

Mr. Byrd L. Davis, Jr.

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Byrd L. Davis, Jr. Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Byrd L. Davis, Jr. Well, Mr. Davis, have you lived in Decatur all your life?

A. That's right. I was born here in Decatur and I've lived here all my life. I was born January 10, 1904, in the family home at the corner of Eldorado and Union Streets. The dwelling has been ~~to~~ down - that is demolished - but some of the buildings that were there are still on the back of the lot, but the home has been demolished.

Q. Well, Decatur must bring back many memories when you were a little boy living there. Do you have any special remembrances of your life at that time?

A. Oh, yes. Of course, the neighborhood now looks a good deal different than it did then, but I remember when they constructed the - at that time - United Brethren Church across the street from where we lived. It was under construction at the time and I must have been a boy about 7 or 8 years old then. I was pretty venturesome, and I crawled up into the framework of the roof of the church under construction. I don't know if I became scared or stuck, but I couldn't get down, and they had to call the fire department to put up their ladders and get me down.

Q. We'll hear later that you had a close association with the fire department. The fire department entered your life quite early! But you got down safely from your adventure?

A. Yes - that must have been the time I got interested in the fire department.

Q. But your father owned a livery stable, I hear.

A. Yes, that's right. He and his father came here from Shelbyville. They were in the livery business in Shelbyville. They came here in the late 1800's - during the Wabash Railroad strike. Some of the first business they had was driving people by horse and buggy to Springfield. The trains would get as far as Decatur, and the railroaders would get off the train and wouldn't go any farther. So they took the passengers to Springfield.

Q. Their business had a thriving start then. You know, Mr. Davis, I'll bet there are some people who might listen to this who wouldn't know what "livery stable" meant. Do you think that's possible? Maybe you should describe what it was.

A. Well, that's possible. The younger generation might not know. It was mostly horses and buggies at that time - carriages - my dad had several nice carriages. He had what they called a bus and a tally-ho and other equipment for weddings and funerals. He had a couple of hearses that he rented out to funeral or undertaking establishments. He also had an ambulance - a horse-drawn ambulance.

Q. That was quite a business! It must have required quite a little care for all those vehicles.

A. At that time he had quite a large livery business and quite a few people working for him. He had his own carriage shop, where he repaired his buggies and cabs - refinished them and painted them. He had a regular painter. He had all that work done.

Q. To say nothing of horses. How many horses did he have?

A. He had quite a few horses. He was very much interested in horses and live stock. He also had a farm at the same time. We used to drive out there in the evening. I remember riding out there in a buggy with my mother and dad.

He always drove a pretty spirited horse. He would shake the paper. My mother would have the lines in her hands and of course -

Q. Just to tease her?

A. Yes, that would tease her, because the horses would start off on a run. Very exciting!

Q. Was your mother able to handle them?

A. Yes, she could handle them. Of course, he was sitting right beside her and he would take over if they got too wild.

Q. Did they ever have any accidents?

A. No, not that I know of. I don't remember any accidents.

Q. A run-away horse was a pretty exciting event in those days.

A. Yes, I suppose they did have some. Automobiles scared the horses.

Q. That was a thriving business, but of course it came to an end.

A. Yes, the livery business came to an end when automobiles came into being, but when that happened, my father went into the transfer business.

Q. What do you mean by that?

A. He was in the business of hauling furniture, etc.

Q. You mean trucking? Still by horse and wagon?

A. No, by trucks.

Q. He went into the automobile business.

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. He could see the handwriting on the wall.

A. Yes, he had to change with the times. He bought a number of trucks and used those for drayage and hauling furniture, moving people - moving and transfer.

Q. How long did he keep up this business? Did he retire?

A. He gradually phased out the business. The farm was sold - out northwest of town. A part of it will be the site of Richland Community College.

Q. The new site, you mean? So it wasn't too far from the city?

A. Not too far. Frank ~~Kelly~~^{ELLIOTT} lived on the corner and that's Art Wilcox's place now. Art Wilcox bought that place. Later on he acquired the farm we had.

Q. Let's talk about your career. You joined the fire department, as we hinted earlier. How did you happen to get started? Aside from your early rescue?

