

Oral History for Mr. Leslie T. Allen

This is Betty Turnell with another oral history in the series sponsored by the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mr. Leslie Allen, city manager for the city of Decatur.

Q. Well, Mr. Allen, your retirement has recently been announced - after sixteen years of service! When do you plan to retire?

A. I plan to retire at the end of August of this year, 1988. I have notified the council. I gave them six months notice so they would have plenty of time to recruit a replacement, but I expect to complete my service with the city of Decatur at the end of August.

Q. Sixteen years is a long time for a city manager to serve, I believe longer than average certainly. What kept you in Decatur for all that time? Your staying here testifies to your success.

A. Well, I guess I've been very fortunate that the citizens of Decatur have been willing to tolerate me for sixteen years. My wife and I have enjoyed Decatur. We, both of us, have lived here longer than any place we ever lived in all our lives. My father was a construction foreman, and we moved quite frequently when I was young. My wife grew up on a farm, but her father died when she was 14, and they moved to the city. So this has been home to us. We've enjoyed Decatur. Our children live in this area. I have had the opportunity to move to other cities, but we had programs going, and I wanted to see those programs and projects completed. After a while you get so involved in the job and you see things happening. You hate to give up and move on. I've been fortunate, too, to have had good councilmen and mayors and a real good city staff, too. That's what makes an organization go. It's made my job a lot easier to have staff members and council members and citizens who give me the support I've needed to help get things accomplished. It's really a team effort involving elected officials and citizens and the city staff. So evidently we've been doing some things right or we wouldn't have been here this long. But we've enjoyed it. It's been a real challenge. I guess the thing I enjoy the most is to see programs and projects completed. Normally managers stay about five years in the community and move on. You don't get to see the results of some of the planning you've done and some of the projects you've proposed.

Q. It certainly was mutual. The city of Decatur reciprocates in thinking that you were very fine in the job too. But let's talk now a little about your life before you came here. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

A. I was born in southern Oklahoma. My family was from Oklahoma. They originally were from Texas, and they moved to Oklahoma in the early part of the 20th century. My wife's home was in Oklahoma, too. She grew up in Oklahoma. I was born in a small town called Durant, Oklahoma. This is in the southern part of the state. My dad was in construction, and

we did quite a bit of traveling. It seems to me we lived in most towns in Oklahoma. That was during the depression. Times were hard, and you had to keep on the move to make a living.

So we lived also in a number of cities in Texas. My father had asthma. He was looking for a different climate. We then moved from Texas to New Mexico. He worked there for a while. My father was an electrician, and most of the time in his career he spent in construction. Later on, we moved to Phoenix, Arizona - about 1937, I guess it was. Phoenix at that time was a small city of about 50,000.

Air conditioning at that time was relatively new, and my father got into the air conditioning business and was doing quite well. And then he passed away.

My mother was in bad health, so my brother and I ended up going to live with our grandparents on our father's side in southern Oklahoma. My grandfather had just retired as a Methodist minister.

I lived with my grandmother and my grandfather until I graduated from high school.

- Q. Then you continued your education after that?
- A. Yes, I finished my high school. In fact, I enlisted in the service in 1944 when I was 16 years of age. They didn't call me up until I was 17, which was in August of 1944. So I didn't complete high school. I went into the service. Fortunately, I'm not sure why, I was awarded my high school diploma. So when I did get out of the service - I got home in 1946 - I was still quite restless. I re-enlisted in the army and went to Japan and spent a year and a half in Japan with the eleventh air-borne.
- Q. Were you married then, Mr. Allen?
- A. No, I didn't get married until I was about 26 years of age. After I returned from my second hitch in the service and was discharged in December of 1947, I started to school at the University of Oklahoma. I went to school about two years and then the Korean War came along. I re-enlisted in the Korean War in the army. I was shipped to Korea immediately. I was in Korea about three or four months when I was injured - wounded in action. I ended up in the hospital for a while. Eventually, I spent about twelve months in Korea and was shipped home and then spent quite a bit of time in the hospital until I was given a medical discharge in '52. After I got out of the service, I started back at the University of Oklahoma. I met my wife on a blind date, more or less. At that time she had been out of nursing school a couple of years. She was a graduate nurse, living in Oklahoma City, and working for a doctor at that time. We met in Oklahoma City. Of course, the University of Oklahoma is located in Norman, which is only a short distance from Oklahoma City. So we started dating while she was working for a doctor and I was in my junior year at the University of Oklahoma,

