

Oral History
Mr. Lester J. Grant
March 28, 1988

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the oral history series sponsored by the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Lester J. Grant, who served the Decatur School System for 30 years from 1937 to 1967. From 1950 to 1967 he was superintendent of the Decatur School system.

We are recording on March 28, 1988 at 254 East Pierson Avenue in Decatur.

Q. Well, Mr. Grant, it's too bad that we don't present a replay of the appreciation dinner given in your honor at the Masonic Temple on May 24, 1967, at the time of your retirement. The comments and speeches made then would have expressed much better than I can today the high esteem and great appreciation the community holds for you. Since we can't have such a replay, I'll ask you to share your recollections of those years you spent with the Decatur schools.

A. But I do have a recording of the whole affair and a typed copy, too.

Q. It was a great occasion.

A. It was for me, and I'll be glad to make a copy for the Library.

Q. That would be great. We'll file that along with this recording.

Before we talk about your years with the Decatur schools, let's talk about your early life. I believe you were born and grew up in Bunker Hill, Illinois.

A. That's correct.

Q. What were those years like?

A. Those were pretty tough years back in 1906-1924. Bunker Hill is in Macoupin County, about 20 miles south of Carlinville, the county seat. During those years was the 1914-1918 first World War. The economy wasn't thriving even then. So those were pretty rough years.

Q. You went to school there?

A. Yes, through high school. I graduated from Bunker Hill High School in 1924.

Q. What made you decide on teaching as a career?

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LOCAL HISTORY

- A. Jobs were pretty hard to find at that time. One didn't have to have a college degree to become a teacher. One could take a teacher's examination - a county-conducted examination. If you passed that properly, you could get a teacher's certificate. I had some options - going to work in a coal mine or trying the teacher's examination, which I did.
- Q. And no college was required?
- A. No. I did get the assignment for teaching - in the fifth grade it Wilsonville, where my folks were living at the time. At that time, Illinois State University, which was called "Normal" at that time, had mid-spring and two summer terms. I started to go to school there immediately when I got the job - the first of May. That's where I went on to get my bachelor's degree.
- Q. Good. I don't suppose a high school senior or graduate would have too much trouble with fifth graders. You probably impressed the children very well.
- A. Well, I'll tell you, Wilsonville was a mining town. They had just sunk a new mine in the town, and most of the people who moved in to work in that mine were foreign people, from Italy, Lithuania, a lot from Germany. Most were Italian, however. One never found a more grateful set of parents to see to it that their children got a good education. I didn't worry about parental support. You told them what you wanted and that was what you got. I was there four years. I taught the fifth grade the first year, sixth grade the second year. The next year I moved up to principal.
- Q. Very good.
- A. The fourth year I got my fifth graders back.
- Q. You had a good start then. From Wilsonville you went to?
- A. I went to Monticello as principal of Lincoln School. I was in that position for eight years. Lincoln is an elementary school in Monticello. Those were eight delightful years, too. It's a lovely community to work in. The people were very supportive. I left there in 1937 to come to Decatur. I almost backed out on coming.
- Q. Why was that? Because you were enjoying Monticello?
- A. I enjoyed Monticello so much and after I had signed a contract to come here, Mr. Harris, who was then Superintendent of Schools, had given me the contract. That was when one could make the sum of \$1,580 a year. I had talked to a few people in Decatur when I was passing through. One said, "Oh, you'd never want to come to Decatur. There's nothing here for you." I went to the extent of asking Mr. Harris to release me from my contract. He said, "Oh, don't pay any attention to that." That advice was the greatest favor I ever had.

- Q. It was a great gain for Decatur that you finally decided to come.
- You had some very important events in your personal life before you came here, didn't you.
- A. Oh yes, I did.
- Q. Your marriage?
- A. Yes, in 1932 I married my present and only wife.
- Q. Where did you meet her?
- A. This is a coincidence. As I said, I went to ISU or Normal to summer school. All of my higher education through the master's degree was in summertime. I never went to college in the regular year. Well, I met her while she was going to school at ISU, too. She was from Pocahontas, down near Edwardsville, and was going home on what was then the Chicago and Alton Railroad with my aunt, who was also attending school. So that's how I met my wife - I met her on the train.
- Q. Very good. And it's been a very happy marriage?
- A. It has been.
- Q. And do you have children?
- A. We have two girls - one now living in Newton, Massachusetts, and the other in Houston, Texas. I have two grandchildren in Houston, Texas.
- Q. You came to Decatur in 1937 as a young married man?
- A. I did.
- Q. Now tell us about your experiences here.
- A. I taught my first year at Roosevelt Junior High School. I taught social studies. The next year I was appointed principal of Garfield School.
- Q. I think you were destined to be an administrator. It didn't take people long to put you in an administrative position.
- A. Well, I was interested in that. My experience at Normal with the principal instructors I had up there led me to think in that direction. In fact, I got my degrees, both bachelor's and master's, in school administration - economics and social studies or history.

I was at Garfield School as principal from 1938 to 1943. Those were years of another war. My experience at Garfield, again, was wonderful. We had a P.T.A. that nobody could exceed. That was a time when we were rationing food and gasoline - you name it! The P.T.A.'s were called upon to help with that registration, which they did without being asked

- just suggest it, and they were there ready to help you. So that was a very happy experience. The next year I went to Woodrow Wilson as principal. I was there only one year, but that, too, was great. I see people on the street today who were there as ninth graders when I was there. Now they are doctors or lawyers, practicing here.

Then Mr. McIntosh, who was Superintendent of Schools, resigned to take a job in Rockford, Illinois, and I was named Assistant Superintendent. As Assistant Superintendent for six years, from 1944 to 1950, again I had to face a war situation - the Korean War. There were a lot of problems with people who were leaving, problems of getting staff, and that sort of thing.

Then Mr. McIntosh went to Rockford, and the School Board appointed me his successor in 1950.

- Q. 1950 was a critical year in that the war had ended, and men were coming back and resuming their positions after serving all over the world. The baby boom started, and you must have had rapidly increasing enrollment. How did you cope with all of this?
- A. I've always appreciated having a challenge, and that was a challenge. We had, as you say, people coming back from the service. One gratifying thing about that was that many of those who had left for the service now recognized the real importance of education. They were coming in ready to give their best to get it. We had a shortage of supplies as well as staff. It was a real challenge, but I liked it.
- Q. You lived through it. It came out all right, but then you had to have some changes in the Decatur school system. You had to have room for all these new students, for one thing. What happened then?
- A. When I took over as Superintendent, we had a little over 9000 students and 300 certificated staff. As those babies came along and started going to school, we were in the process of getting approval and providing facilities as well as the program. During the course of my tenure, from 1950 to the time I retired, we had built 17 new schools and 17 additions and improved the condition of several of those we already had.
- Q. That included some new high schools, didn't it?
- A. Oh, yes. That included Eisenhower High School, MacArthur High School. I've forgotten how many elementary schools were added, but those were all in it.
- Q. And Lakeview was added later?
- A. Lakeview the District annexed to Decatur in 1959. That added a fourth high school to our district.
- Q. All of these buildings must have required a lot of money. How did you finance them?

A. The first major program for the two high schools had several elementary schools included and we had to go for the referendum. As far as I was concerned, I didn't have to do very much about it.

Q. The public took care of it?

A. People were interested in it. Again, P.T.A.'s were a very, very strong force in the whole thing. Businesses had representative committees out pushing for it. Of course, I didn't sit by and do nothing, but they were a great help in that referendum, which was \$7 million and something, a pretty big bite at that time. It went over with a bang.

Q. Good! The Board of Education itself changed during this time, didn't it?

A. Yes. In 1956 the size of the Board of Education changed from three members to seven members. Decatur is, and was then, a special charter district from its inception.

Q. What does that mean?

A. That means it has special privileges that other districts don't have, for example, acquiring a site for a new school building or for educational purposes. A playground if they wanted it, without a referendum which meant that sometimes the selection of sites in other districts which might become a problem could be avoided. It meant too that our school district was at that time under the special charter which was at that time co-terminus with the city of Decatur. That part has since changed, but it is still a special charter. There are other advantages, but those are the principal ones.

The law permitted them to go to seven members. There wasn't any problem there. So that provided a wider representation on the Board.

Q. We know that the problem of civil rights and racial discrimination was beginning to arise at this time. Did you have any problem with those questions?^x

A. No, I didn't. At that time John's Hill Junior High School and Riverside School, now non-existent, were the principal congregation of minorities. We didn't call them black and white; we called them youngsters or people. We had representatives of all the minority groups in town. We met regularly to talk about the educational program, facilities, and such. I remember so vividly that people representing John's Hill, for example, colored people, if you will, on the committee repeatedly said, "We don't care what color of youngsters come to our school. All we want is an equal educational opportunity."

