

Kramer, Robert H.

Interview by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

Early life in North Dakota, Canada, and Taylorville, IL . . .	1
Music course at Millikin	1
Musical career	1
Teaching at Millikin and playing clarinet in dance bands	
Other teaching positions--Argenta, Mt. Zion	2
Business career--Thompson-Kramer Music Store	3
Experiences with Albert Spaulding and Doc Severinsen, Jack Benny, Kate Smith	3
Travels with a dance band	4
(Tiny Hill) from Decatur. Other musicians from Decatur area: Monty Mountjoy, Dick Coffeen	
Changes in music	5

Robert H. Kramer Interview

September, 1982

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Robert H. Kramer.

Q. Mr. Kramer, where did you spend your early life?

A. I was born in North Dakota. Then we lived in Canada for a few years, and then we spent quite a bit of time in Taylorville. We came up here in 1947.

Q. Was that Taylorville, Illinois?

A. Yes.

Q. What brought you to Decatur?

A. I had started school at Murray (Kentucky) back in the depression, and I could go only one semester. After 15 years I came up here to Millikin to finish my degree.

Q. That must have been a bit difficult to pick up after that time?

A. Well, with a family and doing everything I could to make a living, it was quite a chore.

Q. But you got your degree?

A. Yes.

Q. Well, let's see what happened from then on. I know you went into music.

A. Yes. I was in a music course at Millikin. I played with the symphony there and played with the municipal band here in town.

Q. What instrument did you play?

A. Clarinet was my major. I taught clarinet at Millikin for a few years. Then I played with dance bands to add to the income.

Q. So you had a wide experience with music. Do you have any preference or any antipathy toward any kind?

A. Oh, I like classical music and then the old style big band of forty years ago.

Q. Did you receive all of your musical training at Millikin?

A. I took some courses at the University of Illinois and at Eastern - and Murray, of course -

My main interest in music was started by a teacher we had in Taylorville. He was just one of those persons who had everyone working real hard. It was worthwhile.

Q. So you had an early interest in music. Was it always the clarinet?

A. I started on the violin, but I had a short finger. I had part of it cut off so that wouldn't work so I switched to clarinet.

Q. So that's been your love ever since?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you teaching full time at Millikin?

A. No - just part time. At the same time I was teaching at Argenta and Mt. Zion and also privately. I was the band teacher at Argenta, Mt. Zion, and Mattoon, and here in Decatur at the junior high school. At that time we had only five teachers for music. Things have changed considerably since then.

Q. I've often wondered if band instructors or leaders have to know how to march too and make formations?

A. That's part of it. Of course, in junior high or grade school we don't have too much of that to do. It's just in high school that we have the marching bands.

Q. I believe you also own a music store?

- A. Yes, we started 22 or 23 years ago - Thompson-Kramer Music. We were downtown on N. Main between Carol's and Field's for 20 years. Then we moved out on N. Oakland a couple of years ago. It's on the corner of Harrison and Oakland.
- Q. Do you sell instruments?
- A. Band instruments. We call on schools weekly. My son and daughter are both involved in it, and my wife and my son's wife. My son calls on the schools. If they need something, in the way of supplies, he has it with him on the truck. In the fall when they start their beginning instruments, we try to fit students to a certain instrument that they learn during the year.
- Q. I'm sure it's rewarding to see the children struggling with the music and finally conquering it.
- A. It's interesting, too, to see a church program or whatever on TV or in person and realize that that's an instrument that came from our place. It's a nice feeling.
- Q. So you get a thrill out of that! Have you had any experiences that impressed you particularly - in your teaching or in your own experience in the band or in your store?
- A. We've found that the bigger the artist, the nicer person he is. That's from away back - 35 years ago beginning with the orchestra to Doc Severinsen a couple of years ago - just the nicest people to have around.
- Q. They're not temperamental?
- A. Not in the least. Albert Spalding back 35 years ago was one of the greatest violinists in the country and just such a nice person.