majoring in political science. We were married on Labor Day weekend in 1953. After I finished the spring semester at the University of Oklahoma, I went down to Lake Jackson, Texas, where I had worked before off and on during the summer months at the Dow Chemical Company. I worked there. I had decided to work for a while and earn a little money before I went back to school. Anyway, I came home on Labor Day weekend to Oklahoma, my wife's home town of El Reno. We got married and started back to Lake Jackson, Texas, which is south of Houston on the coast. We lived in Lake Jackson for two months and I got laid off. I decided, "Well, I might just as well go back to school." So we went back to Oklahoma and she got a job and I enrolled in the University of Oklahoma. I stayed in school until I finished my undergraduate work in political science. Fortunately, I received a graduate assistantship. I majored in the area of city and state administration. I got my master's degree in the spring of 1956.

Q. When did your family arrive - your children?

A. Well, my older son, Les, was born in 1954. We had been married about 12 months. I was a senior in college. So he was with us when I was a senior as well as when I was in graduate school. As soon as I finished graduate school at the University of Oklahoma, the first job I got was with the Kansas Department of Administration. We moved to Topeka, Kansas.

My younger son was born a year later in 1957 in Topeka.

I really started my career by working for the state of Kansas. I was a budget management analyst. I was primarily interested in city government even though I got my start in state government.

Q. What drew you to the field of city management?

A. When I was in college, like most college students, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. Fortunately, being a veteran, I was entitled to some counseling services. I went over and took some tests. The tests revealed that I probably would excel in the area of social sciences rather than in math or engineering.

I had become interested in political science, having spent quite a few years in southern Oklahoma, which is known as "little Dixie". (I remember as a kid they used to point out that the only character in town we had was a republican. Everybody pointed this fellow out.) It was a heavily democratic area.

Some of my friends were involved in politics, so I became interested in political science. I didn't know what I wanted to do when I got into undergraduate school. Then I got involved in some political activities on the campus through the political science fraternity that I belonged to.

After I came home from the Korean War, the Democratic county chairman for my county in southern Oklahoma approached me to run for the legislature. I said, "Well, you know I haven't completed my education, and I know very little about politics in Oklahoma."

He said, "Well, there are a lot of young men in the legislature."

The salary was so small at that time that you couldn't afford to serve in the legislature unless you had a full-time job or other compensation. I think the only reason he asked me to run was because I had received some publicity about being honored in Korea. I think he wanted me to run on my war record, which I didn't think was proper for a politician. But anyway, that stimulated my interest.

After I finished my undergraduate degree, I became primarily interested in city administration. I was fortunate enough to get a graduate assistantship in the department of political science. I was interested in all the studies of some of the work I had done with the state legislature and state-city administration. I was especially intrigued with the city management profession. It was relatively new then, although city managers have been around for a long time in this country and other countries. The city council/manager form of government really became prominent in this country after World War II.

I looked for a job as an intern in a city. Of course, having a family, I couldn't afford to take an internship which paid maybe \$100 to \$110 a month. I looked for something better and ended by taking this job with the state for \$375, which sounded like a lot of money then.

I worked for the state about a year and a half. Then I had a chance to go with the League of Kansas Municipalities, which is a state association representing all the cities in the state of Kansas. I worked there as an assistant to the director for a couple of years, and, of course, I worked very closely with city councils and city managers. It gave me an opportunity to have a kind of inside track on jobs that became available. I was contacted by a small city in Kansas about being their manager. I was interviewed and selected for the job and spent six years there. I really enjoyed it. It was a small city of about 3000 - a city called Wamego, Kansas. It's an Indian name. Most people have trouble spelling it - W-A-M-E-G-O. From there, I went to Newton, Kansas, where I spent six years. Then I went to Bowling Green, Kentucky, for four years as manager. Of course, I've been here for sixteen years. I really became interested in politics and city management in college. Then my opportunity of working with the League of Municipalities in Kansas gave me a chance to become better acquainted with the city management profession. That's really the way I got into the profession.

