

Julius McCurdy 1982

In order to set the stage, I'm going to have to make a few personal remarks in the beginning. My father was elected sheriff, and we moved to Decatur from Stone Mountain January 1, 1913. We took up residence in the jail, which at that time was located where the Callaway Building is now located. Many people will remember the old two-story building, which had a very homey look, because of the verandah. The living quarters for the sheriff were in the front of the building, and it was separated from the jail by a corridor. As you entered the jail, either from the outside or from the corridor, you entered a large room where prisoners were searched, questioned, and booked and then placed in cells. At that time the jail had thirty-two cells for men—sixteen on the one floor and sixteen on the other. The ERA hadn't come into effect, so we only had one cell for women. We had also one cell that was padded for people who were insane, because they had to be retained at the jail until they could be carried to Milledgeville. In this big room in the ceiling was a trapdoor, and above that trapdoor, on the second floor ceiling, was a loop where the rope could be attached in case there had to be a hanging. It was done by placing the man on the trapdoor above on the second floor and opening that trapdoor. Fortunately, my father did not have to execute anybody that way during his term of office. I think it says something for the times to indicate that at the time he held office—that is, until 1928—the thirty-two cells were adequate for all the criminals that had to be put in jail; and also the one-woman cell was adequate. I imagine the jail is very much larger now.

Going back to those early days, DeKalb County at that time was a county of small farms. Most of the roads were unpaved. In fact, the only road that I remember being paved before 1915 was the Stone Mountain Road, which followed the Georgia railroad from Decatur to Stone Mountain. Some of the farms later on grew into pretty large dairy farms; and at one time, DeKalb County had the largest dairy production of any county south of Wisconsin. The City of Decatur, of course, was the county site [sic-- seat ?], and the courthouse has always been the centerpiece of Decatur. As I walked from the jail, from

my residence, one block to the courthouse, on the west side of McDonough Street, where the new courthouse is now located, I passed two livery stables, each of which had a blacksmith shop. There was a small restaurant, a barbershop, and [Endicott's? "of course"?] drugstore, which was in a two-story building. The second floor of the building was the meeting place for the Masonic lodge. The courthouse looked very much like it does today, except for a large bell tower, which—much larger than is there today—it had four clocks pointing in each direction [one clock for each direction?], but they never kept the same time.

Crossing McDonough Street at the Court Square, we came to the Spurling [Spalding?]-Ramspeck Store, which was probably the largest store in DeKalb County at that time. They sold fertilizer, seed, and farm machinery. I remember seeing plows and other items sitting on the sidewalk on display. Going a little bit farther eastward, we came to the first picture show which was located in Decatur, operated by Mr. Franklin. Just a little farther down was a small building where the Bank of Decatur was located. Later on it moved to the site where the [Spalding? Spurling?]-Ramspeck Corporation was and built a new building. But it was a very small building at that time.

Within a year or two after we moved to Decatur, the first service station was opened in Decatur; and it was just below the bank building, on Sycamore Street. It was operated by Poole [spelling?] Anderson. The pumps were on the sidewalk, and the tanks were under the street; and he had a little office, which he operated inside the sidewalk. All gasoline was purchased by anybody in Decatur at that site.

Just a little further eastward, we came to the Josey [spelling?] House, which was the hotel at that time, a large two-story building. Whenever a jury had to be sequestered, they were carried to the Josey House, where they were served food and kept overnight if necessary. Across the street from the Josey House was the first post office that I can remember, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick was the postmistress for

a long time. Coming back toward the courthouse from the post office was the Weekes Brothers grocery store; and at that time, in order to order groceries, I remember seeing my mother ring the bell on the telephone and get the Weekes Brother' store. Mr. Cleve [spelling?] Josey usually answered the phone and took her order every morning, and within a few minutes Charlie Fowler came around with a wagon and brought the groceries that she needed.

Going on north on East Court Square, I don't remember any buildings there except the residence of Dr. Washington J. Houston, which building is still standing, although it's been turned around and now faces on Church Street. It's located close to where the First National Bank [Decatur Federal, later First Union, then Wachovia?] is located. On Ponce de Leon Avenue there were just a number of residences, maybe some law offices. West Court Square was also, when we moved there, residential, although within a few years, it became the "automobile row" in Decatur. The Buick agency was on the corner of Ponce de Leon and West Court Square; the Ford agency, owned by Mr. Frank Tuggle, was in the center of West Court Square; the Oakland agency, owned by Mr. Hugh Burgess and Jim Bond, was also in that square; and finally the Johnson brothers' hardware store was located on that corner.