Doc Severinsen was the kind of person who ran every day - jogged. He was on sort of a health kick and just nice to know. I saw him later, and he remembered us - you wouldn't expect everyone to remember that long because he had been to a lot of places in the meantime.

Q. It's inspiring to know that the bigger they are, the nicer they are.

A. That's right... Oh, there were several other interesting things that went on... A number of years ago I was playing with a dance band on the road. We ran into quite a few celebrities there. One time we were between Jack Benny and Kate Smith, and we didn't know who they were! It was at a ball where they were trying to raise some money. That was about forty years ago, I guess.

Q. Did you have tours and one night stands?

A. Oh, yes. We went all over the United States.

Q. How did you travel?

A. We had a Lincoln Zephyr car and a truck with two seats in it. It held six people and all the instruments and luggage. We traveled from one place to another. We didn't have a set place. We might be just one night in a place or we might be two or three months.

Q. Did you just pick up engagements as you went along?

A. We had an agent who took care of that. He let us know where to go next.

Q. Was it rugged to travel that way?

A. Oh, it wasn't too bad. We were with a band called Tiny Hill. He originated here in Decatur forty years ago or more. He's gone now, but they just came out with a new record of his that was taken from broadcasts. I think I have a picture of him over there. We spent several years on the road.

Q. Were there any other musicians from Decatur?

A. Yes, there were several from Decatur.

Q. Do you remember their names?

A. Oh, yes. Monty Mountjoy is still here, playing. Dick Coffeen was from Blue Mound. We just had them from anywhere - Denver or New York or wherever. We had a lot of them.

Q. This was your sole occupation at that time?

A. At that time, yes. You didn't have time for anything else because you might have to go 3 or 400 miles in a day's time and play that night.

Q. So you really saw a cross section of the United States?

A. Yes - from clear in the South to clear up to Minnesota - and from East to West across the nation.

Q. You were playing for dances?

A. Yes. In those days they had dance halls. They didn't have bars and such things as they have now. It was a plain dance hall, where you might be able to buy a coke, but that would be it. It might be out in the country, and you'd think at four o'clock in the afternoon that no one would show up there, and the place would be packed that night. It was an interesting experience.

Q. A different time! ... What do you think of the changes that have come to music in recent times?

A. I'm not for them. It's not music anymore. It appeals to young people, of course. I know - it has to. And they've become accustomed to it. There are some good things about it, but for the most part, there is no basis of any kind.

Q. No real music?

A. Yes.

Q. Is it because of the electronic influence, do you think?

A. Yes - It's all too loud and that one thing would be enough to keep me out of it. It's gotten anymore where you can go buy a guitar, learn the chords, and call yourself a musician, which just isn't true.

Q. And if you're writing the words, you just have a few words and repeat them?

A. Yes - repeat them over and over and over.. Well, maybe that's one way people can remember them.

Q. Yes, but it's a little monotonous for people who remember other times.

A. Right!

Q. Are there people still interested in classical music?

A. Oh, yes - There are several symphonies around the country. In fact, the Decatur symphony is coming up fast. It's so much better each year. It's making a name for itself. There is a National Symphony Orchestra Society, and they are working very hard because the government has cut funds back so now raising money for orchestras has to be done by volunteers. That's why we have a Symphony Guild in Decatur. We try to raise enough money to add to what Millikin puts in to keep the orchestra able to get such visitors as Doc Severinsen and Benny Goodman and Carol Lawrence last year. We're trying to raise enough to give the people of Decatur some top performers.

Q. Because if young people don't hear such music they won't be interested.

A. But of course the ones who hear it aren't the young people.

Q. So it's rather frustrating.

A. We try to get out in town and have them play at the band shelter or the shopping mall or someplace like that so there would be a different kind of people to hear them.

