

Dr. E. J. Muffley

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

Childhood and School days.....	1
College.....	2
YMCA Night School.....	2
Playgrounds/Parks.....	3
Career at Roosevelt Junior High School.....	4
C -0 -D -A.....	5

Dr. E. J. Muffley Interview

September 14, 1977

Speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Dr. E. J. Muffley. Dr. Muffley is the only person now living in the Decatur area for whom a school has been named - the E. J. Muffley School on South Country Club Road. That's a real honor, Dr. Muffley! First, can you tell us something about your childhood?

Thank you, Miss Turnell. I'll try to give you a list of things that happened to me in my early childhood. I was born in Lexington, Illinois in 1893. My family moved to Joliet, Illinois, when I was about 3 years old, and my father was a guard at the penitentiary for about 4 years. I remember one day my father took us out to the penitentiary farm and there we saw the cattle. When they opened the gate to let the cattle through, it scared me and I ran to my dad to hold his hand because I didn't know what a cow was. It was very interesting to me to see cows. We came back to Lexington, Illinois, when I was about 5 years old. We lived on a farm until I was about 16 years old. This was a wooded farm along the Mackinaw River in McLean County. I enjoyed the wooded area and the wild animals and the trees. I spent many days wandering in the woods and up and down the Mackinaw River, fishing in the Mackinaw and I learned to swim in the Mackinaw River. During my childhood one of the jobs I had to do at home was to saw wood for our stoves. We had a stove in the kitchen that burned wood and a heating stove burned wood. We didn't use coal out there on the farm.

I started to school in a one-room country school where they had grades from one to eight. It was the Olive Branch School out about 5 miles west of Lexington. They had only one teacher but some of the older students helped the younger students with their work. I remember one of the problems I had when I was about the third grade. I was trying to do my reading lesson and I came to the word "thus" - T-H-U-S. Well, what does "thus" mean? What is that word? ~~Well,~~ I knew such words as "them", "this", "their", "there". Such other words spelled similarly to thus, but I did not understand what "thus" meant and one of the older boys in the eighth grade explained to me the meaning. That was the way the older boys could help. Or they might help you with your arithmetic problems. In my year in the fifth grade my family moved to another farm that was near Lexington, and I attended the Lexington public schools. This was about a mile out from town and I walked to school every day. In those days some of the boys wore knee pants but older boys - my older brothers and some of the older boys - wore long trousers. I always wanted long trousers like my father wore, but my mother would not buy them for me. Finally, when I was in the eighth grade, she bought me a long pair of trousers. This was a happy day for me. I enjoyed having long pants and looking like a man. I graduated from the Lexington High School in 1912. Then I took a teacher's examination - a county examination. In those days if you passed

the teacher's examination, you were allowed to teach in a country school. I taught one year in the Buck Creek country school. I got along very well with the pupils from the third grade up to the seventh grade - I didn't have an eighth grade in my school - but I didn't know how to teach reading to the beginners. How do you teach reading? Well, some of the teachers in the neighboring schools would help me to know what to do, but I wasn't too good a teacher, and I think those children taught me more than I taught them. You may be interested to know that my salary was \$50 a month. Oh, that was a good salary because the hired man on the farm only earned \$25 a month. Well, after one year of teaching, I decided it was time to go to college and I entered Eureka College at Eureka, Illinois, in the fall of 1913.

I was working my way through school. I had to work for my board and room, but on Sundays I went to the Christian Church and taught a Sunday School class. ~~Well~~, I just didn't teach on Sundays. I would take those boys out on Saturdays for hikes or we would go to the college gymnasium and have the boys swim or play basketball. I was doing many things like they do in Boy Scouts today only at that time they didn't have any Boy Scouts in Illinois. ~~Well~~, one day I was offered a job at the grade school in Eureka to take care of the children at recess and noon, to supervise the playground. Well, I told them I didn't know anything about playground recreation and that kind of thing, and the man that was offering me the job said, "Well, we have been watching what you have been doing with those boys on Sunday." So that gave me the idea that they knew who I was. ~~Well~~, I accepted the job, but I was very fortunate in having a neighbor woman who could help me. She had been a leader of children's work in Chatauquas over the years, where the adults would go to the Chatauqua meetings and leave their children with her to lead them in play. And she taught me a number of games that could be used on playgrounds and gave me a book that was full of games. This helped me to organize the public school playgrounds at recess and noon. The fact was that I organized a basketball team that played in the evening, and we played against some other grade schools in the area close to Eureka.

Well, I graduated from Eureka College in ¹⁹¹⁷~~19~~ and ~~17~~ and had a bachelor degree. During the summer of 1917 I came to Decatur and accepted a job with the Railroad YMCA to be in charge of the Night School. In those days students could quit school when they were fourteen years old if they had finished the eighth grade.