A. That must have interested me - got me started. The fire department took my eye when I was a lad. When I was about ten or twelve years old, I used to go down to the fire station at the corner of West Main and Church Street and watch them go through what they called a "practice hitch" hitching the horses to the apparatus every evening. I made sure I was there when they had that practice hitch. I liked to see those horses come out of the stalls and to see them hitched up to the apparatus.

Q. It was very exciting?

A. Very exciting! Of course, if they didn't catch the horses and hitch them to the apparatus, they'd go right on out the door.

Q. They were trained to move!

A. Yes, they were trained to move. It was quite a sight.

Q. Did they have a way of lowering the harness?

A. Yes they did. The harness was pulled up to the ceiling on ropes and pulleys. One of the men would drop the harness on the horses, and they would make a few snaps on the collars and so forth, and they were ready to go.

Q. Then they would make a practice run and come back?

A. Well, they wouldn't make a practice run. It was just called a "practice hitch."

Q. But they would draw a crowd when they did all this?

A. Yes, it was very interesting - Maybe they got tired of seeing me.

Q. You were hanging around so much!

A. Yes. I went to work on the fire department May 1, 1926.

Q. What was your first job?

A. My first job was what they called "hydrant man" or "hose man," I rode on the back of the truck and got off with the hose line and connected it with the hydrant. That was one of my first jobs. Later on I became a driver and I drove ladder trucks and later I drove the chief's car.

Q. When did they shift from horses to motors?

A. Well, they started that along about 1916 or 17. They still had a couple of horse-drawn steamers that they kept at #2 station and at #1 station.

Q. How many stations did they have at that time?

A. At that time they had three - just as they were beginning to go to automobiles, they built a #4 station at Jasper and Locust Streets.

Q. When you became a driver, you were driving a truck?

A. Yes - I drove the chief's car for several years. Then I drove the ladder truck that went on all calls in the city. I drove it several years. Later on, I was promoted to Captain.

Q. What does that entail?

A. The captain is in charge of one of the shifts at one of the fires stations. Later on I was promoted to assistant chief, the next step at that time. Later on, I went into the fire prevention bureau.

Q. The fire department has an active bureau?

A. Yes, it does.

Q. What were your jobs there?

A. Well, mostly inspection work on buildings, business places, and industry throughout the city. These are inspections for fire hazards and safety. I worked in that job 7 or 8 years. Then I went from that to chief of the fire department.

Q. You had quite a long, active career.

A. Yes, I did. I came up through the ranks to the head of the department.

Q. You've seen a lot of changes in fire fighting. What are the main changes you've noticed?

A. Mainly changes in the apparatus. They have more modern, efficient equipment than they had then - more efficient engines, better pumps, better ladder equipment. Modernization has done a lot for the fire department. It has made a more efficient department.

Q. Modernization has probably provided more hazards too. On the whole is the city ^{REMOVED} more protected from fires? *Better protected buildings*

A. Yes - between the modernization of the fire department and up-to-date building codes, the whole situation has improved - fewer hazards and the building code has helped prevent the spread of fires and safety to life in the building is better.

Q. Were there any really spectacular fires you recall?

A. I can recall a few. One is the Newman fire on North Water Street, 100 block. That was a large fire?

Q. Did that take place recently?

A. No - about 20 or 25 years ago.

Q. What caused it, do they know?

A. They don't know. I don't know if the cause was determined. Then the Starr's Garage fire in the 500 block of North Main was a very hot fire. That was a 3 or 4 story building and of course had wooden floors, all oil-soaked because of the operation of the garage. It burned pretty fast and was so hot that it melted the asphalt on Main Street so that you couldn't walk across it at all - you'd sink into it and pull your boots off. We had to set up our heavy stream equipment over on the boulevard at the business across the street. We couldn't get any closer because it was so hot.

One other fire I remember as pretty scary was the LP Gas company up at Forsyth. They operated the liquified petroleum gas sales up there. Of course, they had quite a few tanks of LP gas. Somehow in the operation of the business a tank was set on fire and it spread to the others. It was quite a spectacular fire and scary, too. Fortunately, the relief valves on the tanks operated and that relieved the pressure. There weren't any explosions which was very fortunate. If there had been any explosions, that would have been really bad. It was just across the intersection from the oil tank farm, and it could have caused a conflagration.

