. When we get into the zip codes, which some people have made fun of, but they are absolutely essential, we have now the 5 digit zip code. That made it possible to electronically and mechanically sort mail down to a city and sometime even a section of a city. That is the reason that Decatur is a multi-zip code city. In other words we get mail in broken down - all of this tray is for zip code 62521 or this one 22, etc., which helps us. Now the zip plus 4 is coming in adding 4 more digits. That will make it possible to electronically and mechanically sort mail down to what we call a "block face". In other words, one side of one street is one block - or a major building in that block so that it comes in automatically. "Hey, this is the mail for this business" - and nobody has to touch it. That's what the 4 digit add-on is going to do. With mail volume going up constantly every year it is certainly essential for that to happen. When I came into the post office, national mail volume was probably less than 50 million pieces a year, which I can't even imagine that. Now it is more than doubled. We're up to a 131 billion pieces last year. We will average through the Decatur post office last year

in the neighborhood of 225 to 230,000 pieces coming in every day - to be distributed and delivered. So there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes that the public doesn't realize.

- Q. I sometimes wonder how the electronic devices find the zip codes? I'm sure not everyone writes as legibly as possible and the position on the envelope varies.
- A. We call it "address hygiene". The zip code, particularly the 4 digit add-on, is really designed for business. We don't concentrate so much on private individuals adding the 4 digits because business generates over 80% of our business anyway. And business can through their computers and their addressographs have "address hygiene" so that the zip code is properly typed or printed. The optical character machines can easily sort it in that way. It's beyond comprehension how fast they can do it.
- Q. Well, there are many, many changes that have taken place in the postal service. Some of these you have mentioned. Are there other changes that you've noticed especially?
- A. One of the major changes took place, I can't remember when, but it has been at least 25 or 30 years ago. We used to have two deliveries per day. The carriers came around twice a day - once in the morning and once in the afternoon. I can remember carriers going out in the afternoon and the only mail they had would fit in one hand. It was a total waste of time and money so eventually the old post office department saw the light and said, "Hey, let's eliminate that afternoon delivery, increase the length of the carrier's route and thereby save some time and money. And so they did it. People at first

were critical. They wanted that second delivery, but 85 to 95% of the houses didn't get any mail anyway so it really didn't make any difference.

Another change that was made and was certainly needed. I can remember at Christmas time - again, this was 25 years ago at lease - it was almost like, "The Christmas rush is coming, and it's panic time because we will be inundated with mail." And we were and still are. But at that timewe thought we had to hire a lot of extra people. So we would get students and citizens come in by application. We would hire about 200 part-time workers for about two weeks during the Christmas rush to help us sort and deliver the mail. Well, we finally realized that all we had to do with a little bit of change in management technique was to use some overtime with our experienced people, and we could do the job faster and save all that hiring of extra people. So we started doing that, and it worked beautifully. We've been doing it ever since.

Q. You did something else too. You put on a public relations campaign - "Mail early."

A. Yes, and that made a big difference. The public has certainly cooperated. They have become used to it now. It used to be that people didn't mail their Christmas cards until four or five days before Christmas, but now we start to get them right after Thanksgiving. That has sort of leveled off the things so that it doesn't bother us any more. So we can easily handle the volume and deliver it - Oh, I can't remember when we didn't deliver every piece of mail we got in every day.

- Q. Under the old system a lot of postal employees missed their own Christmas.
- A. Oh, certainly. We worked as much as 12 hours a day. People were in there working around the clock. You worked right up into the wee hours of Christmas morning to make sure that everything was out. Times have changed for the better in that way.
- Q. And it shows how problems can be solved. One big change, I'm sure, that has come about is in the use of trains for postal service.
- A. When I first started, that use was very prevalent and continued for a number of years. They were called "railway post offices". Of course, railway (R.P.O.) clerks worked in the mail car on the train. Sometimes they didn't stop at a little town. They just threw the pouch off and picked up another pouch of outgoing mail from what they called a "catcher-arm" along the side of the track. The train would come whizzing through there and they would pick up this catcher arm with the mail pouch. The clerks on the inside of the train would have to brace themselves against the rocking of the train to sort the mail. Those railway post offices went out as the trains dwindled. After that, for a while we had some highway post offices, which were just big busses that actually did the same thing. Clerks sat in there distributing mail, but that finally went out as well, and a whole new system of transportation and delivering and sorting of mail came into effect with mechanization and better management techniques.
- Q. And, of course, there has been a change in air mail. For a long time the public could buy air mail stamps for service in this country.

