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Dated this 9th day of September, 1987.

Ayawa J. Buntin, Jr.

Dr. H. J. Burstein

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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Dr. H. J. Burstein Interview

February, 1979

This is Betty Turnell, speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Dr. H. J. Burstein, who is known to his friends as "Hymie."

Q. Dr. Burstein, have you lived in Decatur all your life?

A. No, we moved here from Chicago in 1912; I was born in Chicago in 1905, and we moved to Decatur in 1912, and I've been a resident of Decatur ever since... So I've lived here practically all my life.

Q. Dr. Burstein, was Decatur a good place to grow up in those days?

A. I believe so. I've had all my education in the city except for the years when I was attending college and medical school. As a youngster I don't think there was anything unusual about my education, although I did go to the old Marietta School and to the Gastman School and the Wood School. The teacher I remember as being the finest of them all was Sarah Mark Gimbel, who has been a legend in Decatur and was the principal of Gastman School at the time.

Q. And you finished your high school here?

A. I went to Decatur High School, graduated in 1922 and then after that I attended Millikin; I was uncertain as to whether I wanted to pursue a music career. I had started taking violin lessons in the old Masonic Temple Building, which was the site of the Citizens' Bank Building, where we are having this interview this morning. I took lessons with Professor Neice, who was a very capable musician. He played in the Goodman Band. He played trumpet and I believe he taught everything but the harp. Amongst the other things he did, he was the organist at the Catholic Church. I remember as a youngster performing with him in the loft of St. Patrick's Catholic Church.

Q. So you really had a good start in music.

A. That's correct, I think I did. As a junior in high school, I started taking violin lessons at Millikin University with Miss Florence Brown, who was one of the instructors in violin at that time. The head of the conservatory at that time was Max Von Luen Swarthout and the two men who were the administrators of the conservatory of music were Drs. Max Swarthout and D. M. Swarthout, who amongst other things had led the Decatur Oratorio choir. After he left Decatur, he went to the University of Kansas, where he was Dean of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Kansas. A little bit later Max Swarthout went to California and pursued his musical career.

Q. There was a lot of music in Decatur at that time?

A. Not much.

Q. But these were the people who did promote it?

A. Yes. As a matter of fact, they had a music festival in Decatur at that time. The festival was held at the Lincoln Square Theatre, and they had rented the Lincoln Square Theatre for two days. The first day they had the New York - it wasn't the New York Philharmonic - it was called the New York Symphony at that time, and the conductor of that was Mr. Strawsky. I can't think of his first name. The second day they had the Minneapolis Symphony conducted by Max Oberhofer, and the Minneapolis Symphony at that time came to Decatur almost perennially. It was an interesting week end. In addition to the symphonies, they had the Decatur oratorio choir, directed by D. M. Swarthout, perform; and while it was a nice thing culturally, financially it was a bust.

Q. But you didn't stay in music as a career?

A. Well, at the end of my freshman year at Millikin, I was in liberal arts and was pursuing my violin studies but I knew I would not be a virtuoso, so I decided to go to Medical School. I was also interested in medicine younger. During my high school days, I was also an apprentice pharmacist at one of our local pharmacies.

Q. Then you went on to graduate school?

A. Then I took my first year of pre-med at Millikin along with my musical activities and then I transferred over to the University of Illinois and took my second year of pre medic. At that time you only were required to take two years of pre-medical liberal arts education. Then I went to the Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago, which is now called the Abraham Lincoln School of Medicine.

Q. And that launched you on your career?

A. That was my start in medicine.

Q. How did you happen to choose the field of dermatology?

A. I had an internship at the Cook County Hospital, which was an 18 months internship at that time. The average internship was a year. And 18 months gave you a chance for considerable more training, but then also following that I had a residency at the Cook County Hospital which was a combination of neurology, dermatology, and at that time venereal diseases were much more prevalent than they are at the present time, and a good bit of the work consisted of the treatment of venereal diseases.