- Q. I might ask you again - you may have answered - do you think there is any chance of getting young people interested in better music? Otherwise, there isn't much hope.
- A. No - but the colleges always have their music schools filled up every year. I just got the International Musician paper yesterday, and there are about three pages of ads asking for players - most of them string players, but other instruments too - so there are openings.
- Q. Are these paid positions?
- A. Oh, yes - the Cincinnati Symphony, the Chicago Symphony - any of them - So if young people only realized it, there is employment there. I noticed one ad said the starting salary was \$28,005 a year, which isn't bad for a beginning player. That was for a trombone player in the St. Louis Symphony. We have a friend who plays trombone with them. It's always something to hear. When you hear a symphony, for instance like the Chicago Symphony, you can hear a whole concert and not hear one mistake.
- Q. That's very amazing, isn't it?
- A. At the same time, though, on TV, for the background music for some of the big shows you have the same thing - not one mistake from the orchestra. They say that if you make one mistake, you find another job real quick - but I think since the movies went out, those top performers who were playing for the movies are now playing for the shows in Las Vegas and the shows on TV.
- Q. So they are outstanding?
- A. Yes - they're the top players.
- Q. Isn't there a great deal of tension when you know that you can't make even one mistake?

A. I suppose there would be, but they don't even think about it. They play so well that they never think about making a mistake. If they would, they'd make a good one!

Q. I suppose there might be differences in interpretation?

A. Not after rehearsal.

Q. They do what the conductor wants?

A. Yes - they have it all worked out. When you hear it on TV, it's been rehearsed.

Q. If you were giving advice to a young player, what would you say?

A. Oh, get a background, first thing I know they don't like to get into a bunch of scales and chords and things of that type, but those will help them even in the kind of music they want to play right now. Unless they know their scales and chords, they will have to almost back into what they want to play. Otherwise, they can hit it right square in the face and go from there.

Q. Are your children musicians? I know you said they work in the store.

A. They both have played in high school.

Q. Do you have grand children?

A. Yes.

Q. And are they musicians?

A. Well, they were when they were in high school - 3 of them. The other two aren't in high school yet. I assume that they will be when they get in the fifth grade.

Q. I'm sure they must have heard a great deal - in fact, been surrounded by music.

A. That's right.

- Q. It certainly sounds as if it's been a very full and rich life.
- A. Well, I've enjoyed it. I don't know of any part of it I've hated.
- Q. You've had a great deal of satisfaction I'm sure.
- A. Playing with the symphony was the most enjoyable. You try harder there than you would in a dance band. You try not to make a mistake in a symphony. You try your best not to.
- Q. And I imagine there is a great deal of companionship among musicians, especially when you're traveling!
- A. Yes, and I've had quite a few come in since I've been here, and that's always a good feeling.
- Q. It sounds as if you've had a really good life, and I thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us.
- A. You're certainly welcome!

You have been listening to Mr. Robert H. Kramer and this is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.



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ROBERT H. DUMAS, City Librarian



September 1, 1982


Mr. Robert Kramer
1866 N. Oakcrest Ave.
Decatur, IL 62526

Dear Mr. Kramer:

We have received from Miss Betty Turnell the tape of your recent interview. Enclosed you will find a copy of the transcript made from this recording. It would be most beneficial if you would read it and make necessary corrections as well as making any comments or clarifications that you would consider helpful. Please take note of any necessary spelling changes. Return the corrected copy to the library at your earliest convenience in the envelope provided.

You have our deepest appreciation for participating in this oral history project. The transcript will become part of our Local History Collection. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,


Gerald Merrick
Reference Librarian

Enclosure

This is a good transcript of the interview. Mr. Kramer corrected the spelling of Doc. Severinsen and Albert Spaulding.

Mr. Kramer omitted the facts that he had directed the Decatur Municipal Band for three years and church choirs at the First United

(over)

Methodist Church in Mattoon and St.
Paul's United Methodist Church in Decatur.

Thank you for allowing him this
opportunity.

Annette Kramer