

**New England Jesuit
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Neil F. Decker, S.J.
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THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral histories are the taped recordings of interviews with interesting and often important persons. They are not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. They are the voice of the person interviewed. These oral records are, in many instances, transcribed into printed documentary form. Though only so much can be done, of course, in an hour or some times two, they are an important historical record whose value increases with the inevitable march of time.

For whatever reason, New England Jesuits, among others around the world, have not made any significant number of oral histories of their members. Given the range of their achievements and their impact on the Church and society, this seems to many to be an important opportunity missed. They have all worked as best they could for the greater glory of God. Some have done extraordinary things. Some have done important things. All have made valuable contributions to spirituality, education, art, science, discovery, and many other fields. But living memories quickly fade. Valuable and inspiring stories slip away.

This need not be. Their stories can be retold, their achievements can be remembered, their adventures saved. Their inspiration can provide future generations with attractive models. That is what Jesuit oral history is all about.

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29. Fr. Joseph F. Brennan
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58. Fr. Richard W. Rousseau
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May 2008

Interview with Fr. Neil F. Decker, S.J.
By Fr. Richard W. Rousseau, S.J.
March 5, 2008

BORN IN BOSTON

RICHARD ROUSSEAU: Welcome to our conversation. Let's start by looking at your early years, beginning when you were born, then something about your father, Bernard, and mother, Catherine.

NEIL DECKER: I was born in Boston. I am the oldest of my siblings, then Barbara, Bill, and Catherine.

PARENTS

RR: Before we come to the siblings tell us a little about your mother and father.

ND: Like many people at the time, my mother stayed pretty much at home. My father worked very hard.

But before I go on, I should mention something to you about myself. I had a stroke about seven or eight years ago when I was at Boston College, and from that point on it affected my speech. It didn't affect my arms, legs, or anything else, only my speech.

I had been able to deal pretty well with my speech problem. However, after having some surgery at Mass General and coming here to Campion Center, I believe that my speech problem has increased, and I don't know what's going to happen in the future. You can't help wondering: is it going to happen again?

RR: You say just what you want to say. We will do the editing later.

ND: Let me come back to my father. His work was primarily in general sales. He worked very hard up until he had a stroke on Thanksgiving Day, 1955. I had already come back from regency in Baghdad. He had the stroke right in the middle of the family's Thanksgiving dinner. It was devastating for him and for my mother. He was taken in an ambulance to Faulkner Hospital, and went quickly downhill.

RR: How old were you at the time? In your twenties?

ND: Yes, and my father was in his fifties.

RR: That was certainly hard on the whole family.

ND: Yes, it was. Then, when I had to go back to Baghdad after tertianship in 1960, given the family situation, I didn't feel terribly happy about that. He somehow got through the stroke, but very shortly after that, he had to retire and could no longer work. He had had a very responsible position in his company as someone in charge of a whole area of New England. It was a very traumatic experience for all of us.

SIBLINGS

RR: Now tell us a bit about your brothers and sisters.

ND: I am the oldest of four children. The one next to me, my sister Barbara, went to grammar school, high school, and college, and then went into the Marine Corps, where she was an officer. She is now deceased.

My brother, Bill, was also in the Marine Corps. When he left the corps, he went to Boston College on the G.I. Bill. However, going immediately from the Corps into the academic world at BC was a test, and it didn't work out. So he changed into sales and moved up rapidly and was soon covering the whole New England area.

My sister, Kay, is the youngest. She is a Sister of St. Joseph. Right now she is at St. Joseph's in Medford. She has been a grammar school teacher there for a very long time.

EDUCATION

RR: Let's move on to your schooling.

ND: I went to the local Catholic elementary school, St. Thomas, in Jamaica Plain, which was taught by Sisters of St. Joseph.

RR: How did you like them and the school?

ND: Very much. My father's sister was a Sister of St. Joseph as well. They were tough, but they gave me a good education.

HIGH SCHOOL

RR: You went from there to BC High?

ND: Yes, when it was still in the South End of Boston.

RR: How was that experience?