Q. Could you give us a very brief idea of the essential parts of a city manager's job?

A. A city manager is really the chief operating officer for the city government. I often use this example - that the city council is really the Board of Directors for the city, which is a municipal corporation. The mayor is the chairman of the Board. They in turn hire a city manager, who is the chief operating officer.

Q. You are their executive officer?

A. Yes, and I report to the entire council. I am in charge of the day-to-day operation of city government. All the nine department directors report to the city manager. Of course, then, I report to the city council. I am responsible for making recommendations to the council, keeping the council informed, working with all the various city departments, overseeing the planning and budgeting, reporting not only to the council but to the citizens, too, and working with the various citizens' advisory groups that we work with. I'm rather like a plant manager, taking care of the day-to-day operations. The council's major responsibility is setting policy and overseeing the performance of the manager and the organization.

Q. Good! You mentioned that you stayed around to see how some of your projects turned out. What were some of the most difficult problems you faced during your term?

A. Well, one of the first problems I ran into when I first took this position was that the city at that time didn't have an affirmative action program for minorities and women, and that was a requirement to receive any federal funds. The city of Decatur had not received any federal funds since the Greenwood Urban Renewal Project was completed in the late 1960's. There had been a period of at least four years or better when the city was not eligible for any federal funding.

At that time the city was trying to get the Torrence Park Urban Renewal Project under way - doing some clearing and rehabilitation out in the east central part of the city.

The first thing I encountered was meeting with the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs staff. They told me that unless we got an affirmative action plan adopted that this or any other federally-funded project in Decatur would not go ahead. Therefore, I started working on an affirmative action plan immediately. I had some difficulty getting it approved by council. There was some opposition to the whole concept of affirmative action. At that time something like 2% of our employees were minorities. We had some women, but only one was in a position of any authority. She was a division head. It took me nearly a year to get council to approve a plan. There was some strong opposition to it. But once we got the plan approved, we were able to proceed with the Torrence Park project. All the problems associated with that project lay in relocating people and getting houses rehabilitated and getting streets rebuilt - things like that. Also we immediately became eligible for federal funding. At that time there was a lot of money available for cities, whereas today the federal funds have just about

dried up. There is very little federal money coming into local communities. That was one of the first encounters I had with a major problem.

I also took the opportunity to go out and visit with some of our major industries. There were two things they brought to my attention that really concerned me. One was some of the bad flooding and drainage problems in the city of Decatur, and also their concern about the Staley Viaduct.

The replacement of the Staley Viaduct has been studied and considered for at least the last 30 to 38 years to my knowledge. I've seen at least three different studies concerned about the condition of that viaduct.

So fortunately we were able to get a comprehensive drainage program under way and to date, with local funds (mainly funds from bond issues), federal money, and state money, we've spent about thirty-five million dollars on drainage and flood control.

We've still got about three projects to finish, but we should get those finished next year.

Most of the major flooding in this community should be over.

I was concerned about strengthening our organization. At that time the city was having trouble recruiting qualified personnel. Most everybody in Decatur was employed in 1972. Very few people were without jobs. If anyone was without a job, he probably wasn't looking for a job.

I immediately tried to strengthen our organization. That was difficult to do because we were competing with Caterpillar and Staley's for employees. Also, I needed to build a personnel program. It was pretty weak. That was one of our first priorities. I was also concerned about other systems we had - our finance system and our computer system. They needed to be upgraded. Our facilities were in terrible shape. The city of Decatur has a history of using old, run-down facilities to house city government. We started planning then. It has taken a long time to do it. One of the great crying needs of that time was housing our employees in decent facilities.

Of course, today, and by the end of this calendar year 1988, we'll be in pretty good shape. Of course, the library is in a nice facility. We now have our civic center, where we have most of our administrative offices. Our public works, water department, and central garage will be in a new facility this fall out on North Jasper Street. Our police will be moving into the new joint city-county law enforcement jail facilities. We have a new transit building planned - a new office building and garage for our transit system, commonly known as our bus system. It's taken me about 16 years, but it looks as if we're going to have most of our people and our departments housed in decent facilities at the end of this year.