Q. So you really didn't have a problem.

A. No, we did not.

- Q. Well, you were very fortunate compared to some other communities.
- A. I can agree with that. We tried to be truly representative. There were some schools in the district at that time that we called "elite", let us say the Dennis School area, for example. That was the district to live in. That wasn't because their school program was any different, except that the people living in that area appeared to be more affluent than some other districts in town. They were willing personally to provide more funds for playground equipment and programs in the school that the rest of the school district was not providing. So there was that east-west feeling, but it had nothing to do with color.
- Q. Well, Mr. Grant, I'd like to have you tell a story I heard about from the account of your appreciation dinner. I think a lot of your ease of handling this might have come from the way you handled the students. There was a story of the time you helped a boy by giving him an "F". Would you tell us about that.
- A. Yes, certainly. I remember that one very vividly. That happened at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. The bottom floor is in the basement and there are two floors above it. These youngsters got the idea they were going to get out of school without going out the right way. The library was on the first floor, not the basement but the first floor. A few of them got the idea they could jump out the library window. It wasn't very far down. I caught one of them, and we had a little session. That's when he got the "F" in deportment. He and I remember that vividly to this day. In fact, I saw him at lunch last week.
- Q. He turned out all right, didn't he?
- A. Yes, he did. He has a very responsible job in Decatur, and has had for years.
- Q. And a good family and good position. So you really did help him.
- A. He married a lovely girl who was in Woodrow Wilson at the same time.
- Q. You did add a black teacher to the faculty at that time, didn't you?
- A. Yes, we did. I think I was assistant superintendent at that time.
- Yes, we did. I want to emphasize this. I was looking for people best qualified for the job. I wasn't interested in whether they were black, white, or Jewish, or what they were. I wanted the best qualified person. The best one we could find for that particular job at French School was Lizzie Johnson. She was from Champaign, had been on the staff over there. I brought her to Decatur, and she did a great job in Decatur, as far as I'm concerned.
- Q. And everything worked out all right?

A. I might add this. She came to teach, and there was one family in the French district who raised a little fuss about it to begin with. My comment to the family was, "You let your little girl stay in Miss Johnson's room for two weeks. If you don't like it then, come and let me know." And wouldn't you know? At the end of two weeks, I couldn't have gotten that little girl out of there if I tried!

Q. And how about other problems that happened in the 60's? Student unrest, teacher's strikes, did you ever have any teacher's strikes?

A. They didn't call it that. They had a teacher's so-called "work day" during the last year, I think it was, that I was superintendent, in which they were protesting that the Board wasn't providing something or other. I don't even remember what it was now. But that was very short lived. I didn't experience the kind that made history.

Q. There were some strenuous episodes at that time, but you evidently were able to go along and manage through those.

Well, Decatur schools had some honors as well as problems. What were some of the honors that the schools had while you were superintendent?

A. I'll exclude athletic honors.

Q. Oh, I think we ought at least to mention then, don't you? The outstanding ones?

A. I think there were two state basketball champions while I was there, by the then Decatur High School. Then we were recognized by the National Freedom Foundation in two ways at least, one as a school system, one of the top schools in the nation. I particularly liked one of the recognitions. I received one of the seven or eight most efficient and successful superintendents in the nation. The state of Illinois repeatedly recognized us as a leading educational system in the state and frequently when sending out representatives from foreign countries coming to the school systems in the United States, they would be sent out to us. Columbia University invited me to participate in a "Superintendent of Schools Seminar" during one month in the early part of my superintendency in Decatur. So I think we got the recognition that was due, not because of me alone but because of the excellent staff we had. No one could ask for a better one.

Q. But you did have some personal honors, not only the one you mentioned, that you were named one of the five, I believe it was, "most efficient an successful school superintendents in Illinois". I believe that was in 1955. But you also received a P.T.A. award, I understand?

A. Oh, yes, I got the national P.T.A. membership award.

Q. Life membership, I believe?

- A. Life membership. Also, during my tenure I was president of the Illinois Association of School Administrators. Of course, I was a member of N.E.A. and the National Curriculum Association, which was very instrumental always in helping to plan the curriculum and keeping up on what should be offered in the schools.
- Q. You hadn't been in Decatur very long before you were made president of the Lion's Club?
- A. Yes. 1943-44. I was president of the Lion's Club. I joined in 1938, the first year I was principal of Garfield. That means that by this time I've been a member for 50 years.
- Q. Great! You probably have had other community associations too.
- A. Many, many of them, on the Red Cross Board, the Salvation Army, the Y.M.C.A.
- Q. We could go on and on with those, I'm sure. Now that you have had a number of years of retirement, how do you spend your time?
- A. Well, I retired from the school system on June 2, 1967. On June 5, 1967, I joined the Architectural and Engineering Service Corporation, an organization which designs schools, public utilities, like water and sewer systems.
- Q. Where is it located?
- A. In Decatur.
- Q. In Decatur - very good!
- A. And I've been with them ever since.
- Q. Is that a full-time position?
- A. Oh, it was. I'm working only half-time now, but it was a full-time position. And when I went with them, which was in 1967, school districts were still doing considerable building. My main function with them at that time was to contact school districts within 150 miles of Decatur and particularly smaller school systems that may not have the staff to do the planning educationally-wise that they wanted to do and financially-wise to provide the facilities. So I've become the company's representative in working with school districts and representatives like that to provide them with those facilities.
- Q. Well, that was an ideal retirement position, wasn't it? It drew upon your past experience, it helped the school communities and the architects. It sounds like an ideal position.

- A. It was. I couldn't have thought up a better one myself. As further evidence of my interest in that and their interest in what we were doing, not only in my work but the company's work, Eastern Illinois University School administrative staff and Illinois State University both had me provide workshops for their students in school administration at those schools, particularly because the school administrator is the one who has to get the school building program going if they are to have one.
- Q. The representative not only had to get the program started, but you knew the needs of the school. So that was a great help.
- A. I felt my experience would be helpful to them, and I think it was. If nothing else, there is evidence of the fact that they invited me back.
- Q. Very good! Do you have any hobbies?
- A. I like to play golf, for one thing. I'm kind of a hand-craftsman. During all this time, I did a lot of re-finishing antique furniture and fixing things that needed fixed. I can do that.
- Q. Do you have a workshop?
- A. I have one in my basement. I do all my work around the place, except putting on a new roof. I didn't do that. But the yard work and that sort of thing. I keep busy.
- Q. Do you and Mrs. Grant like to travel?
- A. We're not much for traveling.
- Q. But you do go to see your children and grandchildren, don't you?
- A. Those are the two directions we go - one to Massachusetts and the other to Texas. They haven't always lived there, but when they moved, we moved our direction of travel.
- Q. Well, Decatur is once again in the press as choosing a new superintendent. Do you have any advice you would offer?
- A. If this were to be published before they get one chosen, I wouldn't dare make it!
- Q. We'll promise that we won't release it.
- A. I think they know what their needs are and what they want. I don't think I would offer advice. Well, there is one thing relating to what I said earlier. With the problems that have come upon them since I left, I think they must talk about the population, student or otherwise, in terms of people and not in terms of what their color or creed it. This makes me feel sorry for the people who can't think otherwise, and I see it happening on both sides of the fence.

Q. The Board of Education has certainly chosen good superintendents in the past so we know they'll probably come up with another good choice.

A. Well, I can agree almost entirely with that. They had a little difficulty with the first two who succeeded me - Mr. Jones and the next one.

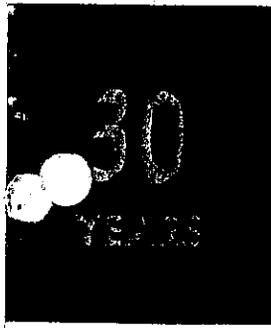
Q. Well, I wasn't in Decatur then and don't know that situation, but I was just thinking of your successful career. We'll certainly have to think they made a good choice there, when you were chosen.

We thank you, Mr. Grant, for sharing your experiences and reminiscences with us and we join your other many well-wishers in appreciation of your service to Decatur. Thank you very much.

A. I've appreciated this opportunity to leave whatever information I can to people who might be interested. As I said, I do have that recording, and I'll be glad to make a copy for the library.

Q. Thank you. You have been listening to the oral history of Mr. Lester J. Grant, who served the Decatur Schools as teacher and superintendent from 1937 to 1967.

