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HARD TIMES



*An Oral History
of the Great Depression*

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Some people were victims of circumstance. It was no fault of their own. Many people did their best to find something to do. I heard of a former banker who became a caddy at the golf club he had at one time been a member of. There were people with a great deal of spunk, who wouldn't frighten easily.

Someone once said to me: The worst thing that can happen to a man is to have a good job. Because when you have a good job, you're in a safe, secure, snug harbor. People will stay where it's nice and warm and cozy. A man really does better for himself if he's thrown to the wolves, so to speak.

Our greatest successes in business were made by illiterate men. They couldn't speak the language. They couldn't write. They made no appearance you could be proud of. From sheer necessity, they had to go into business for themselves. They had to roll up their sleeves and go out. If they became junk men, they opened a junk shop. Then they were dealing in scrap metal. Before you know it, they were steel tycoons.

The Depression *made* a lot of people. I know one man who found himself out of work. He began thinking and thinking. He wrote sixteen letters to manufacturers and explained he could offer them a service at no cost. Three or four of them wrote back. In a few short years, he became an extremely wealthy man. He gave them something they needed, even though at the time they didn't know they needed it.

Coping

I REMEMBER all of a sudden we had to move. My father lost his job and we moved into a double-garage. The landlord didn't charge us rent for seven years. We had a coal stove, and we had to each take turns, the three of us kids, to warm our legs. It was awfully cold when you opened those garage doors. We would sleep with rugs and blankets over the top of us. Dress under the sheets.

In the morning, we'd get out and get some snow and put it on the stove and melt it and wash around our faces. Never the neck or anything. Put on our two pairs of socks on each hand and two pairs of socks on our feet, and long underwear and lace it up with Goodwill shoes. Off we'd walk, three, four miles to school.

My father had owned three or four homes. His father left them to him. He lost these one by one. One family couldn't pay the rent. They owned a bakery shop. They used to pay him off half in money, half in cookies. We lived on cracked cookies and those little bread things. So my father was pretty sharp in a way.

He always could get something to feed us kids. We lived about three months on candy cods, they're little chocolate square things. We had these melted in milk. And he had a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant. We lived on those fried noodles. I can't stand 'em today. He went to delivering Corn-Flake samples. We lived on Corn Flake balls, Rice Krispies, they used to come out of our ears. Can't eat 'em today either. Can't stand 'em. My mother used to make the bread, put it under a blanket to raise. Oh

Do you recall the sentiments of people during the depths of the Depression?

There was a feeling that we were on the verge of a bloody revolution, up until the time of the New Deal. Many people, among them, intellectuals, without knowing what else to do, worked with the Communist Party. The Communists naturally exploited this. It began to change with the New Deal and pretty much came to an end with the Russian-German pact.

I remember a very sinking feeling during the time of the Bank Holiday. I walked down to the corner to buy a paper, giving the man a fifty-cents coin. He flipped it up in the air and said, "This is no good." And he threw it in the middle of the street. (Laughs.) Some took the Holiday as a huge joke. Others had hysteria, like this newsboy: there isn't any money, there isn't anything. Most people took it calmly. It couldn't get much worse—and something was being *done*.

Everyone was emotionally affected. We developed a fear of the future which was very difficult to overcome. Even though I eventually went into some fairly good jobs, there was still this constant dread: everything would be cut out from under you and you wouldn't know what to do. It would be even harder, because you were older. . . .

Before the Depression, one felt he could get a job even if something happened to this one. There were always jobs available. And, of course, there were always those, even during the Depression: If you wanted to work, you could really get it. Nonsense.

I suspect, even now, I'm a little bit nervous about every job I take and wonder how long it's going to last—and what I'm going to do to cause it to disappear.

I feel anything can happen. There's a little fear in me that it might happen again. It does distort your outlook and your feeling. Lost time and lost faith. . . .

I think that's the worst thing that our system does to people, is to take away their pride. It prevents them from being a human being. And wondering why the Harlem and why the Detroit. They're talking about troops and law and order. You get law and order in this country when people are allowed to be decent human beings. Every time I hear another building's on fire, I say: oh, boy, baby, hit 'em again. (Laughs.)

I don't think people were put on earth to suffer. I think that's a lot of nonsense. I think we are the highest development on the earth, and I think we were put here to live and be happy and to enjoy everything that's here. I don't think it's right for a handful of people to get ahold of all the things that make living a joy instead of a sorrow. You wake up in the morning, and it consciously hits you—it's just like a big hand that takes your heart and squeezes it—because you don't know what that day is going to bring: hunger or you don't know.