To talk just a little bit about the characters at that time, I might mention the officers who held political office. The judge of the Superior Court was Judge Reid [spelling?], who lived on Sycamore Street. The Stone Mountain Circuit at that time included DeKalb, Rockdale, Newton, Clayton, and Campbell Counties. Judge [spelling?] Reid was promoted soon to an appellate court bench, and Judge Hutchinson became the Superior Court judge. The first solicitor general was Mr. George M. Napier [spelling?], who was a very articulate speaker and was soon elected to be the attorney general for the state of Georgia. Mr. Ben F. Burgess was the clerk of the Superior Court and held that office for about ten years. His father had also held that office before him; and after he died, his nephews—two of them—held the office. So the clerk of the Superior Court's office was held by Burgesses for well over

fifty years. Judge James R. George was the ordinary—now called the judge of the Probate Court, and he served in that office until he died.

We might mention some of the lawyers who were practicing law. I'm going to name those that were practicing law at that time I started practicing law, which was in 1925. Probably the oldest member at that time was Mr. Leslie Steele, and shortly after then he was elected to Congress. Other lawyers practicing at that time were Robert Ramspeck [and] Carl T. Hudgins. Occasionally P. T. Burns [spelling?] was in his office, but not very often. He had a lot of business interests, and he kept an office in Decatur, and you could catch him there maybe once a week. Mr. Hooper Alexander lived in Decatur and had his law offices in Atlanta. He was a very colorful character and was a district attorney for the Northern District of Georgia. He had long, flowing white hair and frequently walked from Decatur to Atlanta. I can remember seeing him walk up DeKalb Avenue.

I think it would be interesting to recall the history of some of the county commissioners. Bob Freeman was commissioner and had been for several years when I came to Decatur. I remember particularly the time when he was defeated; there was a very strong opposition to him. The night that the election was held, and the returns were coming in to the courthouse, I went up there. A large crowd had gathered, and the returns indicated that Mr. L. T. Y. Nash had been elected to succeed him. I can remember one gentleman from Panthersville, which had a very loud voice, who climbed up into one of the trees at the courthouse, and he was singing at the top of his voice, "I'd rather be Daniel in the lions' den than to be Bob Freeman in the fix he's in." That was my first experience with a real election. Mr. Nash served the county well as county commissioner. At that time, of course, we only had one commissioner. But naturally he incurred some enemies along the way, and about 1932 or '33 he was defeated by Mr. Charles A. Matthews, who had operated DeKalb Supply Company, one of the large number of companies in the metropolitan area. Mr. Matthews made an excellent county commissioner.

He stayed on the job, he was at the chain-gang camp every morning when the crews went out to work the roads, and he knew just exactly what was going on in the county. Unfortunately Mr. Matthews died in office in 1939, and at that time Scott Candler was elected. Scott, with his industry and with his knowledge of the county, he sparked the industrial development which began to take place about that time and brought our first industries into the county. He developed the water system, which formed the base for it; and from that, the county has developed into almost a city-county operation.

One of the events in the early days—about the only event we had in Decatur—was the first Sunday in June, when there was a convention at the courthouse of the fa-so-la singers. On that day Decatur was simply covered with wagons and teams and buggies where families had come in from maybe forty or fifty miles around to participate in that singing. Of course, at that time, you had no air-conditioning, and the windows of the courtroom were open, and you could hear the singing easily over at the depot. And about the only thing for people to go see during their break was the jail. And a great many of them would come down and want to be escorted through the jail, and all of them wanted to see where the gallows was.

It might be interesting to think about law enforcement in those days as compared to the present time. At the time of his election, the sheriff—my father—was the only law enforcement officer in the county full-time. He had four or five deputies strategically located around the county: one in Lithonia, one in East Atlanta, one in Chamblee; and they could be called on if needed for any particular purpose, but mainly they served the jury summons and the subpoenas for court. We only had court twice a year, March and September; and that was sufficient to take care of the requirements at that time. The first two officers appointed as county police were Robert House and Wesley Ware, and they more or less worked under the sheriff, but they provided the patrol, and I think they began operating about 1914 or

1915. Of course, the police department now has grown to a tremendous size and is required for the type of county we have and commensurate with the growth of the county.

