

BILL DOWNEY TRANSCRIPT

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Damian Macey Interviewer

Transcribed by Donna Duzan, May 2018

D: This is Damian Macey and I am here for the Friends of the Library Oral History Project. I am here with Bill Downey who now lives in Martinsville and has many family ties in Marshall and Martinsville. Bill has been the Clark County Clerk for a number of years and has also had many other jobs in the area. So with that, I will introduce you to Bill.

B: I was born in Charleston, Illinois because that was where the doctor was. My family was living in Martinsville at that time with my great-grandmother, Mattie Blankenbaker. We lived in her upstairs right on Route 40. There wasn't an Interstate at that time and even Route 40 wasn't travelled that much. Everything went right through downtown Martinsville. There was a big bump in front of the house and every single truck that went through went bump bump as it passed. We would sleep out on her balcony and we could hear those trucks all night long. I was born in 1952 on a snowy night. My dad picked up my aunt, Lela Harris, who was the Martinsville librarian at that time, and she was my god-mother. We lived there with my great-grandmother for about six months, my dad was running for states attorney. My dad was William Fasig Downey, like myself, our middle name is our mother's maiden name.

My middle name is Connor. My dad won that election and we moved to Marshall. He was states attorney from 1952 to 1956. We lived down on 3rd and Cherry when I started kindergarten. I remember the house had a small bay window that you could lay on. The house was down by TRW and my mom worked there. It was called Formalite and had just opened. So she could walk to work.

D: Who were your mother and father?

B: Dad was William Fasig Downey and mom was Ramona Catherine Connor Downey. Dad was born and raised in Martinsville and mom was born in Bridgeport, IL and spent her early years in Columbia, MO. Dad was in the service during WWII in the Navy. I think he left the service in about 1944. So, we moved to Marshall when dad got elected. When it came time to go to Kindergarten, I could ride my tricycle with Scot Arney to school. Scot was a year ahead of me in school. My birthday was January 5th. I would ride my tricycle down to what is now the Central Administration Office building, was called then the Ohio School building, I only went there for about a month.

We moved to Terre Haute then and there we lived out of the city limits in a subdivision called Southwood. I didn't go to kindergarten then because you had to pay tuition if you were not in the city limits. Then when first grade started I went to Maryland School which is now an apartment complex. Went there for four years, had a lot of good friends there, played a lot of baseball there with my friends. I started playing a trumpet in about third grade. Then in the summer between fourth and fifth grade we moved to Quincy, IL. I'll backtrack a little, my dad was states attorney here from 1952 to 1956 and I

believe that paid \$4500 at that time and mom paid less than that working at TRW. My sister was born in 1955, Dawn Ellen Downey, married name now is Macke. When we moved to Quincy dad went to work for USFG, he was an insurance adjuster, and then my brother Bob was born, Robert Antone Downy in 1959 and my brother Gary was born in 1962, Gary Jerome Downey, and I got to help name him, Dizzie Dean was a famous pitcher for the Cardinals and his initial were J H and sometimes he would tell people his name was J Hannah Dean and sometimes he would say he was Jerome Herman Dean, he just liked to "spiff up" the story a little bit.

So I went to the fifth grade until I was a junior in Quincy. I got my first little touch of politics in my sophomore year. Back in those days grade school was 1-6, junior high was 7-9, and high school was 10-12. The high school kids didn't have anything to do with the 7-9 junior high kids. We were in totally different buildings miles away from each other. I played basketball and baseball, loved that. And in the summer I played on three or four baseball teams. We had travelling teams that went a few miles to play the other towns. Dad was an umpire sometimes and he was always harder on me than anybody else. If it was close, I better be swinging.