Q. Tell us what you did after that.

A. Well, when I came to Decatur to practice, I was doing dermatology, neurology, and also I was District Health Superintendent, which was a position under the auspices of the State of Illinois Health Department. At that time - this was in the depression in 1933 - they had abolished the Division of

of Communicable Diseases because of inadequate funds and then the district health superintendent. I had an area of five or six counties where I used to make investigations of communicable diseases and along with that I started working at the venereal disease clinic of the Decatur Memorial Hospital. Their clinic was started after World War I by Dr. Robert Morris and Dr. I. H. Neece.

Q. And then?

A. I was also in private practice at that time. I started my practice in the Citizen's Building, and I've been here during all the years I've been in practice.

Q. What do you especially remember about your early practice?

A. Well, the things I remember most were the long hours. We had night hours at least twice a week. And then we made many house calls in those days.

Q. Those were quite arduous hours?

A. The hours were lengthy, and it meant spending a lot of time going back and forth, seeing the patients at home as well as the ones you have in the hospital besides your office practice.

Q. You probably spent long hours?

A. Oh, sure, you used to have office hours from 8:30 in the morning to 5 o'clock in the afternoon and we had office hours two nights a week. We would see patients much later in the afternoon than we do presently.

Q. With all this work you were involved in, I often wonder how doctors keep up with the advances in their profession? How did you keep abreast of innovations and new treatment.

A. You are correct. Mainly you have to keep abreast of the current literature in medication and -

Q. You squeeze that in in your spare time?

A. Well, you do most of that at night. Whether you're busy or not in your earlier years, there isn't much inclination to do much reading during your office hours. You're always waiting to see patients. Over the years, the major journals in our country in dermatology are the Archives of Dermatology, published by the American Medical Association, the British Journal of Dermatology, the Journal of the Society of Investigative Dermatology, and the comparatively new dermatological journal called Cutis. And over the years, in addition to my practice and keeping abreast of the literature, I've had five or six articles on uncommon or comparatively rare skin disorders published in Cutis. ?

Q. It takes a long time to read those titles, let alone the articles they represent, and I'm sure you were very busy.

A. Well, I do most of that at night.

Q. You haven't retired, Dr. Burstein?

A. Retirement is a strange thing. I don't think an individual ever knows just when he's going to retire. For instance, the things that enter into retirement are problematical. First of all, it depends on an individual's health and secondly, continued interest in what he's doing. Then, attending medical meetings to get the prescribed amount of credit in the continued medical education as the program is called now, for licensing in the practice of medicine. And also, there is the possibility in the next few years that they will require recertification of a speciality so you have to keep abreast of the newer developments in dermatology by reading and attending the meetings. But as far as actual retirement is concerned, that's a difficult thing to state. I don't think I know when I'm going to retire any more than you do at this moment.

Q. Of course, I have retired because somebody told me to!

A. So far, nobody has told me to. When someone tells me to retire, I might do it.

Q. You see, you are in the very happy position of being your own man, so you don't have anyone telling you when you reach a certain year that -

A. That's one of the great advantages of being a solo practitioner - that is, there is no such thing as mandatory retirement if you are fortunate enough to stay well.

Q. And you seem to be in great health?

A. I think I am - I think I am.

Q. You said you exercise every morning?

A. I walk.

Q. Now, your office is filled with a number of pictures and articles and little mementoes of your career, and some of them represent honors and distinctions that you have received.

A. Well, briefly stated, over the years I've been president of the staffs of both of our local hospitals - Decatur Memorial Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital. I've been past president of the Decatur Medical Society. I've been a Vice President of the Chicago Dermalogic Society and my favorite society is the Noah Worcester Dermalogic Society and that was founded at the University of Cincinnati about 22 years ago, to be specific - and originally it consisted of the faculty and former residents of the University of Cincinnati, which has always been an excellent training center in dermatology and then you might want to know who Noah Worcester was.