ND: I liked it a lot.

RR: Were you involved in anything special, like the glee club?

ND: No, I was not, and I wasn't into athletics either. I always had to go to work right after school. I worked in quite a responsible job at a company near Boylston and Tremont Streets near the Boston Common. And later, I went directly to Shadowbrook from high school.

RR: Where did your family live?

ND: In Jamaica Plain, right by the Faulkner Hospital.

RR: How did all your traveling back and forth affect your schooling?

ND: I have to say, it was quite a workout traveling so far on the bus and then on the elevated train, the "T."

VOCATION

RR: Were any of the Jesuits that you met at BC High particularly influential in your becoming a Jesuit?

ND: Fr. Leo Pollard was particularly influential. It was due in part to my strong liking of German, which he taught me. I liked it very much, and I did very well in it. He was basically the only Jesuit teacher that I had.

RR: What was it at BC High that attracted you to the Society?

ND: It was probably the attraction through Leo Pollard. I particularly remember when I was sick during my freshman year. I was in the hospital on two different occasions, and Leo would come up to the hospital and go over the lessons with me, so I wouldn't lose a lot of my school work. Both my parents were very appreciative of him for that help.

RR: He gave you special attention?

ND: Exactly. I just liked him a lot. Later on, though, he was criticized for his strictness. Not everybody liked him. He was very, very demanding, but I liked the strictness.

RR: How did you approach the Jesuits about joining?

ND: I spoke with Fr. Pollard, who directed me to the provincial's office, which at the time was at 300 Newbury Street in Boston.

RR: Did a number of your classmates go with you to Shadowbrook when you entered in 1945?

ND: Yes, a lot. There was quite a number in my class, as well in the class after me.

RR: Some people had described it as a "boom time."

NOVITIATE

ND: Exactly. And my years at the novitiate were good years for me.

RR: Who was your master of novices?

ND: Fr. John Post. We were his first class.

RR: So you had him for the two years. How did you like him as a master of novices?

ND: I liked him a lot. He was very strict, and I took to that. He was a very good man. Unfortunately, he suffered immensely from the Shadowbrook fire.

RR: He carried on very well afterwards even despite his leg injury.

ND: Oh, yes. It was amazing. A lot of people thought of him as a strict master of novices, but he changed dramatically after his accident, when he fell trying to escape the Shadowbrook fire. It changed him a lot. He became a much gentler person, even to the point where a lot of people deciding whether or not to stay would go to see John Post, and most of the time he so reassured them that they did stay. He was a terrific man.

JUNIORATE

RR: As for the juniorate, did you have good classes there?

ND: I did. Those were good years. In fact, all my four years at Shadowbrook were great years. I did all the studies in the usual subjects, such as Greek and math. I enjoyed them and did well. I also really loved the Berkshires. Who wouldn't?

RR: Then you left there to come here to Weston for your philosophy. How was that period for you?

ND: I liked it here.

RR: What about it did you like especially?

ND: The teachers that we had. Some professors, of course,

were better than others. But for the most part, it was a good experience. I do recall Fr. Drummond, who taught ethics.

I loved all forms of manual labor. In our free time, John Kerdieus, now here in the infirmary, and I did all kinds of heavy work on the grounds.

VOLUNTEERING FOR IRAQ

ND: During that time, they were looking for people to go to Iraq. So I offered to go. I had felt the urge to volunteer as soon as I entered the Society.

RR: So you volunteered. And they chose you to go. A foreign country like Iraq must have seemed to you like a very far away place?

ND: Yes, I had never even been out of the country before.

RR: Were you one of the first groups to go to Baghdad after the war?

ND: No, when I went in 1952, a lot of guys from Weston, like John Mahoney, Joe [John] McGrath, and Joe O'Neill, had already gone to Baghdad after the war.

RR: Tell us about your regency in Iraq.

ND: When I arrived at Baghdad College, I taught religion and English to freshmen and sophomores. All the teaching was in English, except for courses in Iraq history and civics. But after a year, I knew I would have to learn some Arabic if I wanted to work there for a long time.