Then I got to high school as a sophomore and got to play some high school sports. Early on in my junior year we found out that Cass Bennett who was a lawyer here in Marshall, was sick and they asked dad to come in and take Cass's place in the law firm. Because Cass was going to take a judgeship. Dad had actually "thrown his hat in the ring" for this judgeship but they gave it to a local guy. So dad took the partnership with Grendell Bennett. They had an office on Locust Street between Marrs Furniture and Harper Tire. So we got some great friendship there which we had the rest of our lives. I was a junior in high school then but my parents weren't coming until Thanksgiving. So I was not eligible to play football but I worked out with the basketball team. Coach Chuck Cargal was a mentor of mine, passed away too young, he was the football coach and he said if I wanted to play the next year I better come work out with them. But I really didn't want to get "the tar beat out of me" when I knew they wouldn't let me play so that is why I worked out with the basketball team. Tom Murphy, Stan Raisner, Robert Gard, Brent Mason, they were all a year older than me but those are the guys I worked out with. Brent worked at the Dog N Suds, which is down on Route 1 and I lived with my Aunt Dorothy Swope, she was my grampa Downy's sister. So I lived with her from September until Thanksgiving. So I walked to the Dog N Suds quite often to see him, David Lewis who lived nearby became a life long friend and is the states attorney now. Neither one of us had a car but another friend, David Beard, and he had an old '55 Chevy and he would pick us up and take us to school. So those are all friendships that we made that lasted.

My junior and senior year I mostly had one girlfriend, that was Leslie Douglas and I later worked with her dad on the county board, they were farmers that lived out around Dennison. We dated through high school and went our own ways after graduation. So I graduated from Marshall High School in 1970, had the graduation party at our house, huge party with lots of friends. That was Indy 500 weekend and a bunch of us guys left the party and went directly to Indy, stayed up all night and went to the race the next day. That was alot of fun.

D: Bill, was there a particular subject in high school that was your favorite?

B: Yeah, I liked creative writing. Couldn't tell you the teacher's name, she wasn't there very long, and to this day I enjoy writing, write something almost every day. I followed up a little bit with that in college. I didn't really like school that much. Sports and the people I liked, but going to classes, I never really cared about. I spent my fair share of time down in the office with Mr. McNary. I had some friends who also didn't like to pay attention in class so we all spent some time down with the principal. Mrs. Elliot and Miss Stephens tried to help me, but I was just a little onery and didn't want to sit still but they did spur me on to enjoy reading and writing. We weren't really bad just didn't want to pay attention. And then Mr. Morris, had him for math but when they put letters in the problems, didn't like that so much. Didn't get that at all. But I made it through. People in some of the other county clerk offices thought I was good at math when the job math needed to be done.

Thought I might go then to University of Missouri because that is where mom's family was from, and Dan Devine was their football coach and they had a national championship in 1960. He wrote me a letter asking me to send him a tape of me on the football field, to possibly get a scholarship but I had hardly played so that didn't work out. But it was still neat to get that letter from Dan Devine. So I decided to go University of Illinois and that was one of the greatest decisions I ever made. In the April before graduation, Dan Harper and I went up to "rush" because we had decided we wanted to be in a fraternity. So we went through that and they decide if they want you or you want them. Jim and I were both accepted into the Beta Theta Pi House and that was the best thing that ever happened to me. Just last weekend I was at wedding of one of my fraternity brothers who is now an eye surgeon in Birmingham, AL. There are still alot of us that get together even today forty years later. We had brothers all over the country. Life long friendships, all successful with families, grandchildren and good job, some are retired now, some are still working. And I can thank Harpo for that. Cass Bennet's daughter, Chris, kind of helped down that path up there, she was a couple years older than us.

So I went to U of I and what a time that was, some of it shouldn't be shared with this probably. Of course, this was during the Vietnam War time so there were riots and National Guard in the streets, vandalism, it really was a horrible time. There was such turmoil over whether or not we should be there, in Vietnam. The the Fall of 1970 it really came to a head. There would be 20 or 30,000 people out in the streets, chanting, vandalizing, lots of people went to jail, this was a few blocks from campus. I remember once, they warned us that the National Guard was coming in full riot gear, and they were, and it got really scary. We had a time of that then a couple years later it was all Peace and Love and naked people streaking in the streets. It was call streaking and there were thousands streaking through campus .Girls who were especially well endowed, they would put them up on chairs and carry them around like they were royalty or something, it was a crazy time. But, I managed to have alot of fun and kept my grades up.

D: What did you major in?