A. The reason for that change is that air mail as such became unnecessary because that's the way ordinary mail travels anyway. So the only postage which is extra now is our new class of mail, which is called "Express Mail". It is the expedited overnight kind of mail. So that's one of the major changes that have been made. We have plenty of competition, of course, and more competition comes along all the time. People ask about that. They want to know why such and such a firm can provide service and take business away from the post office or in some cases do it cheaper. Well, it's relatively easy to explain because the private company who goes into the mail business is in it for one thing - a profit. Therefore, in order to turn a profit they have to take mail for a concentrated area, where it's easy to deliver in bulk. Yes, they can do it cheaper, and they can make money doing it. The postal service is mandated, of course, by Congress to serve everybody in the country with mail delivery six days a week no matter where they live - in Timbuctoo or wherever - Alaska, Hawaii, wherever. Even in the most remote regions of the country, they are entitled to mail delivery every day, six days a week. You can bet the private industry cannot afford to do that. If the private express statutes were to be repealed, and there has been some pressure to do that, that would be one of the major mistakes that our government ever made because what would happen is that the people who live in the remote regions of the country would have their postage rates raised ten times or more. The post office would be left only with all those hard-to-deliver places; therefore, we would have to raise the postal rates sky-high. Of course, we would be blamed for it, but it wouldn't be our fault. The private express statutes are essential as the first Continental Congress set them up. They set up the postal service for the basic reason of communication

to every single individual in the country. It was the cord that tied the union together.

Q. A part of democracy?

A. So we get criticism for delays of mail once in a while - more than once in a while. You know, it always seems odd to me - I've asked the question to people who complain to me about their service, saying, "I didn't get this letter for two weeks and it was just mailed from Maroa." I always ask them, "Well, how many times has this happened?" "Well, it happened once again last year." "Well, how many letters have you received in the meantime?"

When you consider the number of pieces of mail that you receive on time, regularly, compared to the number of pieces you don't, it's pretty good service. People always remember the delays, but they can't seem to remember the huge volume of mail they get on time.

Q. I'm sure you had many opportunities to move elsewhere, but you chose to stay in Decatur. Could you tell us why?

A. I'm a native of Decatur. I was born and raised here so my roots are in Decatur, and I have a wide circle of friends in town. One of my daughters still lives here. I enjoy the people and became active in the community and although other opportunities came along, I felt with the experience and the time I had put in on my present job that there were ample opportunities for advancement right here, where I didn't have to sell my home and buy another one and uproot the family and take them someplace which they might not enjoy as much as Decatur. I have always felt that Decatur is a very progressive and a very excellent city to live in. The people are friendly, they are compassionate.

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Side B.

- A. I worked part-time at WSOY for about 30 years. The way that came about is this. After I got out of the army the second time with this postal unit I mentioned, and came back into town, I found that we weren't making that much money. The budget was getting a little tight. You lose when you're in the service. Your expenses don't balance. I was looking for a part-time job and a good friend of mine, who was state's attorney at that time, happened to say, "Did you ever think of radio?" He knew I had done quite a bit of public speaking, and used to do some singing. I said, "No, I have never thought of it." He said, "Well, I can't get you a job, but I think I can get you an audition." Which he did, and I went to work the next week, part time, at WSOY and I worked on weekends - Saturdays and Sundays - for almost 30 years. I did news and mostly music programs and enjoyed it very much. It took up a lot of time. My weekends were all filled, of course. It meant that I was working 7 days a week. But it kind of gets in your blood. You enjoy doing it. It's fun. I had some offers from other stations and bigger markets to move into broadcasting full time, but I decided not to take advantage of that because when you get into a top market, it doesn't make any difference how good you are. There is somebody else around who is just as good and if you have to be off with the flu and have to be off for a month or two, you might come back and find you don't have a job. So I decided to stay where the security was and use my broadcasting as a hobby.
- Q. Didn't you do special programs at Christmas?
- A. Yes, I used to do quite a few of those, and I did some M.C. work around town for various organizations. It's just a very interesting hobby.

I still do what we call "production work" - that is, work with studios to produce commercials or things of that kind - just to keep a foot in the door.

Q. Have you ever tried television?

A. I did try television. Of course, I still do some of the voice on television. For a very brief period of time I did newscasts on television and I've done some commercials on camera on television too, but I enjoy radio much better. You can concentrate on how you sound and what you're saying, and you don't have to worry about how you look.

Q. I'm sure you wouldn't have to worry about that anyway! Well, you really seem to be enjoying retirement. You haven't had it very long, have you?

A. April 30 - less than 2 months. It's surprising how quickly you can get adjusted to it. There's plenty to do. I have no problem with that at all. I like community work. I like volunteer work. I've been active with that a good number of years and intend to stay that way. It's very rewarding. I've been on the United Way board for years and work on St. Mary's advisory board - things of that nature. You meet such fine, dedicated people. That's one of the major joys in life as far as I'm concerned is associating with people and the accumulation of friendships. You can't beat that.

Q. It has certainly been a great benefit to Decatur that you have stayed here and contributed not only through your work but through your "extra-curricular" activities too. We certainly thank you for your reminiscences today, Mr. Miller. We know you will continue to give us the benefit of your time and talent.

A. I intend to do everything I can to promote Decatur and enjoy the association with the people here.

Q. Thank you very much.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. "Wil" Miller.

This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.