We make an orange freight. We rode in the reefer.† Clear to Kansas City. It goes like a bat out of hell, a rough ride. We broke through the wire netting and ate the oranges. We got vitamins like mad. (Laughs.) But your mouth gets burnt by that acid juice and your teeth get so damn sore from that ride. By the time we got off at K.C., I could hardly close my mouth.

We catch a train into Kansas City, Kansas, that night. At the stops, colored people were gettin' on the trains and throwin' off coal. You could see people gatherin' the coal. You could see the railroad dicks were gettin' tough.

Hal and I are ridin' on the top of the boxcar, it's a fairly nice night. All of a sudden, there's a railroad dick with a flashlight that reaches a thousand miles. Bam! Bam! He starts shooting. We hear the bullets hitting the cars, bam! like that. I throw my hands up and start walking towards that light. Hal's behind me. The guy says, "Get off." I said, "Christ, I can't." This thing's rollin' fifty miles an hour or more. He says, "Jump." I says, "I can't." He says, "Turn around and march ahead." He marches us over the top. There's a gondola, about eight feet down. He says, "Jump." So I jumped and landed in wet sand, up to my knees.

We come to a little town in Nebraska, Beatrice. It's morning. I'm chilled to the bone. We crawl into a railroad sandbox, almost frozen to death. We dry out, get warmed up, and make the train again. We pull into Omaha. It's night. All of a sudden, the train is surrounded by deputies, with pistols. The guy says, "Get in those trucks." I said, "What for? We haven't done anything." He said, "You're not going to jail. You're going to the Transient Camp."

They drive us up to an old army warehouse. They check you in, take off your clothes, run them through a de-louser, and you take a bath. It's midnight. We come out, and here's a spread with scrambled eggs, bacon, bread, coffee and toast. We ate a great meal. It was wonderful. We go upstairs to bed. Here's a double-decker, sheets, toothbrush, towels, everything. I sat down on this damn bed, I can't tell you, full of wonderment. We thought we'd gone to heaven. Hal's a young punk, he's seventeen. He said, "What the hell kind of a place is this?" I said, "I don't know, but it's sure somethin' different."

* A blackjack.

† The refrigerator car.

The next morning, they called us up to a social worker. By this time, there's a thousand guys in there. They're playing baseball, some guys are washing down walls—bums, bindlestiffs, cynical rough guys who've been on the road for years. It's kind of like a playhouse. It's unbelievable.

Through a social worker, he is assigned to a job with the National Youth Administration, at "a little cold-water college" in Aberdeen, South Dakota. "And then the good life began for me."

"Before Roosevelt, the Federal Government hardly touched your life. Outside of the postmaster, there was little local representation. Now people you knew were appointed to government jobs. Joe Blow or some guy from the corner."

"It came right down to Main Street. Half of them loved it, half of them hated it. There was the immediacy of its effect on you. In Aberdeen, Main Street was against it. But, they were delighted to have those green relief checks cashed in their cash registers. They'd have been out of business had it not been for them. It was a split thing. They were cursing Roosevelt for the intrusion into their lives. At the same time, they were living off it. Main Street still has this fix."

The NYA was my salvation. I could just as easily have been in Sing Sing as with the UN.* Just every bit a chance. Hell, yes. Everybody was a criminal. You stole, you cheated through. You were getting by, survival. Stole clothes off lines, stole milk off back porches, you stole bread. I remember going through Tucumcari, New Mexico, on a freight. We made a brief stop. There was a grocery store, a supermarket kind of thing for those days. I beat it off the train and came back with rolls and crackers. This guy is standing in the window shaking his fist at you.

It wasn't a big thing, but it created a coyote mentality. You were a predator. You had to be. The coyote is crafty. He can be fantastically courageous and a coward at the same time. He'll run, but when he's cornered, he'll fight. I grew up where they were hated, 'cause they'd kill sheep. They'll kill a calf, get in the chicken pen. They're mean. But how else does a coyote stay alive? He's not as powerful as a wolf. He has a small body. He's in such bad condition, a dog can run him down. He's not like a fox. A coyote is nature's victim as well as man's. We were coyotes in the Thirties, the jobless.

No, I don't see the Depression as an ennobling experience. Survivors are still ridin' with the ghost—the ghost of those days when things came hard.