- Q. Fine! And these are very fine facilities, for example, the civic center - the place where the mayor and city council rooms, and the city managers office are - and the theatre and so on.
- A. We were real fortunate. When I first came here, we had a number of businessmen talking about building a convention center but no one had any idea of how to finance it. I didn't really think a convention center would go over in Decatur and compete with Chicago, Springfield, and some other places. So what we really started talking about eventually was a community center. The civic center concept really is a community center, not a big convention facility. Fortunately, we were able to get the state legislation changed. That was the legislation whereby the state helped finance the McCormick Center in Chicago. We amended it so that the city of Decatur became eligible for funding under the Civic Center Act. We started planning the Civic Center and eventually that whole complex was built and the state of Illinois paid 75% of that cost by the receipts from the pari-mutuel betting. The other 25% of that 15 million dollar project was paid by federal funds. The day we moved into that civic center nearly eight years ago, it was paid - no local taxes levied. I think it's been a great facility for the community. Not only does it house our city offices and a nice theatre and the multipurpose arena, but it's been great. It had some criticism at the beginning because of the deficit, but I don't know of any public facility other than the water department that pays its own way - not the library or anything else. So I've been very proud of that project. It's been great for the community.
- Q. So you've had many satisfactions. They may have started as problems, but you've turned them around into assets for the city.
- A. Well, I think that's the interesting thing about being a city manager. You are in a position to have some influence on meeting community challenges and influencing the direction the community will go in meeting these challenges. That's probably the most rewarding part of this job is being able to stay here and see some of these things happen.
- Q. You have had a very recent accomplishment, I understand, with the water treatment plant.
- A. The new water treatment plant is one of those ideal projects where everything has gone together just right. Usually on a major project - and that's the largest public works project the city of Decatur has ever undertaken - that project was close to a 36 million dollar project. We started planning for it about five or six years ago. We hired a large, well-qualified firm to look at our water system - not only the supply, but treatment and distribution. The first thing that came out of that report was that we had to do something to expand the water treatment in this community - plus get rid of an antiquated facility that was built in 1917. It had difficulty in meeting state and federal standards for water quality.

But anyway, we got the project designed. We're very fortunate in getting a very innovative financing mechanism whereby we didn't issue fixed-rate bonds. We issued variable bonds that are traded on the market like commercial paper. The interest rate on those bonds has been under 5%, whereas the average rate for fixed rate bonds has been 7 1/2 or 8%. So we saved about \$2 million a year, plus the bids on the project came in way under the engineer's estimate. When this project is completed, and this week they are actually making water down there, we expect as soon as we finish testing that we can have it in production in the next couple of months. But when the project is over, we're going to end up with a surplus of about six million dollars, which we can use to pay off bonds. Our experience has been so good with the water fund that actually we'll be able to pay off those bonds in twelve years rather than thirty.

Q. Great! Congratulations!

A. Thank you.

Q. Now, you couldn't have done all this just by yourself. I understand that you have a staff of about 500 employees. That's a large number of people to deal with. Do you have any pointers for dealing with a staff that large?

A. Well, of course, on a day-to-day basis I mainly work with a staff in the executive department: the assistant city manager, the administrative secretary, and our risk management people - and primarily too with the department directors, but it's a big organization. The city of Decatur covers over 40 square miles. It takes a lot of equipment and personnel to maintain an area this large, but we've been fortunate. One thing I'm real proud of, I've seen a great improvement in organization. We've got a stronger organization. We've got better qualified employees today. I'm pleased to note that our affirmative action plan has been successful. Today we have over 10% of our employees from minorities. We have minorities in supervisory and management positions. We've also been able to recruit women who are not only laborers, but are attorneys and engineers. We have four division heads who are women. One is an assistant department head. So I've been very pleased to see our organization grow, have better qualified people in the organization, as well as make opportunities available for women and minorities. We have a better organization because we've done these things. When you have qualified people, it's a lot easier to supervise and to manage an organization. When you have people you can depend on, who can get the job done, you don't have to worry all the time whether this or that will get done or be accomplished. We've been fortunate to have some good department heads. Regrettably, we've lost a number of our top people during the last couple of years. Some of our old-timers who have been here for a long time like Hilmer Landholt, our corporation counsel, Frank Lambrick, our director of central services, and Charles Cherches, our director of Community Development. They all passed away in the last couple of years. We've lost one assistant police chief and one assistant fire chief to cancer in the last couple of years. We'll probably have a



couple of department heads retiring in the next year or so. So the new manager is going to have a real challenge. He's going to have to appoint some new management people, and even though we've got some good young people on board, it's going to be a real challenge to him because he's not going to have the people I was fortunate to have when I came here.

