

Emmons, Robert

Interviewed by
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for the
Decatur Public Library

Early life in Missouri	1
Experiences in World War I	1
Jobs	2
Depression of the 1930's	3
Bakery business in Decatur	4
Kiwanis Club in Decatur.	5
Chamber of Commerce	7
Businesses of Decatur	7

Mr. Robert Emmons Interview

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

Q. Mr. Emmons, are you a native of Decatur?

A. No, ma'am, I am not.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in the central part of Missouri, just north of the Missouri River, not too far from Jefferson City, the capital. I grew up on a farm and got my high school education in Fulton, Missouri.

Q. Did you stay in Fulton long?

A. I stayed there until World War I.

Q. I know you took part in World War I because I saw you presenting the colors at a ceremony recently. What were some of your experiences in World War I?

A. I enlisted in July of 1917 and after passing the original examination in St. Louis, I was sent to Paris Island, South Carolina, for training. I trained on the island in the Marine Corps and ended up after my training on board a battle ship, the U.S.S. New Mexico. We crossed the ocean and lay in the harbor at Brest for some time. Later on, after the armistice was signed, we were the escort ship for Woodrow Wilson, who went to Europe to sign the terms of the treaty.

Q. Were you on board ship all of the time?

A. Most of the time. I did some guard duty at one of the barracks in Brooklyn, New York, but most of the time I was on board the battleship.

Q. Did you have any attacks while you were on the battleship?

- A. We had one little skirmish with a submarine.
- Q. But you came out all right?
- A. We came out OK.
- Q. Well, of course, if you escorted Woodrow Wilson, that was at the end of the war.
- A. Yes - I was discharged in August, 1919.
- Q. Did you start working after that?
- A. No, I didn't start working directly. I did work for a short time, but then I went to Quincy, Illinois, to enter Gem City Business College. I took all the accounting and business law they had to offer. Then I got into the baking business.
- Q. That, I believe, was your occupation most of your life - in the bakery business.
- A. That's right.
- Q. Where was your first job?
- A. My first job was with the Corn Baking Company in Quincy, Illinois, as their office manager and general accountant.
- Q. So your business education stood you in good stead?
- A. That's right.
- Q. Let's go on from there. What were some of your other jobs?
- A. I went into the baking business for myself for a while, but that didn't turn out too well, and I sold out to a friend of mine. And then I went into sales with Remington Rand Company.
- Q. That must have been at the time of the depression.
- A. That was right in the depression time.
- Q. Tell us some of your experiences in the great depression.
- A. It so happened I was living in Davenport, Iowa, at that time.

Q. Were you married then?

A. I was married, and I had two children, two girls. They were both very young, of course. My wife had had an appendix operation - very serious - it had ruptured, and we had reached the point where it was almost impossible to sell anything. I didn't know just what was going to happen to us when all of a sudden, out of a clear blue sky, my wife received a telephone call from a friend of mine who had been sales manager of the bakery I had worked with, wanting me to come to Burlington, Iowa, and take over the management of the Taystee Bread Company.

Q. That was almost providential, wasn't it?

A. That was a blessing - one of the greatest blessings that I ever had.

Q. And of course you went.

A. I certainly did - I certainly did.

Q. How long were you in Burlington?

A. I was in Burlington five years, and during those five years - in 1934 my son was born, and that rounded out my family.

Q. How did you get to Decatur?

A. Well, they needed a manager for the Taystee Bread plant here in Decatur, and I was transferred from Burlington to Decatur to take over the management of this plant.

Q. It was the same company?

A. Yes, ma'am.

Q. So we finally have you in Decatur, in 1938 - April, I believe you said.

A. In April.

Q. You came before your family, didn't you?

- A. That's right - they wanted to finish school.
- Q. You said you were manager of the plant. What were your duties?
- A. As general manager of a plant, you have charge of the production and charge of the sales both. Of course, I had a superintendent who directly supervised the production of the bread and rolls, but the sales force and office were under my direct management.
- Q. They specialized in bread and rolls?
- A. Yes - buns.
- Q. And all the bread was baked right here?
- A. Baked right here in Decatur.
- Q. That situation has changed in the bakery business now, hasn't it?
- A. Quite a little bit. At the time I came to Decatur there were three wholesale bakeries here - The Purity Baking Company, The Conklin Baking Company, and the Taystee Bakery Company. And now only one is still operating, and that's the Purity Baking Company. I understand that they don't bake bread here, although they do bake a lot of products.
- Q. The bread then is brought in from elsewhere?
- A. Yes, brought in from some larger plant in another city.
- Q. And the distribution was different too, wasn't it?
- A. Yes - we had more retail outlets at that time. Decatur had a lot of independent grocermen then. We had many country stores at that time and very few large chains operating. Naturally, we had the very important responsibility of serving all these outlets.
- Q. So the delivery was quite a business?
- A. Yes - quite a business and quite a problem - you betcha!
- Q. And it probably had to be delivered more often because there weren't the preservatives and refrigeration we have today.