* He has an administrative job with UNICEF.

Share croppers / Farmers

In 1934, in this Texas town, the farmers was all out of food. The government gave us a slip, where you could pick up food. For a week, they had people who would come and stand in line, and they couldn't get waited on. This was a small town, mostly white. Only five of us in that line were Negroes, the rest was white. We would stand all day and wait and wait and wait. And get nothin' or if you did, it was spoiled meat.

We'd been standin' there two days, when these three men walked in. They had three shotguns and a belt of shells. They said, lookin' up and down that line, "You all just take it easy. Today we'll see that everybody goes home, they have food." Three white men.

One of 'em goes to the counter, lays his slip down and says he wants meat. He had brought some back that was spoiled. He said to the boss, "Would you give this meat for your dog?" So he got good meat. He just stood there. So the next person gets waited on. It was a Negro man. He picked up the meat the white man brought back. So the white guy said, "Don't take that. I'm gonna take it for my dog." So the boss said, "I'm gonna call the police."

So the other reaches across the counter and catches this guy by the tie and chokes him. The Negro man had to cut the tie so the man wouldn't choke to death. When he got up his eyes was leakin' water. The other two with guns was standin' there quietly. So he said, "Can I wait on you gentlemen?" And they said, "We've been here for three days. And we've watched these people fall like flies in the hot sun, and they go home and come back the next day and no food. Today we purpose to see that everybody in line gets their food and then we gonna get out." They didn't point the guns directly at him. They just pointed 'em at the ceiling. They said, "No foolin' around, no reachin' for the telephone. Wait on the people. We're gonna stand here until every person out there is waited on. When you gets them all served, serve us."

The man tried to get the phone off the counter. One of the guys said, "I hope you don't force me to use the gun, because we have no intentions of getting nobody but you. And I wouldn't miss you. It wouldn't do you any good to call the police, because we stop 'em at the door. Everybody's gonna get food today." And everybody did.

The Government sent two men out there to find out why the trouble. They found out this man and a couple others had rented a huge warehouse and was stackin' that food and sellin' it. The food that was supposed to be issued to these people. These three men was sent to the pen.

THE STRUGGLES people had to go through are almost unbelievable. A man lived all his life on a given farm, it was taken away from him. One after the other. After the foreclosure, they got a deficiency judgment. Not only did he lose the farm, but it was impossible for him to get out of debt.

Grain was being burned. It was cheaper than coal. Corn was being burned. A county just east of here, they burned corn in their courthouse all winter. '32, '33. You couldn't hardly buy groceries for corn. It couldn't pay the transportation. In South Dakota, the county elevator listed corn as minus three cents. Minus three cents a bushel. If you wanted to sell 'em a bushel of corn, you had to bring in three cents. They couldn't afford to handle it. Just think what happens when you can't get out from under. . . .

We had lots of trouble on the highway. People were determined to withhold produce from the market—livestock, cream, butter, eggs, what not. If they would dump the produce, they would force the market to a higher level. The farmers would man the highways, and cream cans were emptied in ditches and eggs dumped out. They burned the trestle bridge, so the trains wouldn't be able to haul grain. Conservatives don't like this kind of rebel attitude and aren't very sympathetic. But something had to be done.

I spent most of my time in Des Moines as a lobbyist for the state cooperatives. Trying to get some legislation. I wasn't out on the highway fighting this battle. Some of the farmers probably didn't think I was friendly to their cause. They were so desperate. If you weren't out there with them, you weren't a friend, you must be a foe. I didn't know from day to day whether somebody might come along and cause harm to my family. When you have bridges burned, accidents, violence, there may have been killings, I don't know.

There were some pretty conservative ones, wouldn't join this group. I didn't want to particularly, because it wasn't the answer. It took that kind of action, but what I mean is it took more than that to solve it. You had to do constructive things at the same time. But I never spoke harshly about those who were on the highway.

Some of the farmers with teams of horses, sometimes in trucks, tried to get through. He was trying to feed his family, trying to trade a few dozen eggs and a few pounds of cream for some groceries to feed his babies. He was desperate, too. One group tried to sell so they could live and the other group tried to keep you from selling so they could live.

The farmer is a pretty independent individual. He wants to be a conservative individual. He wants to be an honorable individual. He wants to pay his debts. But it was hard.

