

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
CONDUCTED WITH EDWARD  
F. STEVENS SR. ON THE  
DEPRESSION IN INDIANA.

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Living in Evansville during the so called great depression years what would you classify as the time period constituting the depression.

Well the depression actually started in the latter part of 1929 with the stockmarket crash, but really before that it began to develop up in the working class of people such as what my dad was. Dad never really had a big job in the latter part of the twenties because things started on a downhill slide. So really from my own knowledge the depression years would probably be from the early thirties to about late 1938-39.

Did your father have to move around a lot in order to find work in this period of time up to say the second World War or so.

No, no... We were Evansville residents this is where we stayed. I was born and raised here and dad during the early part of the depression, he did everything that could possibly be done. He worked in a rock quarry and he swept streets, worked in a furniture factory. When Chrysler came in, which was in 1934 or 1935, dad went to work for Chrysler and dad was number five on the seniority list out there. Dad worked for Chrysler on up till he died even at that the wages weren't high but the work was steady and that made the important thing, that was the important difference.

Was the money he was making at the time adequate enough to support the family.

Not really, because we had a large family. We had a feeling in our family that was not unique for the time, I don't think. Everybody in the family worked and all the money we made went home and all the money everybody made went into the support of the family. There was just about enough to go around we didn't starve, we ate but it wasn't high on the hog per-say, and well dad didn't make enough to support the family.

What was the character of the people of Evansville during the depression as compared to now, you have already related some general ideas as they applied to your family, did this carryover into the general population.

Yes...yes...yes, during the depression I was a kid coming up. We in our neighborhood were free and easy going people. It seems like the neighbors took care of the neighbors and this transpired all the way down the thing. There was no closed doors such as you see now. What we had our neighbors had and what our neighbors had we had. They would feed us and they would take care of us.

I can remember one time when my younger brother Bill had the measles and at that time they quarantined you. What they'd do is someone from the health department would come out. They would put a big sign on the house, that said quarantined measles or chickenpox or what ever the case may be, like these building permit signs you see today. Well you can readily understand what would happen here. We have a large family and we are quarantined in the house that means no one comes out, now we have an outdoor toilet and that was the extent of going out we could do. So now dad can't work we can't go to school, nothing can happen so how do we alleviate this? Our neighbors take dad and and put him up, two or three weeks of the quarantine and they went so far as to build a fence between the two houses, which run from one house to the other house. Shielding a particular walkway from the streets, and so dad stayed over in the neighbors house and us kids played around back in there so technically and legally dad was'nt staying at the house. Dad could go to work all the time, but you see at night time he still came over and took care of the kids, this that and the other. They did this I suppose for a good reason, I think it was strictly a lack of knowledge, because they did'nt know how these diseases would contaminate. I could'nt visualize in this day and age a residential neighborhood, today of people doing that type of thing to help somebody out.

I can remember one time there was a death in the family. There was food on the table us kids cloths were washed and ironed. All mom and dad had to worry about was the particular funeral arrangements.

I can remember mother and the lady next store and the two ladies across the alley getting together, every Thursday outside building a fire and washing cloths.

One would bring the soap and it was this old yellow lye soap, one would bring this, one would bring the fire wood, one would do this, one would do that. Us kids would gather the water for them, and there they'd wash and sew. It mattered not whose cloths they were. They'd take them down off the line all together and iron them and of course they didn't have electric irons, they probably had them at that time but we didn't, because we didn't even have electricity in our house and they would use the flat irons on the stove and iron all the cloths and separate them out. I can't see people doing this in this day and age, maybe because there's too many automatic washers out, I don't know but I think there's a difference.

What sort of neighborhood did you live in, was it run down.

No...no, our neighborhood at the time we lived in it was just a regular tenement, residential type neighborhood. All the houses were originally built for individual housing and as things started to get tough, people started to rent out portions of their homes, to make things go for them. The particular we lived in during this period of time was a big, let's see two, four, six, ten, twelve room house and it was blanked up into four apartments. There was two apartments up, two apartments down. I suppose for the time, incidentally that house was built about 1885 or so, and for the time it was built it was an exceptionally good home for somebody. Of course it didn't have modern heating, we heated by pot bellied stove and mom cooked off a coal range, we had no electricity. We had no indoor water and we didn't get indoor water until 1937 or 1938, it was after the flood and that was only cold water, going into one sink in the kitchen. (this is in the city isn't it?)

Yes this was around old Sterling Brewery and as I say we had outdoor toilet facilities. The neighborhood as a whole was just about like that with exception of the outdoor toilets. I say about fifty percent of them had indoor plumbing.

Everybody had an ashpit because everybody heated by coal and the ashpit was always located in the back of the house on an alley, and that used to be a big play place for us kids. I'd say about half of the residents in our area had electricity, probably since they were built, but was just a normal middle class neighborhood.

But of course as things started tightening up, there could'nt be money put into upkeep of those homes, and then she started a going down. The whole blasted neighborhood where I grew up, it just is'nt there anymore, its businesses, the new highway went through it. So thats just about it as far as our neighborhood goes.

Were you able at this time, to get any governmental aid, from the courtly or from the city anything to tide the family over.