B: I was a finance major. I thought at one time I might go to law school since dad was a lawyer, so I stayed in finance and business. My grades weren't that great but good enough to keep going back, took me one extra semester. Somewhere along in your junior year you take what they call the LSAT which is the law boards. Well, I had been out all night probably drinking beer on the day I took it. I

was the only white guy in there, everybody else was a minority, but I took the test, didn't do that great so I didn't go to law school. But I graduated then in December 1974. The first three years we lived in the fraternity house, had a great time, Greg Marrs lived there a couple years later, another Marshall guy was Ken Claypool who was a year older than us. Ken lived a couple blocks from us in a fraternity house with Jack Livvix, Randy Welsh, David Shawler, so they were all close by. Our fraternities got together alot for cookouts and football games, had alot of good times in our fraternity houses. That worked well for a ride home too, Mike Gustafson, he had a car so we could ride together.

School went pretty fast. I had some great summer jobs, worked for the city a couple summers, worked down at Lincoln Trail State Park, worked with a lot of the city guys, Glen McLary, Barb McCarty, Bobby Joe Francis, Earl Stover, Raymond Miller was the head of the gas department and he taught me how to clean my tools, you cleaned them every day, sometimes I worked out with Paul Remlinger and Slim Morecraft. Paul and Slim ran the water cleaning plant and they would run the overflow from the sewage after it had been cleaned, they would run it out into these pits that were sand bottoms about 18 inches deep and would settle to about six inches and it would grow the most awesome tomatoes ...was wonderful fertilizer. And people from town, Earl Turner who is a book into himself, would come and we would shovel that "poop" from the treatment plant into his truck. Channel ten came over one day and talked to him about his awesome garden. Earl's daughter went to U of I also.

One thing about U of I I missed, there would be great Father's Weekends and with so many Marshall people up there, we would all get together and boy were those weekends fun. The dads would stay at the fraternity house and my dad was a big beer drinker and most of the other parents were too. Dad would be trying to get us all up a 8 in the morning and all the guys would yell to "Get him out of here." We had some great times, we would stay up and play Bridge after we had closed the taverns down, we didn't do quite as much drinking on the Mom's Weekend. But we did play Bridge. Bob Guinnip was in on that because he had Susan up there at U of I, and Omer Shawler, Earl Turner, Jim Claypool, Gene Marrs, just a really good group of folks.

After I graduated I came home and started working for Larry Woodard. I have few regrets in my life, but one is, when I got back to Illinois, I went to try out for the baseball team and they asked me where I had played and we hadn't had baseball in high school, and they told me to come back in February when they got back from their Spring trip but by then I had learned too much about girls and drinking beer and I never did go try out. That's my one regret that I didn't try out.

After graduation, I went to work the next day.

D: Is that the same location where Larry is now?

B: Yes, same place, at that time C D Hammond was still involved but was kinda phasing himself out and trying to phase me in. Well that was OK except that they only paid me \$700 a month. I took home \$549.16 a month. Went and bought a car and still managed to live on that for two or three years before I got a raise. It was all a great learning experience. I did alot of books, took care of businesses income tax, and then people's income taxes. Income taxes is where I ended up finding my niche. I worked for him for about five years and then gave him several months notice and went to

Florida and found odd jobs. Got down there right after Christmas but come April we were ready to come home.

D: Then you left the accounting business behind you?

B: Yes, totally. I was done with sitting in an office.

D: What part of Florida were you in?

B: We were around Sarasota and Bradenton. We had friends there and knew somebody who knew somebody to help us get a job. There was a construction company that was putting in phone lines that went on down south. There wasn't much in that area then. There were a couple Indians that worked with us, Seminole Indians not guys from India. They were the original settlers there, until the white folks came in.

D: Even today there are very few Florida natives.

