

Interview with Mary Althaus
Interview with Steve Schimmelman
n.d.

This is Steve Schimmelman speaking with Mrs. Mary Althaus on the subject of the Depression. The Depression was a period in time, starting in 1929 and ending in the middle to late 1930's. It was a time when the stock market crashed. People lost their life savings and their homes and their jobs. I am going to try to make your understanding of the effects that the Depression had on the people living in during those years.

Q: Mrs. Althaus, how old were you when the stock market closed in October of 1929?

A: I was twenty-two years old.

Q: What were some of the chain of events that led up to the crash of the market and the general weakening of the economy that you can remember?

A: I do not remember the events that took place at that time because I was not too interested in politics when I was twenty-two. I was in training as a nurse at St. Mary's Hospital. Well, I just wasn't too interested.

Q: Where were you living at the time that the stock market crashed and where were you employed?

A: I was living at that particular time, at St. Mary's Hospital school of Nursing. My home was at 2805 W. Franklin Street.

Q: What effect did the Depression have on your job? Did you have a pay cut?.

A: I didn't graduate until 1929 and then I did private duty nursing. And, of course, I had no pay cut at that particular time.

Q: What did you do after you graduated from the School of Nursing?

A: After I graduated from the School of Nursing, I did private duty six months or seven. And then I took a post graduate course from Cook County Hospital in Chicago. St. Mary's at that time was a very small hospital of 100 beds and of course Cook County was a hospital of about 3000 beds. It was quite an experience for me. And during that particular time, I was paid a minimum of thirty dollars a month. We didn't get paid until we completed the six months of post graduate work. After I left Cook County, I came to St. Mary's and became a teacher of nursing. I received at that time, which was during the Depression, a minimum salary of twenty-five dollars a week which was very low.

Q: What effect did the Depression have on the enrollment of people aspiring to be nurses and what was the approximate cost of this school before the start of the Depression and after it had started?

A: There was no cost to the nurses that enrolled in the School of Nursing at that time. They were paid every remuneration for the first year, \$8.00 a month; the second year of training was \$10.00 a month; and the third year was \$12.00 a month because the nurses worked on the floor besides their studies. The condition of the school, this was not a big school, none of hospitals in the city of Evansville had large nursing classes at that time. My class at that time had 8 graduates. I think that they had about 10 or 12 first year students. The financial conditions of the hospital didn't seem to have difficulties with the doctors or other employees because they were not paid very much at that time. Even graduate nurses were not paid very much, not like they are now. Of course, there were only the people that came into

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the hospital who were mostly surgical patients. They did not have a lot of medical, we did have some children and we also had a department of obstetrics. We had to go to other hospitals, larger hospitals, for training in mental diseases and in pediatrics. There was no shortage of patients at that time. The food at the hospital was, as in any institution or any school, just the same as it was before.

Q: Outside of work at the hospital, what was lifelike during the Depression?

A: Life during the Depression, that is when Roosevelt came into power, he called a moratorium of the banks. They also started to establish welfare programs which were administered by the state such as the W.P.A. and the CCC Camps. The W.P.A., these men were employed to work on the roads in the state and the county. They cleaned ditches, graded roads, graveled them, and things of that type. The CCC Camps were for young people and they worked mostly in the forest and did things of that type.

Q: Where were your mother and father living during the time of the Depression? Did you have brothers and sisters? What were their ages? What was your father's occupation? What affect did the Depression have on your parents and your family? Did your father have a car at this time?

A: My father and mother were living at 2805 W. Franklin, which at that time was not 2805 W. Franklin. It was 1765 after they renumbered the streets. I had one brother who was 29 years old. He was born in 1900. My father was 54 and my mother was 53. My father was interested in furniture manufacturing. He had control of the office. During this time the furniture manufacturing business was extremely hard hit and most, a lot of them, were out of business, which my father's company did. They manufactured dining room suites. The furniture company my father worked for was called P.H. Rettinger Manufacturing Company. They manufactured dining room suites and tables. During the Depression they had to go out of business. My father stayed at the company because he had control of the office and they had a lot of stock on hand, of course, and they still had a few orders. He stayed there to get them out and if it was necessary to have someone to help him he would have someone come in to help him crate the furniture and send it. They also had a night watchman. Those were the only two people employed at that particular time until he finally closed his doors.

Q: At that time when the Depression started hitting your father's furniture company the hardest, how many people were employed there and what happened to them after they lost their jobs?

A: There were about from 50-60 people employed at the place where my father was, and it was a small manufacturing company. These people were put out of work and many of them went on W.P.A which was the beginning of the welfare program.

Q: Where was your brother, John, working at during the Depression?

A: My brother, John, was employed at what they called the Seminole Glass Company. They manufactured mirrors and things of that type. He did not lose his job at that particular time but, of course, his salary was greatly reduced.

Q: Did your father own his own home, and did you have to sell it or give up any personal belongings to make by during these years? Did you always have enough food and everything like that?

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A: My father owned his own home. He did not lose it at that time because it was paid for. My father, of course, when the company went out of business, got a very small salary. We always had enough food to eat. Everybody that could grew their own garden. We did not have to do without anything in my own personal home. My brother, of course, his salary was greatly reduced. He was married at that time. They had a very difficult time getting along. My brother, John, as I said, had a very difficult time. They had two small children and it was very difficult for them to get along. My father and mother helped them whenever they could. My sister-in-law was a very excellent manager which was very good because she could make something out of nothing. My sister-in-law, as I said, was a very good manager. She made her own soap. She had been raised in the country. She saved all of the frying and got lard from the country. She made her own soap. She made all the children's clothes. She made her own clothes and did many things of that type, and, as I said, she was an excellent manager.

