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INTERVIEW WITH EDGAR DENISON
INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT WEST
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WEST: Today is the first of December, 1971. This is Robert West. As a part of the Oral History Program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis I have with me today Edgar Denison. Will you please start now, Mr. Denison, by giving some biographical information about yourself? Would you like to start and tell us some of the reasons why you came to the United States and what some of the conditions were like in Germany that prompted you to come here?

DENISON: Let me first say that one question will come up with anybody I talk namely, why I have an English name. Before I say anything else, the family, my father's family, came almost 500 years ago from England to the Rhineland and never changed its name. So I had to explain to everybody in Germany as I grew up there the first 21 years of my life why I had an English name, and after I came to the United States in 1927 I had to explain to everybody here how come you have an English name. I was born August 31, 1904 in Stuttgart, Germany. Stuttgart is the capital of the then Kingdom of Württemberg. I went to school there, the highest school that we have in Germany which is... If you went through this school and made your final examination, it was, in those days, in 1927, the equivalent of two years of college in the United States. When I got out of school, we were in very difficult financial circumstances due to the inflation, the famous German inflation as a result of World War I and probably caused by the German government to get out of paying reparations to the Allies. I had a job in a grinding wheel factory, learning that business but one day I was called in and told that I was the only unmarried man left and as long as all business was contracting and they had to let me go as the next man because according to the laws at that time, they had to let unmarried men go first. I saw the handwriting and really, the United States was the only country in which you had a chance to get a start and to make a living so I applied to come over to this country. It took a year. In those days it was very difficult to get a visa but I was one of those who received one after the examinations, both as to abilities and physical examinations in the American consulate in Stuttgart. I came to St. Louis, then, to make a living, to find the opportunity to make a living after having a rather good, general education but not any specific knowledge in any of the disciplines. The reason that I came to St. Louis is that in those days you had to state in your affidavit that you had a job or you would not have received permission to come over here. When I got to St. Louis, I thought I had a job but there was no job. And it became, then, very difficult to find work in 1927.

WEST: Excuse me. Who were you supposed to have this job with and how did you know about it?

DENISON: This is a very long, drawn out and really not very important story. Once upon a time, many years before that—many, many years—my grandfather, from my mother's side, found a gentleman who had an attack in the street in my home town in Stuttgart. He was well dressed. This gentleman turned out to be an American from St. Louis who was on a purchasing trip in Europe. My grandfather took care of the man, put him in a taxi, and took him to my father who was a doctor. From this particular beginning, there developed a friendship, and correspondence off and on and this is the reason that I came to St. Louis because these were the only people whom we knew in the United States and who signed, then, the affidavit. So, it is rather a surprising and somewhat illogical way that I landed in St. Louis.

WEST: How was your trip over here? How did you come?

DENISON: I came on the smallest ship of the Hamburg-American line, Westphalia. And it was the Westphalia's last trip before she was retired from active service. We ran into tremendous storms so that we actually laid by in mid-ocean for two days. The waves came above the bow of the ship, broke the water tank, and all that time I enjoyed myself thoroughly. I, who had never been on the ocean, never got seasick and everybody else was deathly sick. I landed in New York. I only stayed in New York two or three hours. A representative of a firm who was acquainted with the people in St. Louis picked me up and got me to the train and then I landed in St. Louis.

WEST: How was your reception like by the people here in St. Louis? Were they friendly or hostile or indifferent or what?

DENISON: The reception in those days was always one of great curiosity. There had been a very small influx of immigrants in the United States and I had hardly been on land one minute when the first person asked me, "How do you like this country?" I got to hate that question more than any other in the world because before one could have possibly had any opinion, these people all wanted a favorable answer. In those days America had an inferiority complex, which it long has lost. But, obviously, the people were very friendly. They were also very curious, as I said. However, in the later contacts in my first years here, I noticed a great deal of dislike of Germans that was still the carry-over of the First World War; and, after all, I was just another Hun who had made the trip across the ocean.

WEST: What was your first Impressions and reactions to St. Louis? Were they what you had expected or did you have any preconceived ideas of what you'd meet?