Q. Well, let's hope he can find someone as good and continue your work.

You've had very high praise from many of the people you worked with. I'm going to read some of the descriptions that have been given. You have been described as "fair", "someone who gets the job done", "high quality, hard-working, very candid individual", "resists undue pressure", "a professional". Now, remarks like that must be very gratifying.

A. They certainly are! I think one thing I've enjoyed and appreciated since I gave my resignation to the city council is that I've had some real nice phone calls and conversations with individuals. I'm very appreciative of the nice things that have been said. We've tried to serve all the community - every area of the city, regardless of their income or social status. We've tried to treat everybody fairly. And I think it's evident by the investments we've made in this community that we have tried to treat the low income areas the same as we have the high income areas.

The people of Decatur have been very good to me. We've had very few problems with the public. Most citizens have been great. That's one thing I will remember - the cooperation we've had from the public. It does make you feel good to hear these things said. This is my thirtieth year as a city manager, and my thirty-seventh year of public service. It really is great to go out and end a public service career with the kind things that the public has said. Fortunately, I've had no negative comments yet. I'm sure there are some people out there who feel we didn't get the job done, but most of the people who have talked to me have been very kind.

Q. You really are retiring with honor! What are your plans for the future?

A. Well, I'll be 61 when I retire from the city. I'd like to work a few more years, either part time or full time. I've been fortunate to be able to work ever since I was ten years of age. The first job I had was shining shoes. The young people today probably don't remember the shoe-shine boys who used to go around with the little box to shine shoes. That's the first job I had to make a little money was shining shoes. So I've always been busy and involved not only in my job but in Boy Scouts and other community activities - my church. So I'd like to keep busy.

I'd like to play golf and do a few other things. I've got to do something. I think I'd go nuts sitting around the house all day piddling. So I have been talking to some different organizations to see if I

couldn't teach part time or do some consulting work and help other communities if I could. But we do intend to stay in Decatur. My younger son and his family live here, and my older son and his family live in Bloomington, so this is home to us. We love Decatur, or we wouldn't have stayed here for 16 years.

- Q. Well, it's good news that you are going to stay in Decatur. We hope to see you around and that you will be able to contribute in the form of maybe not a regular job - or perhaps it may be. At any rate, we will look forward to your continued association with Decatur.

What are your expectations for the city of Decatur in the future?

- A. I think we're seeing things turn around. Decatur went through some difficult times with some of our major manufacturing firms who had to lay people off and a number of them closing down. We experienced the same thing as other large industrial communities in the last five or six years. But we're bouncing back. We're seeing some expansion. There is a lot of commercial development going on. I feel very confident that Decatur will bounce back. Decatur has been down before, but we've always come back. The economy is going to be different here. The good old days are gone. We're not going to see a lot more smoke stack industries. We'll be fortunate to keep the industries we have, like Caterpillar, Firestone, Staley's, and ADM. They are going to continue to be in business here because they're doing the things necessary to stay in business and make a profit.

We're going to see more service industry jobs. Hopefully, we'll attract more white collar industries - companies like Kemper Federal Insurance Company locating here - and maybe some other corporate headquarters.

So I expect to see not only Decatur, but the whole Midwest bounce back like New England did recently. New England went through ten or 20 years of difficult times when their industries shut down. Now they are bouncing back. I see the Midwest doing the same thing. Decatur is in good shape to progress because our infrastructure - the buzz word today for "public improvements" - is going to be in great shape to take care not only of our citizenry, but our industries and any new industry. With all the construction being done by the sanitary district (over 120 million dollars), the law enforcement building, the Richland Community College building, all the street construction under way such as the Staley Viaduct - this community is in great shape to take care of the public and grow for the future.

- Q. You make it sound very exciting! I hope your predictions come true.

A. Thank you.

- Q. Best wishes for your coming retirement, Mr. Allen. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us.

A. Thank you. It's been very enjoyable.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mr. Leslie Allen, City Manager for the city of Decatur. This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. We are recording in the Decatur Public Library on May 3, 1988.