People were speculating. Now who are they gonna blame aside from themselves? It's their fault. See my point? If you gamble and make a mistake, why pick on somebody else? It's your fault, don't you see?

It's like many people on the bread lines. I certainly felt sorry for them. But many of them hadn't lived properly when they were making it. They hadn't saved anything. Many of them wouldn't have been in the shape they were in, if they had been living in a reasonable way. Way back in the '20s, people were wearing \$20 silk shirts and throwing their money around like crazy. If they had been buying Arrow \$2 shirts and putting the other eighteen in the bank, when the trouble came, they wouldn't have been in the condition they were in.

In 1929, I had a friend who speculated. He'd say, "What's good?" I'd say, "We're selling high-grade first mortgage bonds on Commonwealth Edison." "Oh, hell," he'd say, "five percent. I make ten percent on the stock market." He was buying on margin. He thought he was rich. Know what happened to him? He blew his brains out. The Government had nothing to do with that. It's people.

Most people today are living beyond their means. They don't give a damn. The Government'll take care of them. People today don't want to work. We had a nice colored woman that worked for us fifteen years. She had a grandson. We offered to pay him \$2 an hour to take the paper off our bedroom wall. Nothing to it. One coat of paper. We'd provide the bucket and sponge and the ladder. Do you think he'd do it? No. We couldn't get anybody to do it. So I did it myself. Nothing to it.

Scoop Lankford

He is seventy-five years old. He spent thirty-one years of a life term in a state penitentiary: 1919 to 1950.

THE DEPRESSION hit that prison pretty bad. We were practically not eating. We really scratched. One time they wanted us to eat some kind of fish. They called it halibut. This had black skin all around—didn't have that little white side, you know. This was baby shark they tried to feed us. It smelled so the entire building was stunk up. (Laughs.) So they all threw it on the floor and refused to eat it.

If you know what it was like for you, just multiply. The quality of food was low to begin with. We would get some kind of meat once a day. It was kind of scraps you wouldn't even keep in a butcher shop. Just tiny pieces all boiled up in a pot. It was rich enough so one man would get about a fourth of what his system needed. More people died during that Depression there than they ever did at any other time.

It wasn't starvation. They called it malnutrition. It woulda been starvation if they died quick from malnutrition. They just barely gave you enough to keep you alive. You lost weight. They made you lose weight until the doctor got after them and said they have to get at least one meal a day. A thousand men woulda died if it hadn't been for that doctor.

Did the guards ever talk to you about the Depression?

They were as bad for it as we were. A lot of them was eating in there on the sly. I've even actually given to them a piece of corn bread to take out. Nearly all of 'em were family men.

You wouldn't know there was a Depression as far as the talk was concerned. There was nothing to say. We at least had a place to eat and sleep. The prison itself was a protection from the outside. The people outside, they had to hustle. We were just down almost as low as we could get. We had to dig a hole in low to get any lower than we was. (Laughs.)

We fared lots better when the war was on. Food and more food, during the war. Yeah, the fellas talked about it. They said, "Long live the war!" That was our attitude: Long live the war. 'Cause we were eating pretty good.

Kitty McCulloch

THERE WERE many beggars, who would come to your back door, and they would say they were hungry. I wouldn't give them money because I didn't have it. But I did take them in and put them in my kitchen and give them something to eat.

This one man came in—it was right before Christmas. My husband had a very nice suit, tailored. It was a black suit with a fine white pin-stripe in it. He put it to one side. I thought he didn't like the suit. I said to this man, "Your clothes are all ragged. I think I have a nice suit for you." So I gave him this suit.

The following Sunday my husband was to go to a wake. He said, "Where's my good suit?" And I said, "Well, Daddy, you never wore it. I—well, it's gone." He said, "Where is it gone to?" I said, "I gave it to a man who had such shabby clothes. Anyway, you got three other suits and he didn't have any. So I gave it to him." He said, "You're the limit, Mother."

One elderly man that had white whiskers and all, he came to my back door. He was pretty much of a philosopher. He was just charming. A man probably in his sixties. And he did look like St. Nicholas. I'll tell you that. I gave him a good, warm meal. He said, "Bring me a pencil and paper and I'll draw you a picture." So he sketched. And he was really good. He was an artist.

(Laughing.) A man came to my door, and I could smell liquor a little. He said, "You don't suppose you could have a couple of shirts you could give me, old shirts of your husband's?" I said, "Oh, I'm so very sorry, my husband hasn't anything but old shirts, really. That's all he has right now and he wears those." He said, "Lady, if I get some extra ones, I'll come back and give them to you." I said, "Go on, mind your own business."