- Q. Do you think there is understanding of fire fighting by the public? Is there any way the public could help more? Aside from being more skilled in fire prevention?
- A. Well, the sensible approach is the prevention of fires, and they are doing a real good job in the prevention of fires, I think. That part of the department has become a more specialized part of the fire-fighting business.
- Q. Generally, you think the people support the department with appreciation of the dangers and hazards the fire fighters face?
- A. I think the fire department has good publicity. They have articles in the paper every now and then about the hazards people should look for, how to prevent fires, and safety tips. I think the people are appreciative.
- Q. Well, you're retired now. Are you enjoying your retirement?
- A. Yes, I am. I put in 41 years on the fire department, and I enjoy my retirement.
- Q. Do you have any hobbies or interests?
- A. I have several volunteer jobs. I work in the Boy Scouts. I'm on the Lincoln Trails Executive Board - I have been for several years. I've been chairman of the Health and Safety Section of the Lincoln Trails Council and I'm a member of the Firemen's Pension Board Trustees. I have been for several years. I

SERVING ON UNITED WAY BUDGETY COMM-10 YEARS!
was president of the board for 8 years and a member for 25 years. They meet periodically. I take part in several senior citizens' groups around town.

They meet for good fellowship, and I take part in those a couple of days a week.

Q. Mr. Davis, you showed me a framed copy of an old newspaper article about Billy Sunday - when you were a little boy. I'll describe what is here and you can tell about it. It's a pretty big newspaper ad for the Davis Livery Company. It says, "Billy Sunday told me to sit down!" That's at the top. Then there is a picture of you as a little boy - would you say four years old?

A. Four or five years old.

Q. It says "Because I got tired of those hard seats and got up to stretch and get a little exercise." That's probably why Billy Sunday told you to sit down. Then it goes on to say, "If I had had one of papa's nice carriage or buggy seats to sit upon, Billy Sunday would not have had the laugh on me." Then it says "Just because Mr. Sunday called me down is no reason I'm not all right. I belong to my papa, and he doesn't own anything but the best." As I said, it's signed "Davis Livery Company for good horses - good rigs - good cabs - and good service." Do you remember anything about it?

A. Yes, I do. At the time, the church - they called it a tabernacle at that time - was across the street from the home place where we lived. Evidently I was on the front row. I always wanted to get in front. And evidently I was standing up and maybe some of the people couldn't see. Mr. Sunday objected to that. And that's how it came about.

Q. Your father must have gotten a kick out of that.

A. Yes - and later he used it as an ad for his livery business.

Q. But you know, I think we'll have to explain who Billy Sunday was. Now I know, but I'm sure there are younger people who wouldn't know who he was.

A. Well, Billy Sunday was a noted evangelist who went all over the country holding evangelistic services. He was quite a preacher, an evangelist.

Q. I wonder if he converted you at the age of four? At least, he probably persuaded you to sit down and be good.

A. I think he might have made a pretty good boy out of me.

Q. I'm sure somebody did. Mr. Davis, after you retired from the fire department, I believe you took another job. With civil defense? ~~AND EMERGENCY SERVICE~~

A. That's right. One year after I retired from the fire department - that would be January 1, 1968, I went to work for the Macon County Civil Defense Office. I was with that office for ten years. I experienced three of Decatur and Macon County's worst disasters during that time. Three of them happened in 1974 - a tornado, a flood, and the N. & W. railroad yards explosion. I'm sure that even people who didn't live in Macon County at that time remember.

Q. Of course, we know that the tornado and flood would be bad. We know there would be difficulties there, but maybe you could tell us about the explosion.

A. The explosion happened in the N. & W. Railroad yards from a switching operation of loaded tank cars. One tank car containing liquid petroleum gas was ruptured. The gas spread out over the entire area of the railroad yards. Of course, it reached a source of ignition somewhere in the yards and an explosion immediately happened. The explosion was widespread. It wrecked everything in the railroad yards and of course it damaged some homes in the area. The Lakeview High School was damaged extensively.