I have a flair for languages, and so spent my second year of regency studying Arabic at the new, small residence of St. Joseph. Dick McCarthy and John Mahoney

lived and worked there. A layman was also part of the staff. I loved it and did very well in Arabic, even with the colloquial expressions.

My third year I returned to Baghdad College and again taught religion and English. My year of Arabic study greatly improved my ability to teach English to the Iraqi students.

THEOLOGY

RR: Overall, your experience in Baghdad was a good one?

ND: Totally good! To the point that, when I went back to Weston to study theology I knew I was going to go back to Baghdad. Many others were wondering throughout their second, third, and even fourth years at Weston just where they were going to after theology. Without Arabic, they realized they would not be able to do as good a job teaching in Iraq as they could in an all-English environment, such as the US or Jamaica. But I had no such question. I wanted, without reservation, to go back to Baghdad.

RR: Did your knowing for sure you would be returning to Baghdad help focus your theology studies?

ND: Not the studies themselves, but it greatly helped my motivation. I knew the people I'd be serving.

RR: How about ordination? Any particular memories?

ND: Not really. My parents, brother, sisters, nephews and nieces were all there.

TERTIANSHIP

RR: And then came tertianship.

ND: Yes, it was excellent. The director, Bill Murphy, was extremely helpful and encouraged me to continue in my desire to return to Baghdad.

I also really enjoyed doing chaplaincy work in the various hospitals that we were sent to on our tertian experiments.

BACK TO BAGHDAD

RR: Were you there when the government became hostile?

ND: While I was in Iraq for regency in the early 1950s and even more so after I returned in 1960, the government gradually became more hostile. We all knew that sooner or later there would be problem and possibly a coup d'etat, and it worried and affected us

RR: The uncertainty alone must have been difficult to deal with?

ND: Yes, it was. There were times between my return in 1960 and our expulsion in 1968 when we had to stop teaching for a few days, a week, or even two to three weeks, but eventually we resumed doing what we had come there to do, namely teach.

In addition to teaching English and religion, I was working with Fr. Bob Sullivan, who died here a while back. He and I had an excellent program for teaching English using a language lab. That was very, very good. In fact, we even taught an evening session for the native Iraqi lay teachers so they could improve their English pronunciation.

At the end for the second year of doing that, I was asked to come back to the US and go to Brown Uni-

versity to get a master's degree in linguistics. I had a fellowship to do that. But when everything collapsed over in Baghdad in 1968, and all foreigners, the Jesuits included, were expelled, I had to drop the degree.

REFLECTION ON WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

RR: That must have been pretty discouraging?

ND: Yes, I really wanted to go back. And I was all set to go back, but I couldn't, because our Baghdad schools had been closed.

RR: All that promise and excitement in Baghdad and yet it all ended in tragedy.

ND: Yes, it was very, very traumatic for everybody.

RR: It is interesting that the alumni of Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University now in the US and Canada, have been so faithful ever since. They have a reunion every two years someplace in the US and they continue to support the Jesuits. It shows the impact that their contact with the Jesuit schools had on them. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if the Jesuits had stayed there. The relationship between the Middle East and the West might be different today.

ND: That's right. It's an interesting thought. Joe Brennan was in my room one night recently, and he said that he had just heard some news from Baghdad that a new school had been started outside of downtown Baghdad, which they are calling Al Hikma. I haven't yet been able to confirm that.

HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN IN BOSTON

RR: It's an interesting thought nevertheless! So that brings us to your alternative career, namely being a chaplain in a number of places. Could you tell us something about that? How was the transition for you?

ND: Very difficult. I distinctly remember leaving Providence and Brown University on the 5:00 AM bus and going to Boston to the provincial's office. Fr. John McCall, who was in charge of studies and a great guy, asked me what else I would like to do.

That's when I said to him that the only other thing I could think of was my pleasant experience working as a hospital chaplain during tertianship. So he encouraged me to find a hospital to work in. That's how I started at Boston City Hospital. I was a chaplain there for five years.