Many boys quit school at the age of 14 and went out to the Wabash shops to work, to become machinists. But after they had been there for a while, they discovered they could not read the reports, they could not write reports, they did not know how to do the arithmetic for the machines, and did not know how to read blueprints. This was what we were giving them in the YMCA Night School. This was held at an old house in what was known as "The Pines." It was the original home of Col. Clokey. It was a 12-room house and located at the place where the Pines Shopping Center is now located. There we had about 5 acres of ground. We had tennis courts, a baseball diamond, and a football field. Well, I was able to arrange for the boys to play games and then we had clubs at night when the boys would come together and we would meet and play games.

The arrangement with Col. Clokey, when he gave the Pines Ground to the YMCA, the plan was that the YMCA was to build a gymnasium within 10 years. Well, Col. Clokey died before the 10 years was up, and when the 10 years ended, we did not have the money to build the gymnasium, and the heirs to Col. Clokey claimed the property back and so we lost the Pines.

Well, in order to carry on the work which we had been doing with boys and girls, we moved our office to the Galloway Park. There was an old residence there, and we put our equipment in that house. There was a very large play area of about 10 acres. This proved to be a very successful program, and we were carrying on with over a hundred boys and about the same number of girls. One day I met the County Judge. Now they had county judges in those days. They do not have county judges today. The County Judge was the person who saw the boys who were in difficulty or had some problem in regard to their lives. And Judge McCoy saw me one day and said, "Since you started that playground and recreational program out on the East Side, we do not get so many boys in court as we used to get. The work you have been doing with those boys - the recreational program - has kept them interested, and they do not commit difficulties that bring them into court."

Well, I thought if it was good for the East Side of Decatur it would be good for the North side, the West side, and the South side, so I contacted the president of the City PTA Council and asked if they would help me raise money to open up other playgrounds in other parts of the city. They agreed to do that, and they went down on the streets in Decatur, on Water Street and Main Street, and sold tags to people to raise money for the playground. They raised enough money for us to open four parks, the playgrounds to be supervised by trained people that would help them to start their playground recreational programs and get them interested doing things and not getting into trouble.

Well, one day I met Jim Galloway, who was president of the Decatur Park District, and he said to me, "Don't you ever go down on the streets again and sell tags for playgrounds. That is a disgrace to the City of Decatur, and we don't want that disgrace against our parks."

This floored me, and I said, "Well, we wanted those playgrounds for those boys and girls, to help them have a program that would keep them out of trouble."

And Mr. Galloway said, "You tell us how much money you need, and the park board will furnish the money."

Well, this was the starting of the playground and recreational program for the City of Decatur and I'm known as the father of the recreation and playground program.

Let me say that one of the best things I did in the recreation program was to hire Freda Coombs, who served for 40 years for the girls' recreational program in Decatur, and the Freda Coombs Building is named for her.

Well, this was not such a good job for me. The salary wasn't enough to take care of my family, and about 1924 a teacher at Roosevelt Junior High School got married, and in those days a teacher who got married could not hold a job so this made a vacancy in the school. They offered the job to me. This was to teach science, and that was what my major was in college, and I accepted the job. I served at Roosevelt Junior High School for 35 years.

Well, I taught for a year and a half as a regular teacher, and then I was called in to the Superintendent's office. The Superintendent asked me if I would consider being the assistant principal at the school.

I said to him, "No. Those other men have been teaching there for three or four years and if I was to go around them, there would be a lot of trouble with them.

Then he said there was not another man who was a college graduate teaching at the school. And when I began to check up on the records of the teachers, out of 36 teachers, I found that only 12 of them had degrees from college.

Well, I accepted the job and I served as assistant principal for 18 years and after 18 years the principal died suddenly on Saturday night and I was notified that he was gone. I was raised to the position of principal and served in that position for 15 years. This made a total of 35 years that I served, and I retired in 1958.

May I say that the school board paid me for working at Roosevelt School. They didn't know that I would have paid them to let me work there. I enjoyed the work that I was doing. I had a wonderful group of boys and girls, and I had a wonderful group of parents who backed up the school and we had no problems with colored people. The fact was that the boys choosing up a baseball team would choose a black boy who was such a good player before they would choose a white boy.

Now the schools in those days were somewhat different than they are today. I remember back in the early 30's about 1932 we were in the period of a very serious depression and the school ran out of money to pay salaries. They were going to have to wait until the June taxes were paid so they would have enough money to pay salaries. They issued warrants to the teachers for their salaries to hold until enough money came in so they could cash their warrants. The week before school was out, they sent a notice out that they were going to have to close the schools the following Tuesday. They could not run until Friday as the law did not permit them to issue any more warrants. The teachers held a meeting and they agreed to teach school, to finish the school that week without salaries. This indicated the kind of teachers we had in that day. They were interested in the welfare of the boys and girls and not in the pay check. They wanted the boys and girls to have the training that could be had in the public schools and they were doing a top job. I feel they were dedicated teachers.