DENISON: I had very few preconceived ideas. Before I sailed to the United States, I happened to see a movie of St. Louis—or a movie of the United States and St. Louis was in it—and it was a riotous parade down Washington Avenue because the Cardinals had won the World Series. This was the only thing I had seen of St. Louis, or heard of, before. I also had met a very old gentleman who had been in St. Louis maybe thirty or forty years earlier and he had told me that the water was actually nothing but the _____ of the Mississippi River and you could stir it up with a spoon. This I found to be history by the time I landed. Now, as to my impressions. They were, of course, mixed. I was tremendously impressed by the broad avenues, such as Lindell Boulevard, the Cathedral, which reminded me of the _____ in Paris. But I was unfavorably impressed by the very disorganized streets with all

their advertising signs on the outskirts of the city. Being a nature-lover first, and not a city person first, I was more interested in the surroundings, in the landscape, and of course this is an experience for any European to see this vastness, the beauty that was at that time unspoiled. I remember my first trip out to the Meramec on foot, walking about 25 miles, and people trying to talk to me, some girls trying to ask me to come into their cabin— and I didn't even understand what they were trying to do because my English was too limited. But I was tremendously impressed by the flowers, by the beautiful country, and by the limitless expanse of our country.

WEST: Did you have many problems with your lack of English? How much English did you know when you came here? About how long did it take before you felt comfortable with the language?

DENISON: I'm not sure I feel entirely confident with the language today, although I don't seem to have many troubles with it, but I had a great deal of vocabulary but I had never heard English spoken. Being in dire need of work, I had two jobs—I moonlighted at night. In the daytime I worked physical labor in a wholesale house. It's the only thing I could get at the time. At night, I painted ladies' hats with landscapes in oil colors, which was then the fashion, and inasmuch as there was a great deal of ladies and artists and whatnot sitting around me, it didn't take any time at all for me to get acquainted, to listen to the language, to hear the language, and to get it through my ear. Being primarily a musical person, I find learning a language, when you can listen to people talk it, is not difficult, as I speak a few other languages.

WEST: Where were these places where you first worked?

DENISON: Those are...all the places I work don't exist any more. The stock work was in_____. The painting of the hats was in a millinery place which has long, long ceased to be and this kind of work, of course, didn't exist after the fashions of ladies' hats became much simpler or went out entirely.

WEST: Where did you first live when you came to St. Louis? How hard was it to find a place to live?

DENISON: There was no problem at all in finding a place because there were people always helpful to find you a place. I had a room, a very small room, in a private home on West Pine and the room was just about big enough that I could get out of bed and turn around, but that was all. In those days, of course, that's all I could afford. In fact, I could not afford that either because my salary when I left, when I started here was \$60 a month and even then you couldn't possibly live on \$60.

WEST: Did you feel that you were discriminated against in any way because of your background?

DENISON: I definitely do not feel that way. The conditions were such that you had to start at the bottom, you had no protection of any kind as to wages or working conditions. You were expected to work any hours that were asked of you and if you didn't like it, there was always the saying that there was another job someplace else if you didn't like it, so you could leave.

The fact of the matter is there were no other jobs. This was one of the lies of the early days of the capitalism that doesn't exist any more. But, there was never any discrimination because I was German. I never felt anything in that line. The other beginners had an advantage over me in that they spoke the language fluently and that they knew the country, of course. It is a tremendous undertaking for a single person with0 a family or without any family connections to start a new life in a new country.

WEST: You say there was friendly people around who were happy to help you find a room and such. Were there any particular people or a particular organization that helped you? Was there any that you knew of that maybe helped immigrants and such at that time?

DENISON: No, there were no organizations involved whatsoever, and I don't think any organizations of that type existed. In fact, one of the great surprises of my early American days were that there are no people interested in your acclimatization but that you were strictly on your own. I probably could have found organizations in South St. Louis at that time who represented German provincialism. But I very deliberately stayed away from any tie in, from any organizations or from any families, even, who were German first and American second. My entire desire was to become acclimated and Americanized.

WEST: How did you go about getting your American citizenship? Did you have any problems then? Was it hard to give up your German citizenship in order to become an American?

DENISON: There were no problems of any kind. You have the normal years to wait. You have to declare ^our intention and then when the time comes, you have to know the proper answers—you go through an oral examination. I had absolutely no problems. I enjoyed what is now the old Post Office downtown where I was sworn in as a citizen. Obviously, when you make up your mind to become a citizen, it is up to the individual to realize what he is doing, and I found no particular problem in becoming an American citizen and giving up my German citizenship because, after all, I had left Germany because it didn't give me the opportunity to make a living. And in the mean time, I think it was six years after I came, I had become very well acclimated and found it a normal thing to do to become an American citizen.

WEST: Did you ever find any instances where, when you first arrived, that due to your ignorance of the language or the customs of the people that you later discovered that you'd been taken advantage of by unscrupulous people in any way?