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library.



Lester J.
GRANT



MAY 24,

1967

Appreciation Dinner

MASONIC TEMPLE



Lester J. Grant

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

LESTER J. GRANT

APPRECIATION DINNER

1937-1938 Social Studies Teacher
Roosevelt Jr. High School

PROGRAM

1938-1943 Principal, Garfield
Elementary School

INVOCATION-----The Reverend W. W. Cutlip
DINNER

1943-1944 Principal, Woodrow Wilson
Junior High School

PROCEEDINGS:

A varied expression of thanks and appreciation to an
outstanding educator by a grateful community.

1944-1950 Ass't. Superintendent,
Decatur Public Schools

A LASTING TRIBUTE-----Roy Rollins
LEST WE FORGET-----Mrs. Richard W. Huff

1950-1967 Superintendent,
Decatur Public Schools

ADJOURNMENT

Our special thanks to the
Music Department of Stephen
Decatur High School

COMMITTEES

Chairman - - - - - Mrs. C. E. Barnes ✓

Program

✓ Margaret Fassnacht
Richard W. Huff

Robert Linn
G. Wm. Madden ✓

Publicity

Carroll Arnold
Miss Faye Cole

Mrs. Edward Garver

Tickets

Harold Brintlinger
Howard Brown
Roy Chapman
Guy Clapper

Mrs. Harry Cook
Donald Dame
Mrs. Ralph Lorenz
Dr. Paul McKay

Mrs. Ardath Tolly

Tickets & Program

Jack Kitchen

William Reynolds

Letters of Appreciation

Mrs. Robert Bear
Roy Rollins
Norman Gore

Otto Keil
Melvin Matthew
Miss Charlotte Meyer

Decorations

Mrs. Byrd Davis
Mrs. Alpha Hamm

Mrs. Kenneth Wheeler

Head Table

Decorated by Garden Club

Head Table Committee

✓ Mrs. Richard Huff

Recording

Ralph Barnett

GEORGE WILLIAM MADDEN
No. 4 EWING PLACE
DECATUR, ILLINOIS 62522
TELEPHONE: 422-3189

May 25, 1967

Mr. Lester J. Grant
Superintendent of Schools
101 W. Cerro Gordo St.
Decatur, Illinois

Dear Lester

You won't find a testimonial letter from me among those you were given in the two bound volumes last night. Frankly, I couldn't ... and still can't ... think of anything else to say to you to express my feeling of admiration and appreciation other than what appears on the following twelve pages ... my remarks at your recognition dinner. If I could have thought of more, I would have said them.

Not that what I said was so profound; it's just the subject matter that is!

Peggy joins me in wishing you well in your every new undertaking.

Kindest personal regards



G. William Madden

LJG Dinner-5/24/67

Page 1 (Immediately after dinner)

Ladies and Gentlemen....

It is indeed a distinct pleasure to come before you this evening... on this wonderful occasion of honoring one of our community's most distinguished and accomplished citizens. It is a genuine personal privilege for me to participate in the singling out and paying tribute to a man who has devoted almost his entire working life ***** *

to the educating and developing and nurturing of Decatur's children... and has done so successfully... with perseverance... and with dignity. I can think of no finer human endeavor than the field in which our honoree chose as his career, nor do I know of a more fitting and appropriate thing for us as citizens to do on the occasion of his retirement than to try, in some small way, to express the sincere appreciation of a grateful community.

*
***** at this point, a marching band enters, with others, and a wild parade is held; quickly followed by a singing group lauding Lester J. Grant.

Medley for LJG Dinner - by GWM

1st Draft
594-67

Tune: "Smiles"

There are Grants, that make you happy
There are Grants, that make you gay
You recall, a Grant known as Ulysses
Very famous, back there in 'his day
There's a Grant, whose name is on a chain store
And a pass, in Oregon they say
But the Grant, that we are here to sing for
Is a Grant known as Lester J!

Tune: "Liptoe Thru
The Tulips"

So let's go
Back thru
Thirty years or so
Reminiscing
On a few fond mem'ries
Let's go
Back a few years
Or so....

Tune: "Nothing Can
Stop The Army Air
Corps"

Here he came, right out of Monticello
Very young, a teaching career
All the same, he was a bright young fellow
Moving up, in only a year
He became, known as an able leader
Never said, couldn't or can't
They picked the man, who said " I CAN"
'Cause nothing could stop our Lester J. Grant!

Tune: "It's A Small,
Small World"

So we see our man
Climbing up the rung
He was picked to head
All our schools, far flung
Thru objections and strife
He's devoted half his life
And his praises shall be sung.

Tune: "At Sundown"

Every little mess, I guess, gets blessed
in the office of Lester
Every little thing that's rough, or tough,
'sho 'nuff goes to Lester
They say the school head's big job is
financial....official.....fiducial...
But every little gem that's sticky or icky
gets taken to Lester
Every little kid, with an Id, that is hid
is a problem for Lester
Tho' su-pren-ten-dents aren't hired to do
all things

Still the boss, can't be cross, when the toss
comes a bouncing to him.

2nd Verse

People with a gripe, often yipe, even snipe
in the office of Lester

Advocates of art even cart what they start
to the office of Lester

They say he hears only things of im-por-tance...
of sub-stance.....with-ur-gence.....
coherence

Every little child, who is wild, can get mild
in the office of Lester

Even naughty teens, can be seen, in their jeans
in the office of Lester

Tho' su-pren-tendents aren't hired to do
all things

Still the boss, can't be cross, when the toss
comes a bouncing to him.

Tune: "Ragtime
Cowboy Joe"

He's always stood
For a brand of education that is good
And we stand in admiration
Of his goal
Pretty good goal
That is always doing better

You can bet your bottom dollar
He pursued it to the letter
How he tried
To provide the best in schooling
for the kids that we all know

He's a ball of fire
Climbing hire
He's the kind we all admire

Here's to Lester
We're not here to jester
Here's to Lester Grant!

Tune: "The Best
Things In Life
Are Free"

Tonight belongs to Lester Grant
On that we can all agree
Our hearts are all with Lester Grant
A real friend to you and me

The children today
And those of before
We all want to say
Thank you..... and more

And so we sing with all our might
We all honor him, tonight

Tune: "Tonight"

(same)
(Tonight,) tonight
We sing of Grant tonight

We thank him for the work he has done
He's right, tonight
He's been a shining light
A guiding shining light
Like the sun...

Tune: "Do, ^{Re, Me}~~Ree~~"

"L" - a Life that stands for right
"J" - a Judgement that is wise
"G" - a Goal that's worth the fight
"R" - a Record that's a prize
"A" - Ambition for the best
"N" - where Nothing else will do
"T" - a Tier above the rest

Lester Grant we sing to you

la la la la la la la

(repeat,
faster)

L - a Life that stands for right
J - a Judgement that is wise
G - a Goal that's worth the fight
R - a Record that's a prize
A - Ambition for the best
N- where Nothing else will do
T - A Tier above the rest
Lester Grant we sing

Tune: "Tonight"

Tonight, Tonight
We sing of Grant tonight

Tune: "The Best
Things In Life
Are Free"

We love to sing with all our might
To praise Lester Grant tonight!

Thank you, classical music lovers, everywhere!

It should be quite obvious to all that the program and proceedings here tonight are destined to be rather solemn... and on a serious level.... and in all honesty, I think this is as it should be.

After all, the occasion for our being here tonight is to honor and pay tribute to a man who, after 30 years of hard work in our community's largest and most important public institution, does not have the complete backing of all 86,000 residents. This fact, I believe, is a serious matter. And it is a fact, I feel, because I'm sure it's safe to say that Lester J. Grant is not liked... he is not admired... and he has lost the support... of all people in Decatur who want a 2nd or 3rd rate educational system... or whose personal or selfish interests transcend the maximum benefits to our children... and seemingly the support from several people who, despite the benefits they themselves obtained from their own good education, fail to see the wisdom of providing genuinely good and continuing education for future generations in the face of inflationary trends and population explosions.

I'm sorry that these "me first-ers" couldn't be with us tonight on this solemn occasion... but the more I think about it... I really doubt that those 17 people who want a 2nd rate school system... or those 8 men that I know who say "to heck with the city's kids and their future"... or even that other handfull of fuzzy thinkers I referred to... I really don't feel this distinctly small minority would understand what we're talking about even if they were here. They couldn't possibly understand why ^{over 6} ~~4 or 5~~ hundred people would gather here tonight... buy tickets, pay baby sitters, even pay to park their cars, and give up their time... in order to extol the virtues, pay tribute, and express genuine appreciation to a rather quiet, unassuming, totally dedicated

and highly competent guy named Lester J. Grant.