Q. What time of year was this?

A. July, 1974.

Q. Then school wasn't in session.

A. No - had it been, I'm sure there would have been injuries and possibly some deaths in the school.

Q. What time of day was it?

A. It was around 5 o'clock in the morning, which was a good thing because there weren't too many people around.

Q. Not too many workers around?

A. No, there weren't - so injuries weren't so great.

Q. But property damage?

A. Yes, property damage was extensive - in the residential area and of course in the railroad yards.

Q. Was anybody killed?

A. Yes, there were several railroaders in the railroad yards at the restaurant. They came outside. There were several of those fellows - five or six of them - killed in the explosion.

Q. When a disaster like that happens - or an emergency - I suppose it was your job as assistant director of emergency services - what do you do?

A. The job consists of coordinating the various emergency services. Good cooperation is what it takes in circumstances of that kind, and the assistant coordinator's job is to see that there is cooperation and coordination between the fire services and the police service and the ambulance service and the medical corps. *LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES*
FED CROSS-SALVATION ARMY

Q. And the hospitals?

A. Yes.

Q. And you did have good cooperation at that time?

A. Yes, we did - very good.

Q. No matter how good the emergency services are, it's a terrible disaster when something like that takes place. But we all know it would be worse if there hadn't been planning and coordination and cooperation.

A. That's right. It takes cooperation of all emergency services to get the job done, and there was good cooperation. There was some confusion but that goes along with any large scale disaster, but the cooperation and volunteer help was tremendous.

Q. Did you have to evacuate people?

- A. Yes, they did. They evacuated people in the residential area for quite some distance.
- Q. Following a disaster of that type, are there any rules or regulations to prevent another such disaster?
- A. There was a thorough investigation afterwards to see what caused the wreck. It was conducted by the National Safety Board.
- Q. Did they find out what did cause it?
- A. It was an error in switching operations in the railroad yards that caused some cars that were switching to bump the liquid petroleum tanker too hard. It overrode the coupler and punctured the tank. That caused the release of the LP gas and then it ignited.
- Q. Were there any regulations that came out afterward to prevent such a disaster or is it just a matter of training people?
- A. Of course, training goes along with it. And then there were some added regulations about the switching operations in the railroad yards and about protection on the tank cars too.
- Q. You have now retired from that position and so you have had two retirements.
- A. That's right. I retired again in ^{SEPT.} '78 last year.
- Q. But I'm sure you're on call for advice or counsel or for community interest.
- A. That's right. You don't get out of something after you've been in public safety work for 51 years. I'm always glad to help out if needed.
- Q. Now I'd like to talk to you about your name. Of course, Davis is not so uncommon, but your first name is spelled "Byrd." That probably is a family name.
- A. Yes, the Byrd name started in Virginia. My great-grandparents lived in Virginia and were neighbors and very good friends of the Byrd family. Eventually my father's name became "Byrd." It originated back in Virginia.

Q. How did your family get here?

A. They first went to Bourbon County, Kentucky, and settled. Eventually they moved to Long Creek Township here in Macon County.

Q. Do you have any idea of the time?

A. The records show 1828 or 1829 - my great-grandparents came there.

Q. You said your ~~father~~ and grandfather ~~came from~~ Shelbyville. *MOVED FROM DECATUR*

A. Yes, my grandfather was in the livery business there. *ABOUT 4 YRS* Then he came to Decatur *IN THE LIVERY STABLE BUS. ABOUT 1878* and my father joined him then. It was in the late ~~1800~~'s. *1800's*

Q. We have talked previously about that business, but I did want to call attention to the fact that you have a name that has a long American tradition in Virginia and West Virginia with the name of Senator Byrd. So you take part in a great American heritage.

A. Yes - some people spell it "Bird," but the correct spelling is "Byrd."

Q. You not only take part in a long American heritage, but a long Macon County heritage so that your family has contributed a great deal to the history of this area.

A. That's right. The family came here, according to the records, in 1828 or 29. They were here during the "deep snow," written about in the paper. We're descendants of old time pioneers in the county.

Q. We certainly thank you for sharing your reminiscences with us. We appreciate the contribution that you and your family have made to this area. Thank you very much, Mr. Davis.

A. Thank you!

Q. You have been listening to Mr. Byrd L. Davis, Jr. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