Q. I do!

- A. Noah Worcester was the first dermatologist to practice in the Ohio Valley, and he wrote the first American text book in dermatology, and that is why the society was named the Noah Worcester Dermalogic Society. It is not a national society, and we have approximately 150 members.
- Q. So they do go outside of Cincinnati now.
- A. They have become a national society now.
- Q. And you've had other distinctions too.
- A. I was president of the Noah Worcester Society - seven years ago, I think it was.
- Q. So you know how to wield a gavel!
- A. I think so, yes.
- Q. I noticed this picture of the young boy with a gavel. Is this your grandson carrying on the family tradition?
- A. That is my grandson. I don't know what he will do, but he is getting a nice education near the the north side suburban areas of Chicago, and he is a student at New Trier East. He is working hard. He's a freshman in college. (Note - Dr. Burstein meant to say "high school.")
- Q. You have other grandchildren?
- A. I have four grand daughters who are younger than he.
- Q. You've already mentioned your music. You never did give it up, did you?
- A. No - I still practice periodically. I always seem to practice most - well, I play with the Millikin Orchestra. I think I'm the only person in captivity who has played the first and the last that the Millikin Orchestra has ever given. In 1920 - a number of years ago - I read in the newspaper that fifty years ago the Millikin Orchestra had played their first public concert. I played in that. I was in the violin section and at that

time the conductor was one of the professors of music at Millikin - Frank Heidigger and that was in 1920. And then I have also been able to play with the orchestra this year.

Q. Good! You have already mentioned that your instrument is the violin. Do you have any special remembrances of your years with the orchestra?

A. While I was in high school, Millikin University had their first interscholastic competition, and I played in that. There were three judges - Mr. Edward Powers, who was Decatur's great patron of the arts - do you remember him? And Professor Miner Walden Gallup, who was one of the faculty, who taught piano at Millikin, and also Professor W. B. Olds, who was head of the voice department at Millikin at that time.

Q. And those are all well-loved names here in Decatur. Do you have any other interest besides music?

A. I play golf. During the summer months I try to play twice a week, but I'm strictly a duffer.

Q. But you enjoy it. You have already mentioned your grandchildren. Do you have any other memories of your family you care to bring out?

A. Well, my father originally came to Decatur. He was in the clothing business and tailoring business but then he was in love with the tavern business. For the old-timers like you and I, we probably remember Ben's Barn - a very popular restaurant until about ten years ago, and that was my father's business.

Q. What impressions do you have of Decatur over the years?

A. All I can say is that Decatur is a fine city to live in, to work in, to practice in, and I've always said that Decatur has been kind to me.

Q. It certainly seems to have been. Do you think there has been any deterioration of life in Decatur?

- A. No. I don't think so, in spite of all the controversy about down town and the mall in Hickory Point, I think there will always be a downtown Decatur and that Decatur will continue to be a fine city to live in.
- Q. And so you are optimistic about the future?
- A. I most certainly am! I most certainly am! I think there are all kinds of opportunities in medicine and law.
- Q. And for your grandchildren?
- A. That is correct. I have two sons but neither one was interested in coming to Decatur to practice.
- Q. Are they both in medicine?
- A. My older son is a psychiatrist who practices in Chicago and my younger son does the labor law for a large firm in the city.
- Q. They probably come to visit.
- A. Sure! Sure! I think we have covered most of the points. But let me look at my notes - I've mentioned the venereal disease clinic which was quite an important thing in Decatur at that time. I used to have a case load of a 100 patients to see on Monday and Friday morning.
- Q. It's encouraging to hear you say that you think that problem has diminished.
- A. Sure! Sure!
- Q. Is there anything else you would like to add? You like to travel, don't you?
- A. I like to travel, and we usually take a summer vacation and spend it with our children. During the winter months I like to take a minimum of two or very often four weeks and go to some balmy place to get away from the winter weather. In addition to the things I've mentioned I do enjoy just listening to classical music.
- Q. Thank you very much, Dr. Burstein.