DENISON: I cannot say that I have any recollection in which anybody took advantage of me because I was a foreigner. The minor instances which I have now forgotten would relate to cases in which Americans would take other Americans for a ride, too, selling something like that. But I had never any experience in which I felt I was being discriminated or was being taken for a ride because I was a "dumb foreigner."

WEST: What would you say was the hardest thing to do to become adjusted over here? What was the hardest thing to leave behind as far as what you were used to in your way of life in Germany?

DENISON: While this is a perfectly legitimate question, I have trouble answering it because when I made up my mind to come to the United States, I also made up my mind to become an American. And once you've made up your mind to do so, you don't pine and worry about what you did in the old country; and, therefore, I didn't ever feel that I had lost any particular necessity, something that was necessary to me, something that was important to me. I missed the mountains tremendously but it's not the fault of St. Louis that it doesn't have any Alps nearby. I grew up in the mountains, really, and am a mountain goat by nature. But later on, of course, I compensated and went every year to the mountains. The problem of what is the most difficult thing to adjust to is also hard to answer. I was a very young person and I found it somewhat difficult, without anybody advising me, to make the proper contacts with girls. Our German system by which both sexes take each other out for entertainment—once the boy and then the girl—of course didn't exist here. Also, I found girls here much more protected at that time but this is a matter of acclimatization and while this takes a little time, one learns the ropes.

WEST: You say you worked in a wholesale house and then in a millinery shop. Where did you go from there to finally wind up with your permanent occupation, so to speak?

DENISON: Obviously, I wasn't trained in Germany to be a stock worker or something of that kind and so I tried very hard to find an occupation in which I could use what I had learned and after some years, in fact in the depth of the Depression in 1932, I was able to get into Union Electric in the year in which I think the entire Union Electric only hired thirty people. And then I started a long, long climb. I was a statistician, I worked on rates, on electric rates. I learned a lot. I went to school, took various courses and after many years in Union Electric, I was able to convince the top management that they needed some help in top management and I became, finally, assistant to the executive vice-president, had my own department, and did research in many, many fields—primarily in power production, the power plants, and in transmission and distribution system of Union Electric; also in organization work and labor questions. Anything I felt was interesting or worthwhile for the company I could dig into and come up with ideas and change things. And then the last twenty years of my life in this company, with a total of thirty-seven, I was on the staff and did a great deal of varied work and I was never in any department. I was always directly responsible to the top men.

WEST: How much did your education which you had in Germany help you to adjust to the United States and help you to get to the present position?

DENISON: This is a very important and a very good question. I went through the humanistic education in Germany, which is very broad-based to start almost anything, to build on almost anything you want to. In this country here, I found the people were much more specialized at an earlier age. As you begin to work here, your European education was definitely at a disadvantage because you couldn't use it. But I found later in life as I could use this background, this broad background in many, many fields an enormous advantage, and one I wouldn't miss for anything. The specialization which in Europe come-much later than here can always come. . .you can always pick up anything you need and I was in so many fields and worked in so many fields because my background was such that I could pick up the information I needed so that I was never really in trouble that way. While the humanistic _____, the humanistic education is a time-consuming one, you could almost say a round-about way of getting your education—13 years of Latin, 6 of Greek—it does give you a

foundation which is there when you need it.

WEST: You say that your education wasn't really useful when you first came over here. Why was that?

DENISON: Primarily because I had no practical use for what I knew in many fields. In our country, as I just mentioned before, our work is built up on specialization, especially in the lower _____ of the jobs and quite properly the people here didn't really know what to do with me. Not until I was practically able to create my own job by telling management what they needed and they accepted it was I able to really forge forward using the background which I had acquired both in Europe and here. But in a country in which specialization is very much required at an early age, I was certainly at a disadvantage at first.

WEST: Did St. Louis or America live up to your expectations, your first impressions? How has your view changed of this country since when you first came here till after you had gotten adjusted until now?

DENISON: First of all, when you come over here you haven't too many fixed ideas of when this country is like and you can't have. If you do, you're always wrong, necessarily wrong. Those people who write books after being over here one year or two—I don't read those books because they're not worth reading. As you become acquainted, as you learn the political structure, the scientific structure, "learn the ropes" as we say, then of course you also have let roots down into this country and you don't judge with your peon eyes any more, you judge with American eyes or with American standards. I have obviously applied to what I have seen in this country what I have learned over here. I went through the Depression and it was no fun. I saw the Roosevelt revolution. I saw the Second World War. I saw the whole development of a rather active fifty years and formed my ideas over here. I can't say that I can compare today's ideas with those that I had when I came because I had very few ideas. To me, the most tremendous impression is the over-whelming change that we have gone through and which we are still going through today. There is no stopping. As the Greeks said, . And this is, of course, true today as it was after I came so I cannot really make a statement that I'm comparing present-day conditions or ideas with those that I was supposed to have when I came over here.