When my father first was elected, he had a horse and buggy; he'd never had a car at that time. I remember he received a call one night from the marshal of Kirkwood, which was a separate municipality, telling him that he thought he had some burglars in the store at the corner of Howard Street and DeKalb Avenue, the Castle-Fleming [spelling?] Store. And he hitched up his horse and buggy and got up there before the burglars got out, and he and the marshal caught the two burglars. [slight skip in audio/video; no apparent loss of information]

That recalls to mind one of the more famous lawyers in DeKalb County—which I did not mention just now—and that's William Schley Howard. William Schley Howard had served the Fifth District in Congress, and after his retirement he entered into the law practice; and he was one of the best criminal lawyers that I knew. He lived in a big colonial home on College Avenue close to East Lake Drive. He wore his hair long, like some of the people now, but he was really a brilliant lawyer in the courtroom.

Robert Ramspeck also served in Congress; I failed to mention that just now, and he served a good long period. I think we've been well represented in Congress by people from this area.

Judge James C. Davis, who was judge of the Superior Court at one time, also served in Congress.

Going back now to the—to the—I'd like to talk a little bit about our educational system. As I recall it, the county was divided into a great many districts, which had taxing power and provided school in little two-room schoolhouses; and the county system was not a good system. The City of Decatur, from the earliest beginnings, had a very good system, although when I first came to Decatur, there was only one school, the one on McDonough Street. Soon afterward the schools at Glennwood and Oakhurst were built, and we attended Glennwood School from the first day it was opened up.

After graduation from the public schools in Decatur I attended Emory University in and about 1920. At that time, to show you the development of the county, there was only a paved road—out Clairemont—to about where the YMCA building is now. The rest of the way to Emory was a dirt road; and frequently, in the heavy rain over a long period of time, the road was impassable, and we'd have to go through Druid Hills. That area had been developed by the owners of that subdivision, and they had built paved roads; and we could go up Ponce de Leon to Lullwater, and we could get back to Emory by staying on paved roads. There were only about four or five cars at Emory University; students didn't have cars like they do now. I had one because I used a car in working for my father in delivering subpoenas and jury summons and things like that over the county. [There were] two or three other cars, and we parked them right in the middle of the quadrangle at Emory University, and we could get to any building we had to right quick from that point.

I think our universities have done more to develop this county and create in this county a sense of civic responsibility than any other institution that I can think of. We've been fortunate. Agnes Scott College, of course, was created early and has been a fine institution for many years. Its faculty and officers have contributed greatly to the City of Decatur and to DeKalb County. Emory University came here about 1916, and they have made a great contribution. I remember the first chairman of the Board of Education that I remember was Dr. Sam Guy, who was head of the Chemistry Department at Emory University; and through his efforts the county system has been greatly improved. Then Oglethorpe University, in the northern part of the county, and more recently Columbia Seminary coming into Decatur, close to here, and Mercer University in Atlanta has a beautiful campus just off I-85. Those institutions and their faculties have made a great contribution to the progress which DeKalb County has made and to the type of citizenry which we've had in this county. Our own school systems—the public school systems both in Decatur and DeKalb County—have greatly improved. Jim Cherry deserves much of the credit for the improvements in the DeKalb County School System; because when he came in, he

made a conscious effort to see that enough money was made available to the school system and to provide good teachers and to provide good supervision. And the school system in DeKalb County is probably as good as any in the state of Georgia or maybe anywhere I know of.

Improvement in our public school system and the presence of the universities have helped to improve the race relations in the county a great deal. My first recollection of our county school system was that schools for the white children were not very good, but schools for Negro children were much worse. They were usually held in some church building, and they really were not given the right sort of attention at all. With the improvement in our entire school system, provision was made for adequate schooling for Negro children, although, of course, at that time it was by law segregated.

Another element which I believe has had a great deal to do with improvement in our race relations, as well as the general welfare of the county, is the development of the DeKalb General Hospital. Dr. Rufus Evans is the first man to serve as a public health officer in DeKalb County. At that time we really had no hospital to which indigent white or blacks could be carried. And in some cases, if the situation was very bad, and the patient had to have hospitalization, they were advised to go live with a relative for a short time and get a "Grady card," so that they could be treated at Grady Hospital. Rufus realized that something had to be done about this situation. He was familiar with the facts. He knew that Emory University Hospital was being gradually converted over to a teaching hospital and that the local doctors would have no hospital to attend, and so he promoted the development of the DeKalb General Hospital; and the county cooperated fully with that. We were already a part of the Grady Memorial Hospital by virtue of being a partner in the Fulton-DeKalb Hospital Authority, and indigents were being taken care of there. By agreement with them, the DeKalb General Hospital agreed to take some indigent patients and be reimbursed from Grady Hospital. So gradually the facilities and the services which had been available exclusively to whites were made more and more available to people of all races.