Yes there was aid available. I would'nt know exactly what the classification was, there was food baskets, I don't think any money was available or so. But you know my dad the funny idea, that as long as a man had two feet and good health, he did'nt accept help from anybody, along those lines to support his family, to take care of his family. My dad worked when other people walked the streets and I can recall several things that my dad did. I know there were other people doing the same thing, frankly I seen very few of them. I can remember one thing which I've told you about before. I helped dad on this. We had us a little white cart with a barrel on it all painted white and pretty. We had a big push broom and a shovel, and it was dads job to go down Franklin Street, every morning and what dad would do or I would do is to sweep up the horse dung and put it into this barrel and then when we got the barrel full we would take and dump it into the flowerbeds. Again at this time Franklin, West Franklin had what we called flower islands, in the middle of it all they were was an oval shape concrete enbankment with two or three beds to a block. There was dirt applied to these and then they planted flowers, of course the horse dung was to keep the flowers fertilized and this went on for a year or so. I can remember another time when dad applied for a job in a furniture factory, and all they needed was a fellow to operate a band saw, to cut out table legs. Dad could'nt operate a band saw but he was just mechanically inclined enough and I guess brash enough, he says I can do that job and so he went in there and a fellow showed him how to set the pattern up, in a jig block and showed him how to cut a couple of them out. Low and behold, dad could do it good enough, that he got the job. I think that job payed about fifteen cents an hour or so, my point is, in this whole thing is that you hear people talk about

not being able to do this and not being able to do that. I'm inclined to agree with dad, as I've seen in my own adult life, that work is here if you really want it, maybe it doesn't pay what you think it should pay, but a man should stand on his own two feet. He can do it if he will.

Was he able to support them adequately.

No, us kids worked, and we did just a little bit of everything. I can recall several things I myself had done. The old L and N train station used to be one of the biggest business places in this part of the country, every train that went anywhere in here came through the L and N station. Even during the depression.

Outside that station there was a permanent shoe shine stand that had two chairs to it. The chairs looked like these folding chairs, but they were permanently attached we would go down there and of course during the daytime, we couldn't shine shoes because there was a regular fellow who shined shoes, who lived across the street from the depot and the old brown hotel there. We would go down there at night time when he got off. After he got off you know after he closed his stand, now this fellow used to drink a lot and we knew that. After he closed his stand he wouldn't be in any shape to fool with us kids and run us away, from this stand. We used to go over there at night time and shine shoes and for the depression years it wasn't unusual for us to shine shoes all night and come home with five dollars in our pocket. Which oh gosh, I wouldn't know how to equate the five bucks today, but it was a tremendous amount of money.

I can remember another thing a fellow and I did. We made us two guitars out of cigar boxes, and a piece of slat out of a plastered wall, and we strung this thing with inner tube slices, we cut from the old inner tubes on those cars. You can readily imagine what the thing sounded like when you twanged on it. We used to go in the front of, especially on a Saturday night BrushMeirs Resturant down on Pennsylvania and Fulton Avenue. We'd get down there about 9:30, 10:00 at night. The people would come out, feeling quite happy. We'd also do a little dance I don't know why, I guess because we were young they always tipped us quite generously.

Again it was'nt anything for us to make three or four bucks down there in the course of the night. We carried newspapers, we picked up trash. We would carry trash to the dump in a burlap bag over our shoulders or else we would make a skate board wagon. Yes there was just too many ways to do it. Another thing we used to do, we used to go around and pick junk metals and save it untill we had enough, and take it down to the junk yard, there was just too many ways to make money, if you really and truly had the desire to do so, and was'nt too proud in what you did as long as you could support your family. Of course all this money went home and this was'nt only me, but my two older brothers and we done alright. We never had fancy cloths or fancy foods but we ate and came right along.

Do you think this had a negative or a positive effect on your family life and on you personally.

I think it had a positive effect up to a point, it did one thing it was a time of trial and it certainly brought our family, well of course our family was never really far apart but it really solidified the feelings in our family. It was a universal feeling where we helped each other and we did it without knowing we were helping each other this was just the way to do. This was my dad this was my brother and there was never any such thing as well I did this now its your turn to do this, none of this type thing. Now we had the usual arguments and fights don't miscontrue what I'm saying, but I think that from a negative view that it set a tone of life that does have some effect on the adult years of the individual today and just really how to define that would be hard. I can see right now, I go out and buy a cup of coffee and I'll think twice before I buy that cup of coffee because I don't want to spend the twenty cents, not that I'm a miser, I don't mean that at all, but these kind of thoughts, they stick with you all your life. Right today it bothers me when my children get up from the table and leave a half a plate of food. I try to surpress those feelings and I think I do fairly well. I suppose each individual would have their own feelings toward how it effected them, but you know theres one thing that you have to

think about, you see I was young during the depression and we did not know we were poor, I'm talking about the young ones, because basically everyone was in the same fix we were. We knew you had to work to live, it was just that simple. It was a feeling at the time we were experianing it that we did'nt know until later years, we only knew it because someone told us.

Times being as hard as they were, was there any problem with crime and general dishonesty, as say there is today.

