

Northwest Arkansas Oral History Project  
 Vernon L. Austin Interview Abstract  
 October 14, 2019

Interviewee	Vernon L. Austin
Year of birth	1951
Place of birth	Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas
Interviewer	Camille Hatcher
Interview date	2019-10-14
Interview location	Austin home; Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas
Keywords	<p>Austin, Vernon L.          Austin, Judy          Peterson, Lloyd          Hatcher, Camille          Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas          Gravette, Benton County, Arkansas          Siloam Springs, Benton County, Arkansas          Simmons Foods; Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas          Spavinaw Creek; Benton County Arkansas          Bank of Gravett; Gravette, Benton County, Arkansas          Decatur Assembly of God; Decatur, Benton County Arkansas          Decatur State Bank; Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas          John Brown University; Siloam Springs, Benton County, Arkansas          University of Arkansas; Fayetteville, Benton County Arkansas          Banks and Banking          Business          Education          Farming          Inclusion body myositis (IBM)          Medicine          Peterson Farms Inc.; Decatur, Benton County, Arkansas          Poultry industry          Roads          Schools          Shelling plants          Small town life          Sports          Walmart</p>
Description	<p>Vernon Austin joined his hometown Decatur State Bank in 1977 as a vice president and future president. Under his leadership the bank moved from \$6 million to \$220 million in assets. Decatur itself developed from a population of 200 when Austin was a child to 2000 today (2019). Those years have been ones of transition and change for his family, the Decatur community, and local industries (banking, farming, poultry). Austin shares his experiences and perspectives. The Decatur that Austin grew up in was a close rural community.</p>

His father farmed and did carpentry work. Mom was a good cook who did not mind when lots of kids visited and bedded down for the night. Austin helped on the family farm by milking cows and tending cattle and chickens. It was a time small farms were experiencing changes in farming techniques. High school meant sports, choir, a bit of studying, and a memorable school trip to Oklahoma. There were 'tater fries' on summer Friday nights, trips to Noel and Sulphur Springs for fun, and friendships that lasted a lifetime. Austin's graduating class included many of the same kids who went all the way through school together. As adults many of Austin's friends and their families made contributions to the area: the Wilmeths, Brownings, Bredehoelts, and Petersons.

Considering a coaching career, Austin attended John Brown University and the University of Arkansas playing baseball, basketball, and track. A combination of a job at the Bank of Gravett, meeting his future wife Judy, a desire to stay in Decatur, and a job offer from the Decatur State Bank changed his career to banking. He never lost his love for sports, officiating high school sports and continuing to attend university sporting events.

Austin's career at the Decatur State Bank saw the banking industry move away from paper statements and dual postings to computers, online banking, ATMs, and bank mergers. The guideline of one employee for every four million dollars in assets quickly changed. Other changes included Decatur State adding branches in Gentry and Siloam Springs based on traffic count and customer convenience. In 2011 the Bank was sold to the Chambers Bank. Austin provides his perspective on these changes, along with changes in bank security. It may be hard to imagine pushing a grocery cart down the street to the Post Office to get the bank's cash or flying several million dollars in a private plane from Little Rock to assure Decatur workers would be able to cash their checks. But that's what happened.

It would be difficult to live in Decatur and not realize the influence of both the Lloyd Peterson family and the poultry industry. The Decatur State Bank was owned by Lloyd Peterson. Austin shares stories of Mr. Peterson and his family covering closing costs to allow their workers and local teachers to buy homes, Peterson's breeder poultry process, the role the Peterson Guest House, support for Decatur BBQ Day and the buyout by Simmons Foods. At one time 90% of people in the U.S eating chicken were enjoying food sired by a Peterson Male.

As the banking and poultry industries changed, so did Decatur. Austin remembers Decatur in the 1950-1960s as a place where residents worked on their farms, at the Gravette Shelling Plant, in the chicken processing plants or one of the other small local industries. The food at the local cafes was homemade; the blacksmith shop was in business; and there was a store with everything from clothes to groceries. Some roads were paved;

	<p>others were not. The rise of Walmart brought changes to the community. Currently, Austin is observing with interest the impact on his community of the Highway 549 bypass. Austin retired in 2011 following the diagnosis for a rare muscle disease, inclusion body myositis (IBM). While his life changes as he copes with the disease, Austin's dedication to family, worship at the Assembly of God, and the Decatur community remains steadfast.</p>
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Questions or Comments	<a href="https://nwaoralhistory.org">https://nwaoralhistory.org</a>
Interview sidebar	<p>In the 1950's Decatur was a fun place to be. Austin says "in the summertime on Friday nights there was a 'tater fry' at Spavinaw Creek...we would get together and fry potatoes (on a woodstove)...everyone brought a dish...we ate whatever everyone brought...and swam." [00:03:03]</p>