WEST: You say you went through the Depression and it was a hard time. Did you feel as though you had An extra hard time because you were an immigrant, because you were of foreign background? During the Second World War, did you feel any particular bias or discrimination by other Americans because of your German background?

DENISON: I had no particular extra difficulties in the Depression. I didn't sell apples but again I moonlighted. I did everything I had to do. I worked 14 hours a day, 15 hours a day, worked every night for 25 cents and kept my mouth shut because otherwise you lost your job. These were not nice days and I hope we'll never see them again and I don't think we will. In the Second World War the animosity that we had in the First World War apparently had completely been forgotten. I never was faced by anybody or any condition which was against myself because I was German. In fact, there was a time when I had been selected to go in the service as an officer and work against the Hitler regime but the war ended and I was never called, although I was ready to go. I was tremendously impressed how fair people were in this war and they never, an any way, made life difficult for me just because I came from

Germany.

WEST: In 1932, when you say you first made it into Union Electric, you said that you were one of about thirty or so applicants accepted during that year. What do you attribute this to that you could make it in? Was this due to your good education in Germany or how would you explain that?

DENISON: The Union Electric people at that time were looking for statisticians and in those days there weren't many around. They gave you some tests and I was able to meet their requirements. My second break in Union Electric came when management needed help and for the first time in those years did a very major testing job on some fifty applicants and then that was reduced to ten. And it was a very carefully prepared test in which the three top people who were doing the grading didn't even know whose papers they had in front of them and when all three top people gave me the first grade without knowing who I was, I was in.

WEST: You seem rather unique in that you came over by yourself with no family relations, no family ties or anything like that over here. Was it hard to leave your family at home? Did you have much contact with the large German groups in South St. Louis or North St. Louis?

DENISON: Obviously it was hard to leave your family but we had a system by which Monday night was "letter night" and I don't care how late I came home from work, I wrote a long letter and all the years that my parents were alive there was a letter that went to Germany, to Stuttgart, every week. I did not ever make any contact with any German organizations over here because I felt that it is unfortunate to build walls around ethnic groups which then usually feel that they are somehow superior which they are not, and so I stayed away from groups almost through my entire American life. This has to do with my own way of living, being somewhat of a loner and not a joiner.

WEST: Did you miss any of the German customs, the holidays or festivities or anything that these German areas like to promote, to retain?

DENISON: What you have...what we have here in the United States as so-called German culture or German festivals are really imitations and while I saw a great deal of Germany—and I hiked a great deal through Germany on foot by the weeks and by the month—what I see over here has very little to do with what I saw over there. German-Americanism, German-Americans and German-American language and German-American customs are not German customs and to a German this is very much obvious and I did not miss anything. I just never looked at this whole problem of becoming an American, of being an American, as a comparison between Europe and America. Once you made up your mind you're an American, then it doesn't make much sense to worry about details, what you had in the old country and what you have in the new country. This goes all the way through. I'm a great lover of mountains. Your American mountains are magnificent beyond anything. People always ask me, "Are they as beautiful as the Alps or as the Mountains or as the Austrian Alps?" and I say, "They're different." The comparison I think is misleading. You can't compare an apple with a pear and this is what you would be doing.

WEST: Have you ever been back to Germany or ever really wanted to go back for any reason?

DENISON: I have not been back to Germany, really, although I was once back for a week in 1929 just before the Depression broke, the Black Monday, to see my parents again. I was supposed to have, then, a job with the Shell Oil Company. When I came back, the job wasn't there so I was out in the street. But I had no particular desire to go back, though I should not be surprised if one of these days I pack up my wife and go over to Europe for quite an extended trip—maybe a whole year. Because if I do go, I really want to see, not what the tourists who sees of Europe in three weeks, but I want to see things that I have never seen and that I want to study, such as the castles in southern France or part of Italy and I want to see Switzerland again because I spent so much time in Switzerland.

WEST: So, you don't have any real desire to go back and see the places of your boyhood or anything like that? You'd say that as part of becoming an American, it's a necessary thing to leave behind your past and to fully accept and enjoy what is here where you are?