B: So anyway, we had a winter job there, worked hard and played hard. One experience that I will leave with you is we were digging ditches putting in these pipes in and in Florida, to dig a ditch to put a 20 x 20 manhole in you have to dig a hole as big as this room almost because its all sand and it keeps caving in so around the edge you put what they call well heads which is a pipe that is perforated all the way around and they pump the water away so that the walls won't cave in. So I had worked the day shift, putting pipe in the ground and about 5 o'clock we had a guy come by that said they needed somebody to guard the pipe tonight so that nobody will steal it. So I had a football with me and listened to the radio in my car. But about 3 in the morning I fell asleep sitting in my car. And when I woke up, there was a guy leaning over my hood trying to steal the battery out of my car. The Grand Am had a great horn and I hit that horn and that guy jumped out of his skin and took off running and I didn't bother to chase him. So I got out and made sure that the pump was still running and it was. My car was fine and the pump was fine. Come about seven o'clock I get off and go to the beach and I'm drinking a couple Pina Colada's and some of the guys come get me and tell me that Frank wants to talk to you right now. I asked what he wanted and they said they didn't know but he wasn't very happy, you better see him. So I get to Frank's office and he asked me if I fell asleep last night, I said I did a little bit but I woke up and saw that guy messing around out there. He asked if I checked the pump and I said yes I did, well luckily for me when you steal a battery out of a pump, it still runs. So he had stolen the battery out of the pump but it still ran. So he said he wasn't going to fire me but to stay awake from now on. So I did, but I will never forget that.

D: I want to go back just a minute to your 1975 Pontiac, where did that come from?

B: Flowers, out where Pizza Hut is now. It had red white and blue trim around it, it was a pretty car and rode great, had about 150,000 miles on it when my son killed it. That was 1980 when I went to Florida, came back in the Spring and got back in time to go to opening day in St Louis. We did that for about 25 years, opening day of the Cardinals.

So then the summer of 1980 I became a paint contractor. And did that for ten years. Started out just

doing local stuff and expanded into doing post offices in Nebraska, Colorado, Robinson, IL, Albion, IL. Went back to Florida in the winter of 1981 with Scott Payne and Dennis Beard, one of my best friends that left us about a year ago. We started out thinking we would go to Texas and work in the oil field industry but that didn't work out so we went back to Florida, Scott, Dennis and I.

D: Did the painting job include signs too?

B: No, outside of houses, businesses. Then we came back to Marshall in the Spring. Then we really got serious about the painting business, Scott Payne and me. Then later hooked up with Bob Mott. We made good money painting, painted the inside of the Marshall Post Office and Clark County Courthouse. I made more money in three months doing that than when I became the county clerk. Clerk job started at about \$30,000 and I made about \$40,000 painting in four or five months. Public officials don't do it for the money.

D: Going back to the paint contractor business, did you pick the paint brand and the colors and everything?

B: Depends on who you are working for. When it was up to us, we bought from Gene Marrs. He was great, he kept track of everything you ever bought, what color, what room it went in, kept great records. And he gave great discounts. I enjoyed painting because you can see what you've done, you have a sense of accomplishment, and you dealt with the public but just usually one person at a time. Like at the courthouse or the accounting business, you had lots of bosses, but if you go to someone house or business to paint, you only deal with them. But in churches and banks you had more than one boss, that could sometimes be a problem. Physically it can get difficult, my thumbs are mad at me. And then in the winter, I could go back to doing income taxes. I painted until 1980 until 1990 but in 1983 I met my wife, Carrie Ann Chambers, I am the luckiest man in the world. She already had two little kids, Dale Sutton was her first husband, they got divorced when the kids were 3 or 4 and I came along a couple years after that.

D: What year did you marry?

B: We got married December 3, 1983. The next day was her birthday. We dated for about six months or so, had a very nice wedding at Martinsville at the Bible Church, Reverend Nicka married us, small wedding with just a few relatives, and had a reception at the American Legion. My mom helped make all the food and I don't know how many people were there but it was packed. For our honeymoon, we had a choice of my mom sending us on a cruise but we decided not to. We went to California to the Rose Bowl. My dad's youngest brother, Gary, got us tickets to the game and the parade. That parade is one of the biggest events I have ever seen, we had seats about two rows up and could see each individual flower.

Backtracking again to 1976 when I was working for Woodard my roommate in a little house that we rented off of Earl and Belva Turner, was Bob Greenlee. He died in an accident, he was an ironworker, he fell about 80 feet. Then not very long after that my dad passed away on Easter Sunday, April 18th. He came home that night, laid down and was gone. He was only 52. And then my sister got married

in June to Clark Prevo, great guy, but around Thanksgiving he died in a car accident. So 1976 was a really bad year for the Downey family.