But I know.... and you know, of course, what Les Grant has done for Decatur, and what he stands for. And that's why we're here. And I also want to assure you all, ladies and gentlemen, and especially you, Lester Grant, that there are literally thousands of other citizens in Decatur and other parts of the country... from all walks of life... who share our admiration for you... and for what you have accomplished for us all.

You know, to me, Lester Grant is a GIANT of a man... in his wisdom... in the scope of his thinking... in his accomplishments, his ideals, and his unswerving devotion to the attainment of the very best in public educational opportunities... for all children... in all of our Decatur.

And so you'll all know just how I feel about him, I'm going to ask that a picture be unfurled... a giant picture... one that befits a man who has thought, performed and produced in a truly BIG way.

Yes, my friends, I say Les Grant is a giant of a man.

But you know... for a giant, he apparently had one of the most unauspicious beginnings of anyone I've run across lately.

He was born on New Years Eve, the very tail end of 1906, in Bunker Hill, Illinois. Now where, you might rightly ask, is Bunker Hill? It's a tiny little community in Macoupin County, just a few miles southwest of Wilson, which, of course, is just a hop and a skip southwest of Benld and Gillespie... all of which are "that-a-way" down towards Alton. I contacted the Bunker Hill Historical Society, and to be perfectly frank, they've never even heard of Lester J. Grant!

The only thing they could provide about the year 1906 was that there was a big earthquake and fire out in San Francisco that year, but the records indicated it didn't affect anyone in Bunker Hill.

I also can report on brief conversations with some folks from both Wilson and Gillespie... and they never heard of Lester Grant either. One informant from Gillespie did recall that there was a big financial panic in the U.S. in 1907, shortly after Lester Grant was born, but my informant sincerely doubted there was any connection. And so, it would appear that the man whom we are assembled here tonight to honor and recognize grew up in relative anonymity, little realizing the complexities and challenges of life that lay ahead of him. I think it's safe to assume that little Lester Grant, at age 7 in 1913, didn't care a snit that the 16th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified that year giving Congress power to levy a federal income tax.... or that 4 years later, when he as 11, the U. S. bought the Virgin Islands from Denmark for \$25 million. Whether the U. S. passage of prohibition against the sale of liquor when Lester was 14 years old created any special hardship for him, frankly, I was unable to learn. But I did ascertain that in the same year Henry Ford sold his 10 millionth Model T, for \$290 each, by the way, Lester J. Grant... in 1924 at age 18... was graduated from Bunker Hill High School. Evidently the formalized requirements to become a teacher back in 1924 weren't as exacting as they are today, because the records indicate that Lester Grant began his teaching career in 1925... a year after completing high school... in the town or district of Wilsonville, Illinois. From what I could learn, he taught in an elementary school... which I suspect was a good thing, since the way I figure it he had just barely started to shave! Things must have been really swingin' down in old Wilsonville in those days, since apparently Lester Grant stayed on this job for 4 years. Of course, those were the roaring 20's, which also saw the

introduction of the first talking pictures and Col. Charles Lindburgh winging his way alone across the Atlantic. In this spirit of innovation and change and adventure, Lester Grant left his job in Wilsonville and pushed northward in 1929 to pursue his own education and career. For reasons, I suspect, having something to do with finances, he ended up in the fall of 1929 in Monticello, Illinois, with a teaching job at the Lincoln ^{and principal} Elementary School. Some of my informants have speculated that his northern destination was actually Chicago, but the famed St. Valentine's Day massacre in Chicago early that year detoured him to Monticello. It's been verified that Les Grant has really never thought much of Valentine's Day ever since.

Reliable information on Grant's activities beginning in 1929 in Monticello is rather sketchy. In interviewing old Monticello residents, I learned that Grant made frequent trips out of town... that many thought him rather "bookish"... and that he didn't "carouse around" as much as a lot of the guys his age. One particularly gabby Monticello native thought it was even "darned peculiar" that Lester Grant did absolutely nothing unusual on December 5th, of 1933, the day prohibition was repealed. But they did all seem to agree, that as a teacher, he was good.

Determined to really get the facts on Grant in Monticello, I finally mustered my courage and went directly to Grant himself. I asked him... "Lester, when you lived and taught school in Monticello, why did you make frequent trips out of town, why were you "bookish", and why didn't you "carouse around" at night and in the summer time like all the other guys?"

Lester answered me rather simply.... "because I was going to college while I taught in Monticello. I received my Bachelor's Degree in Education from Illinois State Normal University in 1934, and believe

me, those were tough years."

And so, ladies and gentlemen, in 1934 and 35, while the F.B.I was hunting John Dillinger in Chicago, and the Italian Army was hunting Haile Selassie all over Ethiopia, Lester J. Grant was hunting his livelihood as well as a higher education between Monticello and Bloomington.

And in 1936, as we all heard the static-filled radio proceedings of crowning the Prince of Wales as the new Edward VIII, King of England, our own Lester Grant was ascending to the principal-ship of the Lincoln School in Monticello.

And in 1937, just the following year, as Amelia Earhart took off for an unknown destiny across the Pacific, Lester J. Grant took off for an equally unknown future in Decatur, Illinois. He started in September of that year as a teacher in Social Studies at Roosevelt Jr. High School and thus began his career in education that was to span 30 years here in Decatur.

The rest, of course, is a well documented and factual story of the accomplishments of an accomplished man. From his first Decatur job as a teacher at Roosevelt Jr. High, he was promoted in just one year to become principal of Garfield Elementary School, followed 5 years later by the principal-ship of Woodrow Wilson Jr. High. One year after that he was named an Assistant Supt. of Schools... which was in 1944. Lester Grant served in this capacity capably and effieciently for 6 years. His abilities were certainly again recognized and verified by the fact that he was named Decatur's Superintendent of Schools effective October 1, of 1950... 17 years ago this fall.

A quick recitation of the dates and positions held in such an active and distinguished career can hardly tell much of the human side of the story of what really went on during this 30 years span. And such a run-down can certainly not reveal the inner thoughts of the man who lived them.

For that reason, I am again going to depart from absolute documented fact... and speculate a bit. And I'm going to do (do) this by way of a mythical personal diary... the Diary of Lester J. Grant, Supt. of Schools. Here we go:

May 21, 1932 - The happiest day of my life. Lorraine and I were married!

August 26, 1936 - Received my Masters Degree in Education today at the University of Illinois.

August 15, 1937 - Looked for a place to live in Decatur; we rented a nice duplex at 1649 N. Water... will move next week.

May 4, 1944 - (When principal of Woodrow Wilson Jr. High)...

I'm going to try and help a boy today... I'm seeing that he gets an "F".

Ladies and gentlemen, Lester Grant did see that that boy received an "F", and I think he did help him. That boy went on through school, was Salutator of his high school graduating class, won a Millikin scholarship, was graduated from college, passed his C.P.A. exam, is married, has 3 children, and is an elder in the Presbyterian Church. As a matter of fact, that boy was in charge of the auditing team that Audited the complete books of our school system in 1965. I'd like to call on now, the boy who got an "F" because of Lester Grant.... Mr. Russell McCann. (*See Attachment #1*)

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Again returning to our Diary...

July 1, 1944 - Assumed duties as President of the Lions Club.

March 26, 1945 - Attended festivities honoring Decatur High's new state Basketball Champions.

May 17, 1949 - School Building Bond issue passed today... for over \$ 2 million dollars.

October 1, 1950 - Officially assumed duties as Superintendent of Schools. Now the real work begins!

May 12, 1952 - Our furnace blew up at home this morning at 7:30. Burned my right arm and head.

July 17, 1953 - Elected to Board of Trustees of Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund.

August 12, 1953 - Note that Fortune magazine says 4 million babies will be born this year... the highest number in history... and the highest birth rate in 40 years!

May I pause here, ladies and gentlemen, for a moment.