And another one, I smelled liquor on his breath, too. He wanted to know if he could have a few pennies. I said, "Are you hungry?" He said, "I haven't had any food. I'd like some money to buy some food." I said, "I'll make you a nice sandwich." So I made him a sandwich with mayonnaise and chicken and lettuce, a double sandwich, put it in wax paper. He gave me a dirty look and he started down the alley. I watched him when he got, oh, two or three doors down, he threw it down the street.

Virginia Durr

A TOUCH OF RUE

Wetumpka, Alabama. It is an old family house on the outskirts of Montgomery. A creek runs by. . . . She and her husband, Clifford, are of an old Alabamian lineage. During Franklin Roosevelt's Administration, he was a member of the Federal Communications Commission. She had been a pioneer in the battle to abolish the poll tax.

OH, NO, the Depression was not a romantic time. It was a time of terrible suffering. The contradictions were so obvious that it didn't take a very bright person to realize something was terribly wrong.

Have you ever seen a child with rickets? Shaking as with palsy. No proteins, no milk. And the companies pouring milk into gutters. People with nothing to wear, and they were plowing up cotton. People with nothing to eat, and they killed the pigs. If that wasn't the craziest system in the world, could you imagine anything more idiotic? This was just insane.

And people blamed themselves, not the system. They felt they had been at fault: . . . "if we hadn't bought that old radio" . . . "if we hadn't bought that old secondhand car." Among the things that horrified me were the preachers—the fundamentalists. They would tell the people they suffered because of their sins. And the people believed it. God was punishing them. Their children were starving because of their sins.

People who were independent, who thought they were masters and mistresses of their lives, were all of a sudden dependent on others. Relatives or relief. People of pride went into shock and sanitoriums. My mother was one.

Up to this time, I had been a conformist, a Southern snob. I actually thought the only people who amounted to anything were the very small group which I belonged to. The fact that my family wasn't as well off as those of the girls I went with—I was vice president of the Junior League—made me value even more the idea of being well-born. . . .

What I learned during the Depression changed all that. I saw a blinding light like Saul on the road to Damascus. (Laughs.) It was the first time I had seen the other side of the tracks. The rickets, the pellagra—it shook me up. I saw the world as it really was.

She shamed, cajoled and persuaded the dairy company into opening milk dispensaries. When they sought to back down, she convinced them that "if

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these people got a taste of milk, they might get in the habit of buying it—when they got jobs."

When the steel companies closed down in Birmingham, thousands were thrown out of work. She was acquainted with some of the executives; she argued with them: "You feed the mules who work in your mines. Why don't you feed the people? You're responsible."

The young today are just play-acting in courting poverty. It's all right to wear jeans and eat hamburgers. But it's entirely different from not having any hamburgers to eat and no jeans to wear. A great many of these kids—white kids—seem to have somebody in the background they can always go to. I admire their spirit, because they have a strong sense of social justice. But they themselves have not been deprived. They haven't experienced the terror. They have never seen a baby in the cradle crying of hunger. . . .

I think the reason for the gap between the black militants and the young white radicals is that the black kids are much more conscious of the thin edge of poverty. And how soon you can be reduced to living on relief. What you *know* and what you *feel* are very different. Terror is something you *feel*. When there is no paycheck coming in—the absolute, stark terror.

What frightens me is that these kids are like sheep being led to slaughter. They are romantic and they are young. I have a great deal more faith in movements that start from necessity—people trying to change things because of their own deprivation. We felt that in the labor surge of the Thirties. The people who worked hardest to organize were the ones in the shops and in the mills.

The Depression affected people in two different ways. The great majority reacted by thinking money is the most important thing in the world. Get yours. And get it for your children. Nothing else matters. Not having that stark terror come at you again. . . .

And there was a small number of people who felt the whole system was lousy. You have to change it. The kids come along and they want to change it, too. But they don't seem to know what to put in its place. I'm not so sure I know, either. I do think it has to be responsive to people's needs. And it has to be done by democratic means, if possible. Whether it's possible or not—the power of money is such today, I just don't know. Some of the kids call me a relic of the Thirties. Well, I am.

WORLD'S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING



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like the
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A relief center in Louisville, Kentucky. Margaret Bourke-White, Life Magazine copyright © Time, Inc.