So we stayed in the painting business and doing the income taxes, my wife helped me with that. She got really good at it, at first she was just making copies and putting the packets together. We did this out of our house for two or three years then we got an office down on second street. We had over 500 clients so we really needed office space. I enjoy doing taxes because April 15th and you knew it was over. We didn't do extensions. When I worked at Woodard's we would still be doing taxes in August. And if a client brought their information in after April 1, we charged double because I didn't want to be doing them late and when the weather was getting nice, I didn't want to still be doing taxes. Baseball season starts and once we were married we had kids in sports and wanted to be outside.

D: Did you have clients that brought in a shoebox with receipts and information?

B: Yes, Roy Lee Tingley, bless his soul, he was a friend of my dad's and a really good guy. He had a really tough life, he was a railroader and a farmer, he had had motorcycle wrecks, women and ex-women, he was a character. He would bring in a couple grocery sacks with little pieces of paper. We had those papers all over the living room floor and I told him I was going to charge more and he said he didn't care. He did eventually get better. It's important to teach you clients how to organize papers, some of them will get better and some won't. So we did taxes along with the painting business, it worked well to do them seasonable. Carrie was working at the Goodie Shoppe at Terre Haute as a manager but we worked her job, painting and tax work for quite a while.

Carrie had two kids, Emily and Jacob. Emily was born in 1976 and Jacob in 1978. Carrie lived on 6th street across from the school beside the First Christian Church. Then my mom decided to move to an old family house, the oldest house in Martinsville, belonged to the Chancellor's, so we bought mom's house which was just behind the grade school. In one day we moved my mom to Martinsville and us into our house. We had lots of friends who had trailers and we moved her out and us in...all in one day, we were very organized both places. Cost me alot of beer and a little gas, Dennis Miller, Dennis Beard, Stan Raisner, Jim Harper, we all got it done. That would have been in about 1988 or so.

D: That house that you mother moved into, the Chancellor house, I always thought that was such an interesting house. Did she have to do alot of restoring to that?

B: Yes, it was built during the 1850's, before the Civil War. When mom moved in she did a little bit of work, new carpet, painting. My mom passed away in 1999 and my sister kept it for awhile, it was a "money pit". Kathy Haskins owns it now, she has sold it on contract three times and has gotten it back. She has done some major remodelling trying to sell it. It's a neat place, big old white pillars, nice little back yard. And in the back of the back yard it a cemetery where lots of my ancestors and buried.

D: Many people don't realize there is a cemetery there.

B: Right, you have to go down the alley to see it. So, in 1989, we were still in the painting business and it was going well.

Then Norm Kasameyer, who was like a second dad to me, and Buck Weaver came to me and said I needed to run for Clark County Clerk. I had already spent a few years as township assessor after being appointed and then elected, which was hard to do as a democrat. That was a thankless job, paid \$1500 a year, Dan Smith was the Supervisor of Assessment and you turned in your township books to him. The office did most of the work, and they would give you a list of new buildings and work that needed to be checked. So I had done that for awhile when Norm and Buck said I needed to run for county clerk. Les Litteral was planning to retire so they needed somebody to run. And I thought about it and decided maybe it was a good idea. So I said that we needed to talk about it. So I decided to run and I ran against Shirley Shumaker who had worked in that office for 10-15 years. And we got out and knocked on every door in Clark County and went through 10,000 fliers. And in Casey we knocked twice. Mostly it was family helped with this, Carrie was babysitting at the time. And to make a long story short, we won. By about 150 votes. Two days before the election, my grandpa Downey died and he had been very supportive of me running.

Grandpa was at the house where we lived also and I noticed that his breathing had become very slow and I just sat with him till he passed and then stayed for awhile. He had told us he didn't want to go to the hospital and so I didn't need to call an ambulance. That was his wish. He had been wounded in WWI and for the last few years that was an open wound in his leg that we had to dress every day. And that was actually his "good" leg, he was a very interesting person. He was a veteraniarian and did all kinds, small and large, animal care. He delivered lots of animals for a bag of peaches or potatoes, people didn't have much money back at that time.