We are all very much aware of the exploding population that has taken place right here in Decatur. This has occurred, of course, because of the high birth rate of the 1950's, plus the influx of new residents. At this time I'd like to call upon a person who helped cause our schools to become crowded..... (No, not you ^{Mrs. Madden} sweetheart. You're still part of the problem...!!!!) The person I'm speaking of was a newcomer to Decatur back in 1950, and is also a parent of 3 students currently enrolled in our schools. It is a very real pleasure ^{for} me to introduce one of Decatur's ^{most} capable women... and certainly the prettiest... Mrs. Lois Raber. (See Attachment #2)

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And now back to our Diary:

- November 17, 1953 - Today the voters approved a 7 million dollar bond issue for 2 new high schools, 3 new elementary schools, and 1 addition to Harris School
- November 24, 1953 - Elected Secretary of the Illinois Association of School Administrators.
- November 16, 1955 - Today I was named one of the 5 "most efficient and most successful" school superintendents in the state of Illinois by an Indiana survey group.
- February 12, 1956 - Watched Garfield school teacher, Miss Carolyn Wilson ^(New Westphal) on the Gary Moore TV Show.
- March 27, 1956 - Voters approved a Bond Issure for 2 new elementary schools, 2 additions, plus a 40¢ increase in the Educational Fund tax rate.
- July 7, 1958 - Moved all offices into the new Otto Keil Administration Building.
- November 25, 1958 - Elected President of the Illinois Association of School Administrators.
- January 13, 1959 - After 3 stormy sessions our Board of Education voted to annex the Lakeview School District. Two Board members changed their mind twice!
- March 22, 1959 - Received a PTA National Life Membership Award... the first one ever given in Decatur.
- September 20, 1959 - Read nice article in newspaper... headlined "Grants have Fun at Home". Will call and thank them tomorrow.

Again I'd like to digress from a moment. It's a well known fact that ~~at~~ a successful superentendency depends upon an informed public. It has often

been said that the public's two chief sources of school information are first, what the parent learns directly from his own school age child, and second, what he reads in the newspapers. Decatur is most fortunate, I believe, in having the owners and heads of our local newspapers fully in favor and highly supportive of a genuinely first class school system. We may not always agree with how an article or headline is written, but I can assure you they believe strongly in really good education. ^{good}
 At this time it is my distinct privilege to call upon one of ^{both locally and state-wide,} education's strongest boosters, ^{the} former Editor, and now currently Vice President of Planning for all Lindsay-Schaub newspapers.... Mr. Ed Lindsay.

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(See Attachment # 3)

Getting back to our Diary:

- November 10, 1959 - Large bond issue for 5 new buildings, additions and future school sites was defeated overwhelmingly.
- April 9, 1960 - Attended late night Board meeting at which G. William Madden was sworn in as new Board of Education member. Checked with Decatur Historical Society and they advised me that, to be perfectly frank, they never even heard of G. William Madden.
- June 12, 1962 - Received the American Educators Medal Award from Freedom Foundation of Valley Forge, Pa. One of 14 given in the United States.
- October 9, 1962 - Bond issue and tax rate increase defeated.
- April 18, 1963 - Received copy of the Booz, Allen & Hamilton management audit report which was quite favorable.
- November 10, 1963 - Heard remarks attributed to Paul McKay of Millikin on their planned design for excellence. Very impressed.

Once more I'd like to pause in our mythical diary.

One of the inherent jobs of any really good educational administrator simply must be the pursuit of excellence... the constant striving to do ~~the~~ job better... to improve... to motivate... to kindly ^{the} desire to reach up and out... applying to all people... all employees... and in turn, all students... everyone connected with the particular institution. No one could possibly understand what Lester Grant has accomplished any better than another truly great and outstanding administrator.

It is with sincerely great pleasure that I call upon the President of Millikin University, Dr. Paul McKay. (See attachment # 4)

Seeing outstanding local athletic team participation... including 9 appearances among the revered Sweet Sixteen Basketball Tournaments in the past 17 years, plus, of course, one State Basketball Championship in 1962.

Evolving wholesome relations with mutual respect and cooperation between minority racial groups within the schools....

Believe me, I could go on and on.

My friends... I say again.... Lester Grant is a giant of a man... in his accomplishments, in what he set out to do... and has done... and in what he has unswervingly stood for during these past 30 years.

You know, ladies and gentlemen, I'm awfully glad that we've all taken the time to hold this recognition dinner tonight. In far too many cases, I suspect, a great many real "do-ers" of the world, such as Lester Grant, are never really told... and especially right out in public, so to speak, what a genuinely good job they've done. That's why I'm glad we're all here... so we can tell him... face to face... that we're proud of him!

Of course we all know that words are fleeting... and even difficult to recall later on. So at this time, I'd like to call upon a very distinguished gentleman who is going to present a more lasting tribute To Lester Grant. IT's my pleasure to introduce a Vice President of the A. E. Staley Co., and a long time friend of good education, Mr. Roy Rollins.

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You will all notice a final notation on your program this evening.... a line which reads simply... "Lest We Forget".

(See Attachment #5)
(See Attachment #5 A for Lester Grant response)

There is no man that I know of who can strive for great accomplishments and achieve them, and also be happily married and raise a family, without the backing , support, and kind understanding of an intelligent, loving, and devoted wife.

Lester Grant has been blessed with such a wife, and we are all greatly indebted to her for what she is.

Lorraine Grant is a charming lady of dignity... and possess complete devotion to the same high purposes that her husband has been pursuing these past years.

It is a real pleasure for me to recognize her... to thank her on behalf of a grateful community... and to introduce the wife of our former School Board President, Mrs. Camilla Huff, who will make a presentation to her.

(Attachment # 6)

I would also like to introduce to you 3 of the other loves in Lester Grant's life. It's a real pleasure to welcome... and to say hello... I know this must be a proud moment in her life..... Lester's mother... Mrs. James T. Grant. (have her stand up)

And now... 2 lovely ladies on the younger side.... a great joy to their parents.... and I'm sure, equally proud of their father... Lester and Lorraine's 2 daughters.... Diane and Debby Grant. (have them stand)

And so, ladies and gentlemen, I know you all join me in saluting... in complimenting, and in most sincerely thanking our retiring Superintendent of Schools.... Mr. Lester J. Grant and his lovely wife Lorraine.

Before I close, I have two little things I really want to do yet.

First, I want to personally thank Mrs. Mary Barnes, one of our former School Board members who conceived and organized and served as General Chairman for this recognition dinner. (have her stand up)

And I also want to thank Miss Margaret Fassnacht, Mr. Gary Anderson, and Miss Marilynn Mertz for organizing and rehearsing the singing group from Stephen Decatur, and also Mr. Glenn Fair for bringing his Stephen Decatur band over here.... and all the others who have helped so very much on this tribute to Les Grant.

Secondly, remember I said there were two things.... I feel in all fairness, I really must read just a few of the many telegrams we have received here tonight.

(Read the five telegrams)

Congratulations, Lester and Lorraine.... and may the very best of everything come to you both in the years ahead. You have the admiration and thanks of a really and genuinely.... grateful..... community.

Good night.... and thank you!

DOMESTIC SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise this message will be sent as a fast telegram.	
TELEGRAM	
DAY LETTER	
NIGHT LETTER	

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WESTERN UNION

W. P. MARSHALL
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

TELEGRAM

F. W. McFALL
PRESIDENT

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise the message will be sent at the full rate.	
FULL RATE	
LETTER TELEGRAM	
SHORE-SHIP	

NO. WDS.-CL. OF SVC.	PD. OR COLL.	CASH NO.	CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF	TIME FILED

Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

To LESTER J GRANT MAY 24 67 19

Street and No. MASONIC TEMPLE

Care of or Apt. No. _____

Destination: DECATUR, ILLINOIS USA

JUST HEARD OF YOUR RETIREMENT. URGE YOU TO RECONSIDER.
WE OLDTIMERS OUGHT TO STICK TOGETHER.

(SIGNED) EMPEROR HAILE SALASSE

Senders name and address (For reference)
WU1213(R2-66)

Sender's telephone number

DOMESTIC SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise this message will be sent as a fast telegram.	
TELEGRAM	
DAY LETTER	
NIGHT LETTER	

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WESTERN UNION

W. P. MARSHALL
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

TELEGRAM

F. W. McFALL
PRESIDENT

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise the message will be sent at the full rate.	
FULL RATE	
LETTER TELEGRAM	
SHORE-SHIP	

NO. WDS.-CL. OF SVC.	PD. OR COLL.	CASH NO.	CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF	TIME FILED

Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

To LESTER J GRANT MAY 24 1967

Street and No. c/o MASONIC TEMPLE

Care of or Apt. No. _____

Destination: DECATUR, ILLINOIS

BEST WISHES AND CONGRATULATIONS. IT STRIKES ME THAT YOU
KNEW WHERE YOU WERE HEADED BETTER THAN A LOT OF US.

