

The ties that bind

40th president made Decatur a stopping point several times in his career

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DECATUR — A century has passed since the nation's 40th president was born in the small Illinois town of Tampico. In that time, Decatur hosted Ronald Reagan on four occasions at four distinctly different times in his life and U.S. history.

On the first occasion, he came with his college football team. On another, he came in Air Force One.

Todd Rudat, assistant archivist at Millikin University, studied Reagan's handful of visits to the Decatur area and Millikin. Reagan's first visit was perhaps not his favorite, but he certainly remembered it in his subsequent stops, Rudat said.

■ Special date

Feb. 6 marks the centennial for Reagan's hometown of Dixon and alma mater of Eureka.

Life/D1

Reagan first arrived in Decatur in October 1929, not as an elder statesman, but as a football player with the Eureka College Red Devils. Then a sophomore, Reagan was the starting right guard in a game he would recall on subsequent visits as a major beating.

The Red Devils lost a lopsided game against Millikin and future NFL Hall of Famer George Musso, who would go on to join the Chicago Bears.

"I just want you to know — I'm a little embarrassed to say this — the score was 45 to 6, and the 6 was Eureka's," President Reagan later recalled at a forum on agribusiness at Millikin's Richards Treat University Center, Rudat wrote.

Mere days after the Red Devils' defeat, the stock market crashed and sent the world into the Great Depression.

It would be nearly another 25 years before Reagan returned. In the intervening years, he had worked in Hollywood in many roles



H&R file photos

October 1955: Ronald Reagan gazes up at the Lincoln statue on the Millikin University campus during a Decatur visit.

REAGAN/A2

REAGAN

Continued from A1

and hosted the star-studded "General Electric Theater" television show. Returning to Decatur in October 1955, Reagan was a spokesman for G.E., touring facilities across the country.

The Decatur Herald and the Decatur Review reported on Reagan's appearance, with the Herald running a photo of Reagan looking up at the statue of Abraham Lincoln on Millikin's campus. Few could have predicted the man pensively looking up at the nation's 16th president would go on to become its 40th.

Reagan's first visit coincided with the Great Depression, and his second came during the height of McCarthyism. At an Oct. 12 award ceremony held by his college fraternity at the Hotel Orlando in

Decatur, the Herald reported that Reagan spoke about "how the communists had tried to invade the actors guild but were soon removed."

Reagan made another visit to Decatur in 1977, the year after his first unsuccessful bid for president. Rudat said the \$50-per-plate fundraiser he attended brought in about \$20,000 for the Republican Party. During his speech, Reagan again recalled his



H&R file photo

August 1986: President Reagan speaks to a youthful audience in the packed Junior Livestock Building at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield.

spectacular beating on the Millikin football field with good humor. It was a telling part of his personality that he always did so whenever he visited, Rudat said.

"Reagan, in '55 and later, brings up the story," Rudat said. "He was able to just take it in stride. He had a self-deprecating kind of humor that I think he played on very well."

Rex Brown, then a member of the Macon County Board, recalls his meeting with Reagan at the fundraiser.

"He was very relaxed, very personable and always ready with a quick comment of some kind, whoever he was talking to," Brown said.

On his final visit in 1984, Reagan flew to Decatur Airport aboard Air Force One. The president delivered a campaign speech to thousands gathered there and later toured facilities at Archer Daniels Midland Co.

He also spoke in a panel discussion at Millikin about agribusiness.

Former state Sen. Duane Noland of Blue Mound was at that time a young farmer when he spoke on the panel with Reagan.

"He had a relaxed style and a strong presence," Noland said. "He carried himself very erect and very strong, but he wasn't somebody who was aloof or hard to approach."

Noland recalled his attempt at an icebreaker during the panel: Speaking about his own relative anonymity, Noland joked that he felt like a child fallen into a vat of chocolate, praying "that the Lord would make my tongue equal to the task."

For a moment, it seemed silence would greet the remark, until Noland realized a single roar of laughter was coming from the president.

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