He had also held several community offices and the day of the election all my relatives were in town and his funeral was the day after the election. So we had lots of company at our house watching the election returns while Carrie and I were up at the courthouse and at one point Shirley walked by and said Congradulations, you won, we didn't believe it because there were still two precincts not in but she said, no you won. And she was right. So that was a very emotional time. We all stayed up till the sun came up. So if Grandpa hadn't died then they wouldn't have all been there to share with us.

D: What was his name?

B: Harry Lester Downey, they called him doc because of his being a vet. His absentee ballot didn't count, they should have pulled it out so its a good thing I didn't loose by 1 vote !! So winning that first election was a big day and in the next five elections nobody ran against me.

D: What year was that?

B: 1990. I took office.....and we were still painting the Robinson post office... I didn't know anything about that office. I found out soon after the election that I was to take office the first day of December. So I had to sub out the painting job to start work at the courthouse!! John and Cliff Remlinger and Scott Payne finished the post office.

That was a interesting job, I was there for over twenty years but I didn't know anything when I first got there. By the time I left, I was teaching classes to new clerks which was interesting. The first thing I

would tell them in class was that a government body turns in a levy to ask for their tax money, like the library here turns in a levy, they fill out a form and it ends up in the county clerks office and it goes through the process then the treasurer writes checks back out to the taxing bodies for the amount levied. But I met two county clerks, Ron Rastmus from Ford County and John Koonce from Iroquois County, and they showed me how to do a sixteen column spreadsheet and I used that till the very last day I as county clerk. I wasn't much of a computer guy, they do it all by computer now, but I used the spreadsheet and it all had to balance to the penny. The county clerk job was good to me, I got in at a good time, got a good pension and good health care. Thats pretty important these days. Courthouse was good to me now retirement is good to me.

While I was still at the courthouse, I started coaching high school sports, I had always coached my kids, Emily in softball and volleyball and Jacob in basketball and baseball. And I had a nephew, Harry, who was playing high school baseball and their baseball coach quit. So I asked Gene Kannmacher if they had hired a baseball coach yet, and he suggested I apply and I said no I've got a job and he said I could make it work. Well, I ended up being the baseball coach. So I coached that for seven years. That was fun. Then someone asked me to coach boys basketball so I did that. Then they asked me to coach girls basketball, Robin Karras was head coach and she asked me to be assistant girls basketball coach, so then I did that.

D: When did you move to Martinsville?

B: 1993. That fall we bought grandpa and grandma's house, they had lived in it since 1946. We put in all new drywall and plaster, roof, furnace, we completely re-did it. There are 20 acres there with two ponds behind the house. Bought it for \$25,000 and put about twice that in it. Grandpa died in that living room, and grandma died there, so I tell people its just fine with me if I die there too. I don't plan to go anywhere else.

D: Was there some world event or person that you would say greatly influenced you in your life?

B: Not that I can think of, my life just all seemed to kinda flow. Norm and Buck were huge, because I would never have thought of running for county clerk on my own.

D: Is there a modern convenience that you have thought, I just couldn't live without?

B: I'm just the opposite...I could live without a TV, computers, well, I do like electricity and cars because I like to travel. I have journals from Isaac Bean, an ancestor who wrote about riding his horse from Texas every winter, he had thirteen kids, he would come home, get her pregnant and then go off on another sabattical. He wrote about sitting down with the indians, eating with them. I like my bed and my air conditioning too well to do that, though.

D: If you talked to a person in another country, what would you tell about Martinsville and Marshall and why they are good place to live?

B: Because of the people for the most part, its a slower paced rural community. For me, my favorite place to visit was Arlington Cemetery, the changing of the guard. I have been to 49 states, all but

Alaska, Carrie and I are planning to go to Alaska in 2019 after she retires. We plan to drive up there and take about two months. I've had relatives up there but I don't right now.

D: I have enjoyed talking to you and you told us just what we like to hear about. And future people can read to listen on tape to your history.

B: What I enjoy most now is my six grandchildren, Emily has Kaden, Laila and Brennan and Jacob has Hannah, Brice and Gavin.

D: I'm so glad you are enjoying retirement.