RR: I heard you replaced the senior chaplain, nicknamed "General Brock."

ND: Yes, I did. My whole experience with hospital chaplaincy was a total plus, even for myself.

RR: I gather the people liked what you were doing. It helped in many ways.

ND: Yes, very much so. I went from there up to the Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield, and was there for six years.

RR: Could you give us some insight into what you found most interesting at Boston City Hospital and then at the Berkshire Medical Center? Give us some examples of the kind of people you dealt with or some of the things that happened?

ND: Boston City Hospital was a great place to be. I liked it a lot. At the same time, it was in chaos. People came there from everywhere. In the beginning I found it very difficult, partly because there were many Hispanics and I didn't speak Spanish. That made it difficult for both them and me. But I was very close to the medical and nursing staff. All that was also true up in Pittsfield.

BERKSHIRE MEDICAL CENTER

RR: How about the Berkshires?

ND: That was a very good experience as well, because there was no problem with language. It was very different from Boston City Hospital.

RR: Different in what way? The medical staff or what?

ND: The doctors, the nurses, and the people working in the hospital were just fine. Also, Boston City Hospital was going downhill, and it only grew worse very fast. They used to have some 1200 beds. Now they are down to about only 300 beds.

RR: It must be difficult to see a proud institution crumble?

ND: It was, yes.

RR: What about in the Berkshires? You didn't have that kind of atmosphere, even among the patients?

ND: Absolutely not. It was very well run and full of hope.

PORTLAND, MAINE

RR: From there you went to Maine?

ND: Yes, I think it was because I needed a change. I went to the Maine Medical Center, but very briefly, only a year. It was a very difficult period for me. I found people in Maine very cold. I wasn't alone in this. Many other people felt the same way. I commented about this to some of the staff, who were regular people, and they would say, "That's part of the milieu around here. If you stay here a while, you'll find them friendly."

HOLYOKE AND BACK TO PORTLAND

RR: And then you went to Holyoke. How long were you there?

ND: About two years. And again, I found it different. But I don't really remember much about it. I enjoyed the work, the people, and living in that part of New England.

RR: Then you went to Cheverus in Portland?

ND: I was the minister there. They had asked for me to come, so I went.

RR: What did that involve for you?

ND: It turned out that the rector there was Fr. John Foley, a dear classmate of mine from BC High and during the whole course of studies. He died here at Campion just a few months ago.

RR: How did things go for you there at Cheverus?

ND: They went well. Of course, it was different from being

a chaplain. But it went reasonably well. I helped by covering for Fr. Terry Currie on his days off by taking his place at the hospital.

FALL RIVER

RR: Then you went from that to St. Anne's Hospital in Fall River.

ND: Yes, and I found it terrific. It was great being a chaplain again. I did a lot of work on the weekends, helping out in parishes.

RR: Did you ever get to New Bedford, my home town?

ND: No, but I did go to Westport every weekend. The pastor there, Fr. Jack FitzGerald, who became a very good friend of mine, was also the head chaplain at St. Anne's Hospital.

RR: Did you like the people in Fall River?

ND: Oh, yes. They were very nice people. Every other week I would help out at Jack FitzGerald's parish.

SABBATICAL

RR: And around that time you had a sabbatical?

ND: That's right. And it was a very good one. I went to the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge. I liked it a lot. When it was my turn, I did a lot of cooking while I was there.

RR: Did you have a chance to do some traveling besides?

ND: No, I didn't have the chance to do much traveling. I audited five courses, so they were not for credit. That was fine with me. I found it a very good experience.

I lived in Faber House at 42 Kirkland in the same house as Fr. John Libens, from Detroit, who was the local rector of Weston Jesuit Community.

Then, in the middle of the sabbatical year, he asked me if I would consider becoming his assistant. He's a really wonderful guy. So I agreed to help him. And I was there helping him for four years. He was finally replaced as rector, so I went to Youville Hospital as chaplain.

PK: Did you live at Youville?

ND: No, I lived at Faber House and worked with elderly and infirm at Youville. I was chaplain there. I was back in my element.