Let me just mention now two or three items which may be of interest. One would be the five-cent carfare, which was a great controversy in my early days in Decatur. To begin with, a streetcar line had been built from Atlanta to Decatur coming out Howard Street and turning first at the depot and coming up Trinity and turning again at the jail and coming down McDonough Street and then back to Howard Street and then back into Atlanta. Later that was extended to go out to what was then Columbia Drive and to Ponce de Leon Avenue and then come back Ponce de Leon to the courthouse and around the courthouse square and back down McDonough Street. To get their franchise for the carfare the company had agreed to never charge more than five cents for a fare from Decatur to Atlanta. If you got on the car outside the city limits, say, at East Lake Drive, you had to pay ten or fifteen or twenty cents. But you didn't have to pay but five cents if you got on inside the city limits of Decatur to go to Atlanta. The company tried several times to break that contract and carried it to the Supreme Court, but the contract always stood. The result was that we got the poorest car that the company had; the service was bad. So finally the city fathers decided that it would be the better part of wisdom to modify that contract and let the fares go up and let the power company provide us with a better streetcar. There was another streetcar line that ran in South Decatur, through Agnes Scott College to Candler Street and out West College Avenue and down to Stone Mountain. That rate was not fixed by the contract, so it was not covered by the five-cent fare.

While we're talking about Stone Mountain, I think that's one of the greatest developments the county's ever had. The mountain was originally used as a granite quarry, one of the largest industries in the county. But it had ceased operation, and efforts had been made to buy the property from the Venables, who were the owners, to use it for a park; and a private organization tried to raise funds to build a Confederate memorial on the steep side of the mountain. They employed a very famous sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, who made a number of models and was proceeding with some developments on the side of the mountain, when conflict arose between him and the organization—the Stone

Mountain Memorial Association, I believe it was called. So Mr. Borglum proceeded to break up all of his models; he thought they were his property. The association thought that they were their property, and he was indicted and brought back to the county; but no trial was ever held. He was finally released, and he later went on to build the famous Mount Rushmore carvings. The state then began to be interested, and finally the state acquired the mountain and a large tract of land surrounding it and built the Stone Mountain Park there, which is probably as great an attraction for tourists in the metropolitan Atlanta area as we have. It attracts large numbers of visitors every year.

One other interesting development in the county began during World War I. The United States wanted to acquire a large tract of land to build a cantonment called Camp Gordon. They acquired a tract near Chamblee—several thousand acres of land—and a large number of our forces which went to Europe were trained there. I worked there for about three months as an office boy in 1917, I guess. We traveled back and forth from Decatur to Camp Gordon in an old Ford automobile with about seven or eight people riding in it. The road was not paved, as I mentioned before, beyond the present YMCA site; the result of it was red mud, and in a heavy rain you simply couldn't get there. If there was a light rain, everybody would get out on a hill—and, since I was the lightest, I would drive the car and the rest of them would push me over the hill—and then they'd jump back on, and we'd go back on to Camp Gordon. If it got too bad, we'd go back around through Atlanta and down Peachtree Road; a paved road had been built out to the camp from Atlanta. After World War II [sic—World War I?] that property was acquired by investors who owned it for some time, and the idea of building an airport was developed during Mr. Candler's term of office. The WPA was still in operation; and by using WPA funds and \$250,000 from a bond issue, the first airport in DeKalb County was built. Shortly after that, World War II started, and the Navy decided they needed that airport for a training base. So they leased it from the county and expanded the facilities greatly during that lease period. The present airport [Peachtree-DeKalb Airport] is a result of those efforts. The remaining part of the original tract of land that was used

in the First World War was later reacquired by the government, and Lawson General Hospital was established around the airport; and it housed a great number of wounded veterans from World War II. Lawson General stayed in operation for quite a long time after World War II. Finally the VA hospital was built on Clairmont Avenue [sic—Road?], and Lawson General was abandoned.

Let me say in conclusion that I hope that these more or less rambling remarks will be helpful. I appreciate the fact that the DeKalb Historical Society is seeking to preserve in history the personal memories of those of us who lived through those days, and I hope that the society will continue to be supported and that these other people can make contributions like this to the history that they are accumulating.