(SIGNED) AMELIA EARHART PUTNAM

DOMESTIC SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise this message will be sent as a fast telegram	
TELEGRAM	
DAY LETTER	
NIGHT LETTER	

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WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

R. W. McFALL
PRESIDENT

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise the message will be sent at the full rate	
FULL RATE	
LETTER TELEGRAM	
SHORE SHIP	

NO. WDS.-CL. OF SVC.	PD. OR COLL.	CASH NO.	CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF	TIME FILED

Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

To **LESTER J. GRANT** MAY 24 '67 19

Street and No. **MASONIC TEMPLE**
 Care of or Apt. No. _____ Destination **DECATUR, ILLINOIS, USA**

CONGRATULATIONS LES, OLD BOY, ON THE OCCASION OF
 YOUR RETIREMENT. YOU HUNG ON LONGER THAN I DID.

(SIGNED) THE DUKE OF WINDSOR,
 FORMERLY, EDWARD VIII

Senders name and address (For reference)
 WU1213(R2-65)

Sender's telephone number

DOMESTIC SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise this message will be sent as a fast telegram	
TELEGRAM	
DAY LETTER	
NIGHT LETTER	

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WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

R. W. McFALL
PRESIDENT

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise the message will be sent at the full rate	
FULL RATE	
LETTER TELEGRAM	
SHORE SHIP	

NO. WDS.-CL. OF SVC.	PD. OR COLL.	CASH NO.	CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF	TIME FILED

Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

To **THE DISTINGUISHED LESTER J GRANT** MAY 24 1967

Street and No. **c/o MASONIC TEMPLE**
 Care of or Apt. No. _____ Destination **DECATUR, ILLINOIS, USA**

HEARD YOU WERE RETIRING SOON; CONGRATULATIONS.
 PLEASE CONSIDER THIS MY FINAL OFFER. I'LL ~~FINANCE~~ FINANCE
 YOUR SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR 3 ENTIRE YEARS IF YOU'LL GIVE ME
 BACK MY VIRGIN ISLANDS. PLEASE PASS THIS ON TO YOUR
 SUCCESSOR.

(Signed) FREDERIK IX, KING OF DENMARK

DOMESTIC SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise this message will be sent as a fast telegram	
TELEGRAM	<input type="checkbox"/>
DAY LETTER	<input type="checkbox"/>
NIGHT LETTER	<input type="checkbox"/>

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WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

R. W. McFALL
PRESIDENT

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE	
Check the class of service desired; otherwise the message will be sent at the full rate	
FULL RATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
LETTER TELEGRAM	<input type="checkbox"/>
SHORE-SHIP	<input type="checkbox"/>

NO. WDS.-CL. OF SVC.	PD. OR COLL.	CASH NO.	CHARGE TO THE ACCOUNT OF	TIME FILED

Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

To MONSIEUR LESTER J GRANT MAY 24 1967

Street and No. c/o MASONIC TEMPLE

Care of or Apt. No. Destination DECATUR, ILLINOIS, USA

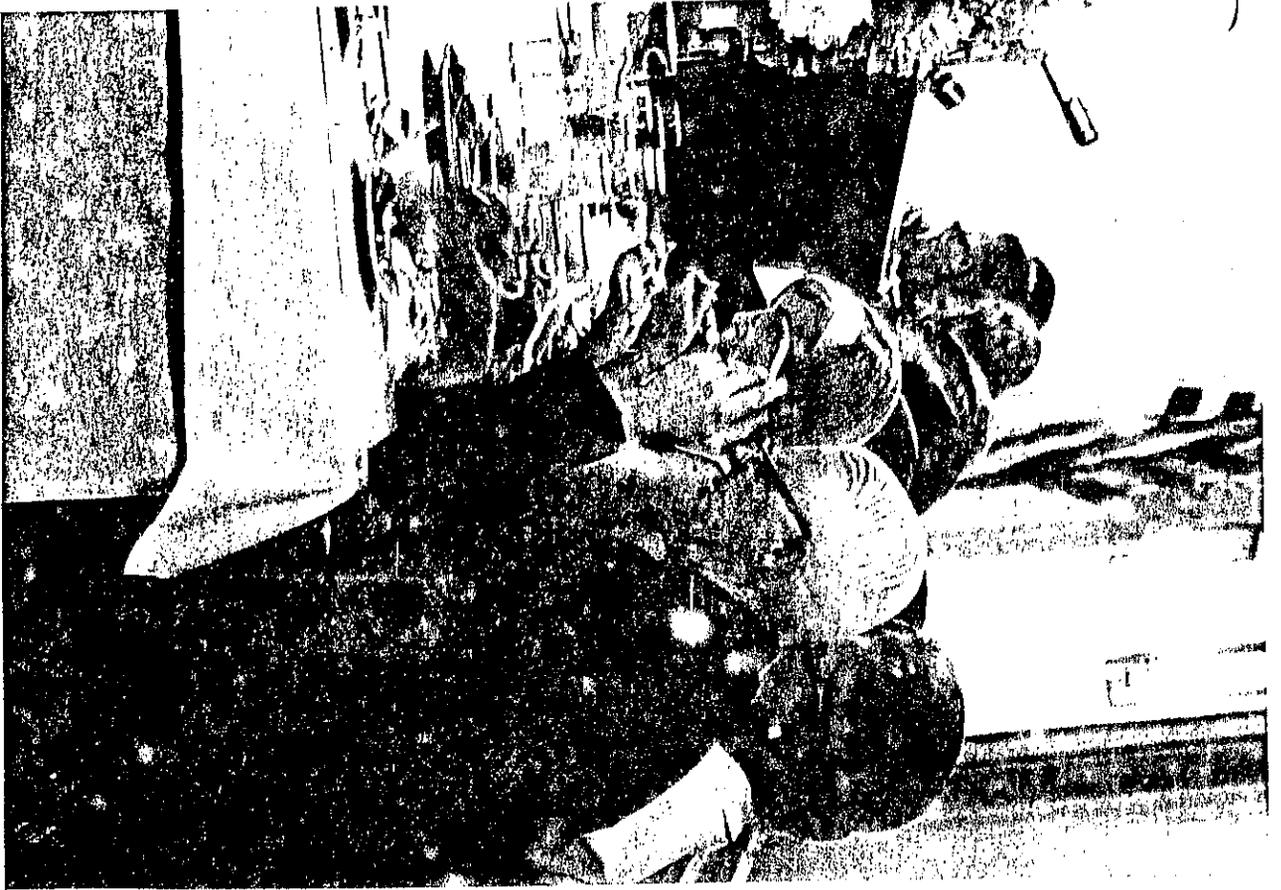
CONGRATULATIONS, LESTER. STICK BY YOUR GUNS.
ONE OF THESE DAYS THEY'LL BE CALLING YOU BACK.

(SIGNED) CHARLES DE GAULE

Senders name and address (For reference)
WU1213 (R2-65)

Sender's telephone number

Dick Huff



Richard Grant





Korraine Grant, wife

Daughters Albroa and Diane



Left - Right Mrs James Grant, mother; Lester J. Grant; Korraine L. Grant, wife



Russell Macann



Roy Rollins



Caricature

Hester J. Grant



Bill Madden



E.E. Lindsay



Parade during singing



SPEECH OF RUSSELL MC CANN

Former student at Woodrow Wilson Jr. High 1943

Mr. Grant, ladies and gentlemen, my story of Mr. Grant starts just shortly before this report was issued by Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. It's the report of Russell McCann, Class 7A, and it's signed by Lester J. Grant, Principal.

When I started Junior High, I was straining for independence and really at a crucial stage in my personal development, and yet I couldn't even cope with the new freedoms that Junior High brings.

I was in a group that pushed the teachers to the limit, and I'm sure that maybe the teachers even shed a tear when they found out who was going to be in their class. One of our favorite pastimes was seeing who could get out of the school the fastest after the last class. We soon found out that, after that bell rang, the teacher was so busy helping students that she couldn't see us, and we found a new way out of the school--the window. Gosh, that was a fast way out, and this went on for quite some time until, on the floor below us, a teacher happened to be standing at the window looking out, just as I went flying by.

The next morning, I received an invitation from Mr. Grant to come and visit him. He talked with me, and I'm sure, thinking back, that I probably denied everything at least ten different ways, but the outcome was inevitable and Mr. Grant, the educator, scored a tremendous success in student discipline that day. My punishment was to report to his office every day at 7:30 and sit there while the teachers reported in and stay there until school started. In addition, I was to receive an "F" in conduct for that term.

Needless to say, I had plenty of time to think about how I could explain this "F" to my parents, but as the days rolled on, I couldn't think of anything that could justify it, and when the report cards were finally handed out, I was no closer to an answer, so I thought I'd just change that "F." I erased and I scraped, but all I did was really just blotch everything, and so I thought, well, if I would wrinkle it and crinkle it enough, maybe the "F" would be illegible. And so all the way home, I wrinkled it and crinkled it and wadded it and creased it, and that darned "F" was still there when I got home.