Maybe yes maybe no, we had our trials and tribulations, but quite frankly the group in our area that felt they had to rob, cheat, lie or steal to get what they wanted, we had nothing to do with them and we effectively controlled our own. Now there was probaly a high crime rate in these times, I can't comment fully and intelligently on that. I can speak of the general area which we lived, but you know we never locked a door and I never locked a door in my life till we got married. It was a strange feeling for me to have the wife lock the door, I could'nt quite understand that. Now in this day and age I would'nt dream of going to bed unless we had a door locked and bolted. No not when I was a young one, now what we would do is when we had a thief in the neighborhood, we had someone who took stuff that did'nt belong to him. He was hurting our very menas of existence and we took care of it one way or the other. I'm not saying to you that we had a vigilante committee, they good enough to leave us alone, thats just the way it was. Any outsiders that came into our area were fair game and really we never bothered with them too much one way or the other, because I suppose we were too busy with our own. That probaly does'nt sound too good coming out but thats the way life was.

In your opinion did the New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt improve the plight of the individual, did it help end the depression.

Well I don't know whether this did help end the depression or not. But you know when Roosevelt came in, Roosevelt did one thing for this country, I suppose you'll get an argument out of this depending upon who you are talking to. He instilled confidence, Roosevelt was a leader good bad, right or wrong, he

was a leader. He was man enough to stand up and battle for the things he believed in and he did start this country back on a positive road. He did this through the N.R.A., W.P.A., so many self help programs that its just not funny. The strange thing was, after he had ramroded a lot of this stuff through and the Surpreme Court got on it, they found most of it unconstitutional. Now does this make him a good or a bad president? I think in an overall picture it makes him a good one, he started a moving. The negative aspect of that and incidentally another thing Roosevelt did or he was instrumental in, was bringing in Social Security. It does give you retirement for your old age, which was not in affect at that time. One thing this has done and I think we can see the big after effect of this right now. It took away the mans desire to work and accomplish on his own, because right now we are in such a welfare thing every time somebody turns around, he says well the government has to give me this, the government has to do this. I know this is'nt true, a hundred percent, all the way across the board. I myself experiance it, I get out and I talk to people. I'm talking about leaders of our local industry that feel the government has to subsidize, they have to implement, they have to do this and it always alarms me when I hear that sought of thing. Why don't you do it? Well you get a pat answer, we can't because of this or because of that.

I don't know if what they are telling me is the straight fact, I don't know that much about it. The point is that they are beginning to depend on government. Roosevelt is the man that started that, with all of his depression programs and that is the negative aspect of it, probaly we will never get out of that. Once man becomes dependent then he forgets how to fin for himself. So I don't know if that answers your question or not but thats just about the way it is.

Did it improve life for your family, did it have a really marked effect over what it had been during the height of the Great Depression.

Well it improved life for our family, in one respect. It gave my mother and dad something to talk about, because prior to Roosevelt coming in, everything was discussed in a negative vein. After Roosevelt came in my dad thought Roosevelt was a god. He would vote up to the day he died for a Democate and I don't

care if it was a snake running on the Democratic ticket my dad would vote for it from that time on, there was not a good Republican to dad. It changed us in that respect, it gave us a good positive aspect, now of course, I have to look at it from the eyes of a young one.

I can't give you all the ends and outs of the political aspects of the times because frankly I could've cared less, whether it was Roosevelt or Hoover. I remember one time, my dad boxing my ears because I thought Hoover was a pretty good man. I got reading some of the stuff and some of the things he stood for and the way he made his own fortune, being a naive individual it put goose pimples on me. Here was a man who had come up stood on his own two feet and really made a go of it. That was exactly what we were doing and why dad took the other attitude I don't know, who knows how another person's mind works. Yes it helped us up because not only us our family, but everybody. The reason for this is that he started putting out public works and jobs were there, if you really wanted them. If you didn't mind going out and busting up concrete, laying concrete, laying road beds and so on. The jobs were there.

It didn't, then take away this idea of self reliance.

No, not when it first started out, but you see it didn't stop there. As I say around 1935, 1936 when Social Security started coming in, then you started getting this program and that program. Then you started subsidizing this and that. No it wasn't something that happened bang overnight but it all was a direct or indirect relationship to what you might classify as the depression years.

The reason for this is they were trying to build, into our nation and into the economy a means of checks and balances. So that a situation like that couldn't develop again. If it did, if one section of our economic life would go down, the checks and balances would be such, that the others would be subsidized to such a point that it would even itself out. This is what happened, and so yes with this thought, it did start man along the lines of, that he doesn't have to fin for himself, because the government owes him a living. It's been a slow thing, but it was the direct result, of the so-called depression years, and it was the direct result of President Roosevelt's New Deal and so forth.

Theres just no other way you can look at it because if we would have still continued with the ideas and thoughts of President Hoover. President Hoovers ideas were, okay its here a man with industry can make it. Now he might not go out here and become the president of a company, he might have to sweep the streets, he might not be able to live in a plush mansion. He might have to live in a shack, my point is he did'nt take away the ingrained drive of the American people to stand on their own two feet and progress up.