- A. Yes - we delivered bread six days a week then. We didn't deliver on Sunday.
- Q. People wanted their bread almost every day.
- A. That's right.
- Q. How did they keep it?
- A. Oh, they put it in a bread box. Nowadays most people keep their bread in the refrigerator. I know I do. It keeps it longer. I know some people who even freeze it.
- Q. Let's go on to other aspects of Decatur. How did the city differ from the town we know today?
- A. When my family and I moved to Decatur, there were 66,400 people here.
- Q. And today?
- A. Today we have over 90,000 people in Decatur. That, of course, is due to the growth of large companies coming to Decatur and employing a large number of people. I think Decatur has a wonderful location in the central part of the state, and I want to say right here that Decatur's been mighty good to me and my family.
- Q. That's good to hear, but you have done a great deal for Decatur, too. For example, you've taken part in a large number of civic organizations.
- A. I've been a Kiwanian for about 35 years.
- Q. Tell us about that.
- A. I was first a Kiwanian in Burlington, Iowa, and when I came to Decatur, my competitor, Mr. Grover Patten, invited me to come to the Decatur Club for a visit.
- Q. That's good spirit!
- A. Yes, we had good relations competitively in those days. I knew Grover Patten and some of his friends. Thurman McDavid was sales manager for

that bakery, and I knew the Conklin brothers, and we worked together. It was a good relationship.

Q. So you joined the Kiwanis?

A. I joined the Kiwanis, and I also served on the Salvation Army Advisory Board for 15 years. I belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. After my retirement, I became very active in some of our Senior Citizens' organizations.

Q. Let's go back to when you first came to Decatur. You had your family here - two girls and a boy. Do you think Decatur was a good place to raise children?

A. I do. I know my children got a good basic education. My two girls and my boy went through the elementary schools here, and then they went to Decatur High School. At that time it was located where the Civic Center now is. And all three of my children graduated from that high school. My son was especially proud of it. He lives now close to the present Stephen Decatur High School, and his children, three of them, are graduates of Stephen Decatur.

Q. You must have some great family reunions.

A. Oh, we do!

Q. You, of course, have retired. I believe you said you retired twice.

A. I did. I retired from the baking business in 1957. I didn't know exactly what to do with my retirement so Henry Bolz of the Chamber of Commerce called me one morning and said he wanted to talk to me. I went down to see him and I ended up being hired to take over one of the jobs at the Chamber of Commerce right after my retirement from the Bakery. I stayed there for five years.

Q. Good! What was the job?

- A. I was assistant to Mr. Bolz in charge of some of the various committees.
- Q. What kinds of questions come to the Chamber of Commerce?
- A. A lot of problems. I'd say Henry Bolz was responsible for bringing some of the outside business to Decatur, which helped the growth of the city.
- Q. Mr. Emmons, you mentioned earlier these businesses which helped the growth of Decatur. What are some of these?
- A. I might mention the following. Of course, there have been others, but these are possibly the bigger ones. There was York Division and the Marvel-Schebler Division of the Borg-Warner Company, for one, located south of the lake. Then there was the Caterpillar Tractor Company, a bit plant in Decatur, building road machinery. They've contributed a lot to the population of Decatur. Then there was the United States Signal Depot. It's not active now, but it was stationed in Decatur for a good many years. Then there is the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, the General Electric Company, A. E. Staley Mfg. Co., Mueller Company, Wagner Castings Co., Mississippi Valley Structural Steel, Decatur Pump Co., Pittsburg Glass Manufacturing Co. at Mt. Zion, as well as our long time reliables. Many smaller manufacturing companies, wholesale and retail businesses, have been established in Decatur, and the Mueller Company.
- Q. We all know that at the present time some of these businesses are experiencing hard times because of the general economic conditions of the country. But you think they are sound and will have a come-back?
- A. I think these are all good sound companies and I don't see any reason why there shouldn't be a revival a little later on.

Q. It's encouraging to see that you are so optimistic. You really do think that Decatur has a great future?

A. I do!

Q. Well, good! We're very pleased to hear of your experiences and to know that you have contributed so much to Decatur, too. We have enjoyed very much hearing your reminiscences. Thank you for coming to take part.

You have been listening to the memoirs of Mr. Robert Emmons. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.