Well, that experience was all that I needed. I never had any trouble in school again, and I think that Mr. Grant had found the one thing that would change me from the rowdy pest into an eager student, and I think that he showed his wisdom in many ways over his life, as a fine citizen and as an educator, but in this particular case, he just knew boys. He knew what I needed, and I'm very glad that my path crossed his.

SPEECH OF LOIS RABER **

Thank you, Bill, Mr. Grant, and everyone here tonight. The three great social institutions of our country--the home, the Church, and the school--for good or for bad, are the foundations of our American society. It is my great pleasure to play a small part in the tribute tonight to Lester Grant, our Superintendent of Schools, a man who has influenced so greatly the most precious extension of our life on this earth--our children.

I was one of the lucky ones! We chose to live in Decatur. There were many reasons for this choice; the size was right, the trees were just so beautiful and, most importantly to a young couple, everyone said the schools were so good. Of course, we didn't have any children yet, but the birthrate was high here--best in the State, by the way, per capita, and we had high hopes. I don't know if it was the water or what it was, but we have three teenagers now who were part of the baby boom of the post-World War II that caused the Decatur school population to grow from 7,500 children to over 22,000 in less than 20 years.

In 1959, the Committee of 100 was formed to study our school needs, future plans and problems. I was sent as a representative from an organization that I belonged to. One of the reasons was because I was unhappy that my children went to old schools, my taxes were higher every year, and after all those buildings that we built in the '50s, how could we possibly need more money? Well, let me tell you that Lester Grant, his staff, and the School Board gave quite a revealing picture of life in Public School District No. 61. I learned a great deal about our tax structure and the limitations of our State statutes. I realized that women drive men wild, because they oversimplify everything, but this study made me a wiser and, yes, a dedicated supporter of our schools.

1 * Wife of Dr. Paul Raber. She was a very active PTA member and a strong supporter of good education

It's not my job to hinder, but to help. Far too often, we are overly concerned about the poor or the special child and forget that over 90% of the school children are just average. Lester Grant has worked for educational excellence for all of our children.

As a member of the Illinois Citizens Education Committee, I have met private citizens who invariably would say, when they were introduced to me, "Oh, you're from Lester Grant's district! Now there is a good Superintendent," or, "You're sure lucky to have Grant over there." They would talk about the growth of our District and how, in Decatur, people just can't live on the wrong side of the tracks. Did you ever realize how our high school boundaries were an almost ideal socio-economic cross-section of American life? It's a wonderful place to raise a family, and we're proud to say that our children are born, bred and read in Decatur.

It's the Superintendent who sets the tone of his School District and provides some of the "go spirit" and, as would be expected of Lester Grant, he has surrounded himself with a staff of educators who are qualified, dedicated and just plain wonderful people who have always given more of their time and talent way beyond an 8-hour day and a 5-day week. Lester Grant's integrity can never be repaid with words or money. No matter that we, at times, have failed him in his dreams of a perfect school system, he has kept working within the boundaries that we have given him, always prodding us onward toward better education; never complaining, always the gentle man.

Lester Grant, you are an inspiration to our community. I speak as an individual, but I know that all of you join me tonight when I say simply and sincerely, "All your efforts have not been in vain. I thank you, my children thank you, and our children's children thank you."

SPEECH OF ED LINDSAY *

Thank you, Bill. I don't always agree either.

I first met Lester Grant in 1943 when he was principal of Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. Later, I noted with interest, the number of times that my daughters mentioned how much their "Woody" background had meant to them at the Madeira School in Washington and at Northwestern University.

I saw Lester Grant begin to blossom to the educator and administrator that we know when he was chosen Assistant Superintendent of the Decatur School District under Ray McIntosh. Together, they conceived the program for full-time school, annual salaries for teachers, collaboration in the Summer Community Playground Program, the establishment of study sabbaticals for teachers, etc. Because Ray McIntosh left to become the Superintendent at Rockford in 1950, and because Lester Grant's (structure) stature had risen (structure too), had risen in his assistantship, he was made the Superintendent of Schools for the Decatur District.

Much of the early post-War II planning had not been fully implemented. There were needed modifications in program and in staff to be carried out. _____ were dictated by what some of us regarded as a too narrow interpretation at the State level of school law, some of which had its origin in the premechanization planting and harvesting patterns of 19th century Illinois.

In 1958, Spudnik I, the first manned space flight, gave new thrust and insistence to the geographical horizon we had come to know in World War II, with a lifting of the knowledge horizon into areas undreamed of by the authors of school textbooks previously written.

Editor of Decatur Herald & Review

Much was said of the size of the student population in the Decatur District, resulting from the growth and population and from the early and more productive marriages. Much was said of the new buildings that were needed and built. But it's what happened within the walls of the building and within the minds of the pupils that has given Lester Grant his standing among his professional fellow educators in the State and in the nation. He's been concerned that pupils in the Decatur Public Schools--a larger percent of whom now enter college than entered high school a few decades ago--he's been concerned that they would not find that the kind of lives for which the older school patterns prepared them were obsolete before, as graduates, they were ready to live them.

He has built breadth and depth into the Decatur School District curriculum. An item here would be the introduction of conversational foreign language in the 4th Grade. He has nourished and kept inspired a year-round Curriculum Committee to seek quality in education equal to the capacities of the young minds in the classrooms. He cautiously has made it possible for the most capable to be encouraged without discouraging the least capable. He has been concerned with such obvious needs as special training for the handicapped and a broad and basic vocational foundation for those who would go into crafts from high school. And he has been devoted to a program of counseling of increasing competence to help the pupils find their way to full development and to help the teaching staff find more effective avenues to pupil motivation and inspiration.

As Lester Grant looks back on his years in the Decatur Public School System, he must find great satisfaction in the things he has accomplished, interspersed with some of the frustrations that are inherent in the profession he's in. I hope that, as he becomes involved in new education ventures, as he must, because he's too young and too vigorous to retire, he will be philanthropical enough to forgive the community for some of its brief lapses into anti-intellectualism, official and otherwise. I think he has seen enough of the operation of formal education and, indeed, of life itself to know that the appreciation of every last parent in the community for a good job of educating their children comes only when the last of the parents of each school generation become grandparents. And, as a grandparent who was an early convert, I wish to say, "Thank you, Lester Grant, for educating the children of this community."

SPEECH OF DR. PAUL MC KAY *

Mr. Chairman, Mr. and Mrs. Grant, ladies and gentlemen, as we've already heard, Lester James Grant accepted his first teaching job in 1925. This means that, for 42 years, he has been giving grades either as a teacher or as an administrator, and we've already heard from Russ McCann this evening one of the grades that he received in 7A at the hands of Mr. Grant. Now, it occurs to me, Bill Madden, that a man who has been handing out grades for over three decades ought now to be on the receiving end, and it is not inappropriate for him to be graded in public, and this is exactly what I propose to do.

I have before me a report card carrying the name of Lester James Grant. For achievements in building new schools under his administration, what does the record show? Fourteen (14) new elementary schools; 2 junior high schools (1 completed, 1 under construction); 2 new high schools (19 additions). Therefore, for accomplishment as a builder of new schools, Lester J. Grant receives a grade of "A." For honors received as an educator, bringing credit to his school district and community, what does the record show? We've heard from the diary a partial recitation of these awards, ranging, as Bill Madden has said, from President of the Illinois Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 1950 to a very recent award, where he was invited to Williams College to attend a very special Humanities Institute.

In summary, for the honors he has brought Decatur through the recognition he has received from State and National groups, Lester James Grant receives a grade of "A." For deportment and citizenship, for the conduct of his personal and professional life, living beyond reproach, as an example to his students, colleagues, and friends, Lester James Grant receives a grade of "A." For his ability to inspire loyalty among his administrative staff and their unwavering

confidence in him as an educator, par excellence, this is an achievement which must not go unacclaimed. For this intangible asset, yet one that is the hallmark of a true leader of men, Lester James Grant receives a grade of "A."

In summary, "A" for Administration; "A" for Ability; "A" for Conduct, Deportment and Citizenship; "A" for the Loyalty he commands among his close associates and colleagues. These are not, I assure you, grades gratuitously given; they are grades laboriously won over these decades of devoted service and accomplishment. So far as I know, there is no Phi Beta Kappa for School Superintendents; perhaps we should start one. If we did, the man we honor tonight would be a charter member. Like Ben Abou Adhem, like Lester James Grant, may their tribes increase.