It may be of interest to you to know that in 1934 I called a meeting of the representation from the various denominational churches. We met in the old Central Church on the corner of Edwards and William Streets. There

were about 8 or 10 churches represented and at that meeting they decided we ought to organize a church council. This is what they did, and I was elected president of the first church council. This operated for a number of years carrying on an educational program for the public schools until a law was passed preventing them from carrying on such a program in the public schools. But they did continue to operate as a church council and it still is operating under the name CODA - C-O-D-A - which stands for "Churches of the Decatur Area". I'm happy to know that our churches can work together and help unite our people in the church work that needs to bring us together and to put on such programs as the evening services that are held in Fairview Park and also the Thanksgiving Service that is held every year here in Decatur.

In 1945 I received my Master's Degree at the University of Illinois.
I was working on my Master's Degree at the University of Illinois. I received my Master's Degree in 1945. I was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Eureka College in 1955. In the year 1957 they completed building an elementary school that was across the road and about a half a block north of where I live. One night I was visiting at my neighbor's home and in those days where I lived was out in the country and we had a country telephone with about three or four neighbors on the same line, but each neighbor had his own ring such as two longs and one short or two shorts and two longs. This indicated which family was being called on the telephone. Well, I was at my neighbor's house, and I heard my telephone ring. I answered the telephone and Mr. Grant, the superintendent of the public schools, said he wanted to tell me that the new school was to be named the Muffley School. This so shocked me that when I hung up the telephone, I could not speak. My neighbor said, "What was the matter? Did someone die? Somebody hurt? What is your trouble?" Finally I told him the school was to be named after me.

It may be of interest to you to know that a little boy in the second grade over at the Muffley School asked his teacher, "Was Mr. Muffley named after the Muffley School?" I thought that was very interesting.

It may be of interest to know some of the organizations to which I belong and in which I am interested in working. I'm a member of the Kiwanis Club and I'm very much interested in the work the Kiwanis Club does in helping to support the playgrounds and the recreational program in Decatur. The fact is that one playground is called "The Kiwanis Playground" and another playground is called "Sinawik", which is "Kiwanis" spelled backwards. I'm very much interested in working with that organization. I'm also a member of the Mental Health Organization. I've been very much interested in the work that they do. ~~The fact is that~~ the Mental Health Association is the organization that helped to bring the mental health center to Decatur and start the work that is being done to help people with mental health problems.

I'm a member of the Illinois Arthritis Foundation Board and from time to time I attend the meetings at the state office in Peoria. I'm very much interested in helping to raise money for the Arthritis Foundation. Part

of the money is used locally to help people who need materials to help them get around - wheel chairs and crutches and things that way, but I'm interested in the funds that go into the National Fund for Research and one day I hope we break through and find a cure for arthritis. That I'm looking forward to.

Completed

I'm a member of the Council of Social Agencies and Senior Citizens. These organizations have been working to help the senior citizens in the problems that confront them. I'm a member of Retired Teachers Association and I'm a member of the organization working to pass laws to improve the pensions of retired teachers. I serve on some of the committees. I'm an elder of Central Christian Church and I serve on several committees for the church. The fact is we have a 5 acre farm which I manage. Some day we hope to build a church out there, but right now I have it rented to a farmer. I serve on a number of committees for the church.

Well, I do a number of other things. For instance, I have an acre of ground where I live and I mow my own yard and I have a large garden and raise vegetables which I honor the neighbors with. I give them squash and tomatoes and help them to live.

1975

A number of honors I've received and for which I'm happy. I was appointed by the Decatur Council of PTA a life member of the National PTA. I was granted an honorary award from the Arthritis Foundation in 1955 and in 1975 at the local meeting of the Mental Health Association, I was granted the Bell Honor.

Well, this will give you some idea of how I keep going so that although I'm 84 years old right now I'm still active and trying to do my part as a good citizen in the city of Decatur.

Well, I think I'd better stop now.

- - - -

Thank you very much, Dr. Muffley. You're really an inspiration to all of your listeners. You may say you are 84, but I'm sure if anyone could see you, and of course all of those who hear all of your many accomplishments, we know that this is just a delusion - that you probably are only in your sixties, if that. So we really do admire your activities and thank you for all that you have contributed to the City of Decatur, to the young people who have lived here. And we especially thank you for coming down to record your experiences and your observations.

You have been listening to the views and experiences of Dr. E. J. Muffley. This is Betty Turnell speaking.