

Interview with Charles Specht  
Interviewer: Theodore Specht  
n.d.

**Q:** This is Ted Specht and I'm interviewing Charles W. Specht at the residence of 2017 South Boeke Road, in Evansville Indiana and the topic of discussion is the depression. Charles is presently retired after working for Blue Cross Blue Shield as a District Representative and has lived during the years of the depression. Well Dad, where did you live during the years of the depression?

**A:** I lived in New York City.

**Q:** When did you first move to New York City? Was that before the depression?

**A:** Well it was slightly before in 1929 and the early part of 1929.

**Q:** What made you move to New York City?

**A:** At that time, I was fairly young and looking for adventure, to come to the largest city in the United States appealed to me. And although I found the city and environment to be very fascinating, a tremendous city, yet jobs at that time were getting very scarce. The first job that I and my buddy got was with the telephone company distributing telephone books, which took a lot of muscles and little brain. But that was just to get a start in the interim we located and from there on shortly after that I got a better job. Even though many of the natives told me during that time that, they were absolutely unable to get a job at all. So sometimes particularly in New York an outsider can come in and be more successful than the natives, taking our great Indiana Wendell Willkie as an example who became the president of the Stock Exchange, a job that even Roosevelt envied and wanted and couldn't get. But of course, I didn't go into those high circles but did pretty well. So, there's better job was working for Standard Brands or General Foods Inc. as the name is. I was selling Maxwell House Coffee, and Post Products, and Certo and etc. I had a little panel truck and travelled in the New York area through most of the Manhattan and a little part of the Bronx. Our headquarters was on Rector Street downtown, which is near the Greenwich Village and not too far from the financial center or Wall Street or the Street as they call it in New York. So, I got a little insight in that short time before the crash as they called it the Great Crash of the enormous financial structures. And Manhattan itself was boasting of the greatest financial facilities of the world. But this soon came to an end with this depression and from what was known of a prosperous city, shortly you found many, many people unemployed and men that you could see by their clothes that they were men of held good positions were now out on the street selling apples trying to make some incomes. And the poorer element naturally had nothing other than to move into the area right along the Hudson River or North River as they call it in New York. And they called this place Hooverville and it was made of tin and boards. How these people lived in there, I don't know but they did.

**Q:** Did you personally walk through it and observe the conditions? Tell us something about what it was like.

**A:** Well as I explained, it made up of any cardboard. Or tin or whatever they could get for a cover to keep from getting rain or snow from hitting them. Food, I think the best way they could get food was to filch it wherever they could. Lot of that going on and they got away with it. Because you just couldn't let them starve. But this was much like always in our American Politics blamed on President Hoover who was of course just the unfortunate president during this era. Who I think most of us know his background; he was a farm boy from Iowa, a very honest and brilliant man. He made his own fortune he

was very wealthy and the money he had obtained he refused to accept his salary as a President because he said he was sufficiently supplied with funds and let those who needed it have it. But in spite of this nobleness and trend was against him and as soon as next election came of course, FDR Roosevelt came in and the Democrats again took over as they usually do when they have through various propaganda convinced the public, that the Republicans can't do the job that the Democrats can. Unfortunately this is based on taking full advantage of an opportunity such as this one presented itself where circumstances made it so that no one could succeed other than what finally did happen as we all know the second world war, then of course everyone went back to work, went back to making ammunition and always there's great wealth when we go into a war by many people. Armaments and even where never before woman worked now they flocked to these jobs and there's double earnings, so prosperity always looks very good right during a war and unfortunately each time there's a war the Democrats are in office, so the Republicans come in to try to heal the wounds it seems, and the end of it is that any depression of any sort is built up and over blown to the point where the people are finally convinced that it must probably be the fault of the man in the office at the time.

**Q:** Having lived in New York City, that must have been pretty exciting as far as nightlife and everything goes. And being pretty young how did, was show biz pretty popular and everything back then. I guess the movies were pretty good. What was the nightlife and stuff like in New York City?

**A:** Well that was one of my favorite subjects of course, it would be of yours too if you were living there. The movies in those days were beautiful places all over New York and the outlining areas and to my surprise, you could light up a cigar, or pipe, cigarette anytime you choose. Everyone smoked in the theatre. You would think that there with the fire hazard and the eight million people living together that they wouldn't allow it, but they do, they did. The theatres, the stage shows, were, all from 42nd street to 59th and from 8th avenue over to almost to 5th avenue. All through there were the theatres, the stage shows, the Rialto, Paramount, Zig Fields Follies, and nightclubs, Leon's and Eddies and the Stork Club, International. Many name number like the Harvard Club, and the Racquet and Tennis. Some very exclusive clubs all through there. And one of the jobs I had during there was made it possible for me to see and visit many of these places.

**Q:** I heard in those days that Harlem was quite the thing as far as entertainment and stuff.

**A:** That is true. They had the Cotton Club and two three other clubs in deep Harlem on Lexington Avenue and places where white people would go and they had Cap Calloway and a lot of the old timers, that are old timers now, in their prime.

**Q:** Were the prices lowered after the depression hit? As far as, you know entertainment prices and stuff like that? What about food prices, gasoline, and everything like that? Did they lower any or did they go up or what during the depression?

**A:** I didn't notice particularly that the prices went up. I suppose they did a little. But there was scarcity and a person always was happy to get what he could get. And you didn't even think of the price I suppose which is human nature. But Harlem was a place in those days too where already they started the race challenge and all the department stores and things, they had in the Harlem area were more or less owned by the Jewish people and the taverns and things like that were owned by Italians. So I

remember when they picketed that area and they insisted that black people be hired at some of these places which they did and of course in their anxiety to get back some of the things that they felt they had lost, these black people threw things out of the back windows of these department stores, clothing and all sorts of valuables and their buddies down in the alley picked them up in push carts and away they went. There's not much they could do about stopping this because the story was, they were in there and you don't do business unless you do business with them and the law didn't have much to say in that area at all. Politicians were reluctant because they did get quite a few votes in the area too, as they wanted them.

**Q:** Did the depression affect the sporting events, you know, as far as the number of baseball games or football games or whatever were played. You know, did they limit them because of the depression and not as many people had jobs and could afford to go to them.

**A:** No, that wasn't too apparent, I know in those days they had the Polo Grounds for the New York Giants, Ebbets Field for the New York or Brooklyn Dodgers Which is over in Brooklyn. And of course, the Yankees were always in Yankee Stadium, which was in the Bronx. And these three places were always pretty well filled because of course prices were less than, than they are now. But the standard of living being the same I guess came out to be about the same in value. But subways, that is one thing old Jimmy Walker who was the mayor for years and a very popular man even though he was caught with some shady things which most politicians run into eventually. But he was honest about it. They asked him once about him having two, three limousines and he said it was necessary for my position. I wouldn't look good as being the mayor of the largest city in the United States going around in a Ford or Chevy. And that's his answer and they were good and honest. To get back to one of the things that he did and that was he kept the subway fare to 5¢ when all over the United States any place where they did have subways and I think there was only one in Chicago, much higher. And he kept the largest subway system in the world to 5¢ as long as he was in office, which was of course a great help for the poor and for everybody.

**Q:** Thank you very much for the interview, Dad.

**A:** Your welcome and I hope it helps.