DENISON: That is correct. I became very much involved in nature study in this country very actively, much more than most people I know, even teaching. And obviously our climate is so totally different from Europe that you have to learn an entire new set of rules and your nature is very rich and really somewhat unspoiled compared to Europe. In Europe we may have to drive 30, 40, 50 miles to see just a few flowers and he , even today under our very difficult conditions, we can't just drive a mile or two. And we see some remarkable sights that have not yet been destroyed by real estate developers or industrial complexes. So, I think this is a marvelous thing in this country that we must preserve at all costs. This is what I am spending my retired years on, to help preserve what we have in conservation and preservation.

WEST: When you first came to this country, did you feel it was the "land of the free" that it was built up to be what we think of with the Statue of Liberty and everything? Was there really that much of a difference between Europe and the attitudes towards freedom and everything between Germany and the United States?

DENISON: That question is being asked, used to be asked, by quite a few people. My own reaction may be somewhat unorthodox. We had in Europe problems with police states, with religious question. We had problems with being very small countries. You couldn't trespass. You couldn't walk where you wanted to. The famous old story, you can only do what is not "forboten" but is not interdicted. On the other hand, I develop the impression in our country here that we have a form of slavery, a form of fear I should say, which is equally noxious and this is the fear of the boss, the bossism. Anybody who went through employment in the Depression years knows what a powerful man the fellow was who was in charge of you who could do with you what he wanted. Never did I see under European conditions such absolute power, such dictatorial power; and I have wondered through all these years that I've worked in this country if we are not fooling ourselves being free people. Free, politically, to a great degree; but in our work I never thought that we were free people. We have a form of supervision—which is, by the way, expressed by the word "boss" for which no European language has a word—which is quite difficult to live with. Obviously the unions have done a tremendous amount to undermine this, what I'm talking about, but even if you are not subject to any union jurisdiction, as I certainly was not in my work, you are constantly aware of this tremendous power of those for whom you work. You asked me before about my impressions of liberty, or maybe liberties plural. There's one facet of it that a European has difficulty to

comprehend. Your almost religious belief in the rights of the individual even when this individual damages the general public. For instance, a farmer on the hillside can do anything with his land he wants to even if it destroys, through erosion, the land further downstream in a valley. You have no laws. Nobody can stop him. Take another case: We have beautiful rivers right here in Missouri and some big cattle outfit can come in, establish a feed ladder on the river whereupon the of a thousand or two thousand cattle will go into this river and it is the end of this river. You have no laws to stop this. You seem to have an almost religious belief that the individual's rights are In my background, in my thinking, these ideas go too far. I believe that we will have to come up with laws with regulations in which the common good comes first rather than the profit of the ideas of the individual. There are no restrictions here how you build a house, practically. In some cities there are, in some there are not. You can destroy a whole neighborhood if you feel like it. You can do in your garden or on your grounds what you want regardless of what neighbors think unless you do something that is contrary to building regulations. All these are expressions of a great belief in individual rights and as we become more and more populated, over-populated, there isn't any question in my mind that these rights will have to be abridged. And that we, in this country, will become much closer to European conditions in living and in attitudes than we have been.

WEST: How are the attitudes in Europe towards this type of thing different than in the United States?

DENISON: Let me give you an example. Here in St. Louis County we had open sewers for the first 30 or 40 years of my life here. It's an unthinkable condition because you could have an epidemic any day. We had an encephalitis epidemic here probably tied into these open sewers. In Europe, a medical officer is absolute. If he says this is going to be changed, it will be changed. Another example: In Europe you have fire inspections of every house because as closely tied together the houses are over there, built together as the houses are over there, you can't afford to have them burn. If this fire inspection man, officer, tells you to change something, you change it or you're just being punished very badly. In other words, the communal officers are much more powerful and I believe this is necessary as you become more densely populated. One of the most striking impressions which I received in this country is the need of every citizen, of most citizens, to do their own labor. In Europe, I doubt very much that I had a hammer in my hands but once or twice in my life, in my first 21 years. Over here I became a Jack-Of-All-Trades not only of necessity but because it was a marvelous experience. This is one of the big differences between Europe and America caused by a number of reasons, one of them being the pioneer tradition, the other one the formerly much lower wages of artisans in Europe versus the United States. But it is a remarkable fact that you have in the United States so many people who are so very skilled in so many ways, so many arts and that is one of the big differences in the United States and Europe, and it has a great effect on our life and on our thinking. If you're able to help yourself in most any situation, you think independently and this is a very great asset, which we have, which the Europeans may slowly learn but they haven't arrived yet.

WEST: Thank you very much, Mr. Denison for your time. This now concludes the interview.