BOSTON COLLEGE

ND: Then, after five years at Youville, Fr. Jim Collins, who is here now and who was minister at BC, called me to come over and chat with him about my coming to BC to be his assistant.

So I agreed and became his assistant, and, later on, I also became the assistant treasurer of the BC community.

It was a very, very good experience for me. I am no longer there. I had to leave for some surgery, and after that I expected to go back to St. Mary's, but that didn't happen.

RR: Is there something of importance that we haven't touched on?

ND: I don't think so.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

RR: Then let me ask you another question. What is your personal experience with what we can call God's providence in your life, in all that has happened to you over the years? What have they meant to you as a Jesuit especially?

ND: I think the experience in the Middle East was one such experience. It was the highlight of my life. Also I'm grateful that in Baghdad I was able to be a firm, excellent teacher. Students had a good rapport with me. And I had a good rapport with the Jesuits there. Over there in Baghdad, there was a whole different spirit. Everyone was an active part of the team.

RR: Then, I am sure that God's providence helped you deal with the tragic side of your family and provided you with new visions and opportunities, especially after the expulsion from Iraq and the abrupt change in your life plans. That is what comes through your years as a chaplain and other strong experiences.

ND: I did not expect to come here to Campion, because my life had been so focused elsewhere. On the other hand, my good experiences over the years as a chaplain softened me and have been very, very fulfilling.

RR: That brings us to the end of our conversation. I am grateful for your insights into how, with God's help, you were able to help so many others. Thanks!

ND: You're very welcome!

Anima Christi

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within Thy wounds hide me.
Permit me not to be separated from Thee.
From the wicked foe defend me.
At the hour of my death call me.
And bid me come to Thee.
That with Thy saints I may praise Thee
For ever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Neil F. Decker, S.J.

- Born:** June 23, 1928, Boston, Massachusetts
- Entered:** June 30, 1945, St. Stanislaus Novitiate/
Shadowbrook, Lenox, Massachusetts
- Ordained:** June 14, 1958, Weston College, Weston,
Massachusetts
- Last Vows:** August 15, 1962, Notre Dame de Jamhour,
Beirut, Lebanon
- 1941 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High School
- Student
- 1945 Lenox, Massachusetts: St. Stanislaus Novitiate/
Shadowbrook - Novitiate, juniorate
- 1949 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied
philosophy
- 1952 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College - Taught religion,
English
- 1953 Baghdad, Iraq: St. Joseph Residence - Studied Ara-
bic
- 1954 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College - Taught religion,
English

- 1955 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied theology
- 1959 Pomfret, Connecticut: St. Robert Hall - Tertianship
- 1960 Baghdad, Iraq: Al-Hikma University - Director of works
- 1962 Baghdad, Iraq: Baghdad College -
 1962-1963 Assistant Prefect of Discipline
 1962-1967 Taught English
 1963-1964 Taught religion
 1964-1967 Co-director of language lab
- 1968 Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University -
 Studied linguistics
- 1969 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston City Hospital -
 Chaplain
- 1974 Pittsfield, Massachusetts: Berkshire Medical Center
 - Chaplain
- 1980 Portsmouth, Maine: Maine Medical Center -
 Chaplain
- 1981 Holyoke, Massachusetts: Providence Hospital -
 Chaplain
- 1983 Portland, Maine: Cheverus High School - Minister
 of Jesuit community
- 1984 Fall River, Massachusetts: Bishop Connolly High
 School - Chaplain at St. Anne Hospital

- 1988 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Weston Jesuit
Community/Faber House -
1988-1989 Sabbatical at Weston Jesuit School of
Theology
1989-1993 Assistant to rector
1993 Hawthorne Street Residence - Director
1993-1998 Chaplain at Youville Hospital
- 1998 Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: St. Mary Hall/
Boston College - Assistant to minister of Jesuit
Community at Boston College, assistant treasurer
- 2007 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Health Center -
Praying for the Church and the Society

Degrees

- 1952 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-Boston
College
- 1959 Licentiate in Theology, Weston College

AMDG