SPEECH BY ROY ROLLINS *

I have some sympathy for Mrs. Raber and Mr. Lindsay and Dr. McKay; when you try to follow a Bill Madden act without a dog and pony show, you're in some trouble. I was billed as giving a lasting tribute and, naturally, I put together about an hour and a half's talk, and then I talked to the Program Committee, and they said earnestly, and I thought a little threateningly, two minutes. So, without telling them, I compromised a little on the time, but we'll still have you out of here by 10:30, so you have nothing to worry about.

Reading other people's mail is always fun, as you may have found out some time or other. The best part is gossiping about it, and that's what I intend to do. I obviously can't read all of the letters that came to Lester. They didn't come directly to him, you understand, we intercepted some on this occasion, because there was really a great outpouring from former Board members, from noted professors, university presidents, civic organizations, businessmen, and a wide variety of others. But I'll give you a small sample. I'll only identify a couple of these. There is a limit to how much gossiping even I should do.

The first I liked said, "This is a switch; you're not even dead yet, and we're telling you what a nice guy you are."

This one is from a man that I admired a great deal, and I will identify him. This is the man that Lester succeeded as Superintendent of Schools. Mr. McIntosh says, "One of the interesting phenomena of public education during these 25 years has been the increasing public awareness of the importance of the public schools, the increasing public demand for change, the increasing public resistance to paying the cost of change and, finally, the increasing

1 * Then Vice President and
Personnel Manager at A.E. Staley Co

tendency on the part of many otherwise intelligent people to resort to the age-old practice of repudiating able leadership as the solution to the problem."

This one says, "I feel certain that you are one of the quiet great ones whom I have had the good fortune to know."

This was from the NAACP, and I liked it. Says, "The Decatur branch wishes to express appreciation for your service to the public schools of Decatur. We have had a pleasant association with you through the years and have found you always ready and willing to talk with our representatives and to give careful consideration to the facts presented. We recall especially the efforts you made in behalf of a resolution by the Board of Education in favor of open housing."

This one--and there were several that said much the same thing as this one--said, "The years I was privileged to serve on the Board of Education were most interesting, due largely to your fine leadership."

This letter I don't really understand about; I think it's an outside joke. It says, "Les, if you want the flagpole ^{set} shut on the other end, I think I'm inclined to go along with you." "Raymond Newton, Bus. Manager"

This is a typical line from many of the letters, but I felt very well said. "The citizens of Decatur shall be forever indebted to you for your wonderful service, not only as a capable administrator but, also, as a fine Christian gentleman who has set a worthwhile example for the young people coming under your good influence."

This one says, "As a member of the Board of Education of District No. 25 back in the '30s, I always appreciated the work you did here in Monticello, and I am aware of the extra hours you put in to get the work done, especially from the coaching standpoint which took so many of those extra hours." If I hadn't read any letters, I wouldn't know you used to be a coach.

Only one of these letters did I want to quote entirely, and I think I'll have to identify this one. It's from a clergyman here in town; I don't remember exactly which Church, but it's signed, "Monsieur Powell." It says, "Time goes on, and we cannot escape our relation to it for even a month. You have not been just a captive of time; you have been deeply involved and profoundly concerned and committed in one of the most important areas influencing the present and the future. You and I hit this town about the same time. I admit that I have kept a close eye on you because of the profound importance of your position and our interrelationships. Very early in this period, and more and more as time went on, I have found out that, through the various stresses and changes, along with the countless contacts with realities and personalities, you have conducted yourself with skill and dedication and a good sense of humor. I hope to be seeing you as time goes on. May God bless you and yours always."

Lester, I congratulate you as among the best in the nation as an educational leader. Your influence has been felt far and wide. My family wants me to say, "The same goes for us. Even to the son you hardly knew, but who knew you through the eyes of his sister, who adored you."

This one says, and there were many who said something of this kind, "As the father of three boys, I feel that my sons are fortunate to be enrolled in the Decatur School System."

This one says, "It's been a long time since I first saw you in Old Main at Illinois State Normal University, but I'm glad that both of us stayed put in Central Illinois so that we never completely lost touch. You were a fine student."

This one says, "This university has enjoyed very fine relationships with the Decatur schools for many years. This is in no small part due to the personal relationships between you and your associates and administrative officials here."

And the last one says, "For your forthright courage and high professional demeanor, you have received many honors in your chosen field, as well as the profound respect of your fellow townsmen and associates."

That last quote sums it up for me, and I can do no better in closing than to say, "Les, you have truly earned the profound respect of all of us, and when you read every one of these letters, you'll feel as I did, and here they are."

RESPONSE BY LESTER J. GRANT

I'll show you the front of it, anyway. You can see the rest of it later.

(one volume of letters from friends)

The only thing I knew about what was going to happen tonight was that Dick Huff said, "After Roy Rollins gets through, you will have an opportunity for a few words. And following experiences I've had with Bill Madden's productions, I didn't have the slightest idea what to expect tonight. I feel pretty safe up to now that you haven't heard anymore than you have. I did find out, however, through all this experience, that what I thought was a truly loyal staff, that there was an awful lot of talking behind my back.

I didn't know just what to think about the kind of production Bill was going to produce. In fact, he told me Monday evening to be ready at 6:00 o'clock, that there'd be an elephant around to pick me up. I waited until 6:00 tonight, and no elephant showed up, so I had to come on my own.

I think the kind of production that Bill has demonstrated here tonight, and in previous productions that some of you have seen, that it is the proof of something about our Decatur Public Schools, because he is a product of the Decatur Schools. It either proves that we encouraged creativity, or it proves something about the value of our, "fine arts" program, or it may prove that we need more "fine arts" programs.

And since this was to be somewhat of a history, or it has turned out at least to be somewhat of a history session here tonight, I'd like to just take us for a second or two through one stage of educational history. Education has changed, but it has a history, and I want to relate this to what a teacher might have done with the use of a hen, h-e-n that is; maybe the little red hen, in a classroom situation and give you a little historical account of how

it might have been related. I didn't go back quite to 1900, but at that date it would have been known as a hen when brought into the classroom. About 1910, it would have been a problem. In 1915, a project. 1920, a unit of work. 1925, an activity. 1930, the basis of an integrated program. In 1935, a frame of reference. 1960, the hen has achieved a definite status as a dynamic in the group process. And then, 1967, today, with our new emphasis on the mental health approach, the hen hardly would have recognized herself as the scapegoat in the frustration aggression process. Education runs in cycles. I don't know whether 1970 will be back to the hen in its plain language, h-e-n, or not.

Well, Bill has omitted a lot of things in his diary, thank goodness. There are some things I might have related, and there is one person here tonight who will recognize this one. I tried as much as I could to get out and visit in the classroom and, on one occasion, in visiting an elementary teacher, was very intense, as I always was, in what was going on in the classroom and later discovered, after the session was over, and she was talking to me, she said, "Did you notice I had my dress on wrong side out?" I hadn't noticed, but when she told me, I did. Well, she was here, but she got up and left. I don't know whether she knew that was coming or not.

And there's one thing he didn't mention, too. Nine years ago, when we moved into the, what was later named Keil Administration Building, it had another name. About that time, as some of you may recall, it was known as "Grant's Tomb." It almost turned out to be that.

Well, may I say we are deeply grateful to every one of you; very deeply grateful for this whole occasion. No words that I can say can express exactly how I feel--how we, the family, feel--toward this ovation to our 30 years in

Decatur. And I like to think that these many kindnesses that you and others have shown us over the years have been reflected in the kind of quality educational program that we've tried to produce for your children and grandchildren in our public schools. It's been said that your education has been a failure, no matter how much it has done for your mind, if it has failed to open your heart. And I think tonight is proof of the success of education and the opening of your hearts. We shall be forever grateful to every one of you who has contributed to our success, the successes that we have achieved in Decatur as a team of public school people, and we'll be forever grateful to you, everyone. Thank you so much.

SPEECH OF CAMILLA HUFF *

Thank you, Bill, you saved me a lot of trouble. I had a big speech all written of it. Lorraine, would you come up here a minute?

We did plan our festivities this evening to honor Lester Grant, and although we think Lester is just a great guy, here is another Grant who deserves a lot of recognition. And I know that her support and understanding over the years, and her outstanding talents as a homemaker, I'm sure these things have made Lester's job a little less difficult--I didn't say easy; I just said a little less difficult. We would like to present this tribute to you, Lorraine, for a job well done. Thank you.

* Wife of Richard Huff, President of
Board of Education