Q: We all know during these years quite a few banks collapsed because they did not have the Federal Reserve System at that time. How did that affect your family? Did your father lose any money? Or did you lose any money? Were there any banks that paid the full amount of money?

A: My father and I both lost all our money at that particular time. My father had money in two banks and the one bank is on the West side of Evansville. It is called the Midwest Federal now, but then it was called the Westside Bank. He lost everything in that bank that he had. They only paid 10 cents on the dollar. Now he also had an account at the People's Savings Bank which was on Main Street and he received 100% of the money he had in that bank. May I tell you a story that, of course, I was later married that my husband told me that it happened at that particular time about his father the day that the banks were going to close. He went to the bank the day before and he wanted to get some money out of the bank and the teller, of course, he told her how much he wanted and she said, "Don't you want more than that, Mr. Althaus?" And he said, "That is all I want. I don't need any more." And she asked him three or four more times if he was sure that was all the money that he wanted at that time and, of course, the tellers knew that the banks were going to close its doors the next day. And she could not come right out and tell him the actual truth, but she was trying to help him to take more money out of the bank because she knew that it was going to close but he didn't take the hint. He didn't think about it and he only took what he needed and therefore he lost some of his money, too. As I said, most of the banks in Evansville, in fact only the People's Savings Bank in Evansville paid 100% back to its savers. All the others paid 10 cents on the dollar. As I now live in Mt. Vernon I would like to tell you none of the Mt. Vernon banks closed and all of the money is there now, all of the money was just as good as it ever was and also the teachers in the Mt. Vernon schools had to take a cut in salary but were always given their checks whereas the teachers in Evansville's schools were given vouchers that they could not cash but could use for their absolute needs at the different stores and, of course, at that time also many of the manufacturing companies in Evansville had to go out of business because there was just no money and, of course, there was just nothing to go on and, of course, when Roosevelt came into power they gave him really dictatorial powers. He dictated really the beginning of, as I call it, the initial government because everything had initials now: W.P.A., CCC and the NRA, which covers the whole thing and it goes on from there. Everything now has initials instead of its right name.

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Q: What were some of your personal experiences during these years? What was the social life during these years was there any effect on the social life of the people? Did it have any effect on the people?

A: During those years the people made their own entertainment. They did not depend on going to movies, of course, some of the movies closed down. Some of them did not raise their prices. Food prices were not too cheap but were more or less stable because people did not have money to pay. And I say most of them made their own gardens and raised their own vegetables and canned them. And, of course, people walked a lot in those days when they want somewhere. They didn't depend on a car. The transportation at that particular time in Evansville, was, we had streetcars at that time and then, of course, the fares were very cheap and, of course, the train system, we had many trains coming into Evansville at that time and the main depot was at 8th and Main and the trains, their fares were not too high of course most people didn't have any money to travel and, as I say, most people made their own entertainment. They visited one another's home and had their small little parties, everybody brought things to help make the party a success.

Q: While you were going to school at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, what was the city of Chicago like during the years of the gangsters like Capone and Dillinger and the general condition of Chicago?

A: The city of Chicago was very hard hit because there were many poor people and, of course, Cook County Hospital was a county hospital you did not have to pay anything to become a patient in Cook County Hospital. Those were all county and welfare patients. The conditions there, I'll have to tell you this about Al Capone. We had many nurses and doctors from all around the world there and if we lived in Cook County Hospital which was out toward Cicero which was Capone's main headquarters and they did not have sufficient space in the nursing home for the nurses so Capone borrowed to the city of Chicago or he loaned to the city of Chicago one of his hotels he owned on Lake Street for the nurses to live in. He also set up soup kitchens in Chicago for the poor people and I think that this is one thing that many people do not know about Al Capone that he did all those things. I do know he furnished us a three-story hotel to house the overflow of nurses because a nursing home at that time was not large enough to accommodate all of them and, of course, Cook County Hospital as I said, we had nurses and doctors from all over the world and many of the doctors from the University of Chicago, the University of Northwestern, and all of the schools did their intern work at Cook County Hospital. The interns at Cook County were paid a minimum salary of \$30.00 a month and of course, they were given their room and board and they lived around in buildings close to the hospital. They work shift work like the nurses, they had the 8-hour shift and there was plenty of interns and externs and residents and the main doctors of the hospital at that particular time. The hospital at this time was county owned and I think it still is and it ran just on credit from the bank or the Government and we always had plenty to eat and the hospital always had plenty of facilities for taking care of all the people who wanted to come to the hospital or who needed to and, of course, they had every kind of department that you can imagine because it was connected with all those medical schools for their internship.

Q: As we have said the Depression continued on to the 30's, what were some of the major things Roosevelt did to help the people get by? And when did the country seem to have its feet back on the ground? But what was the really main thing that helped pull the country out of this Depression?

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A: The Depression continued on into the 30's and Roosevelt, of course, established the NRA and, of course, there were many different branches of that which helped the people. A lot of these things as I said were administered by the state, the states themselves, such as the W.P.A. I knew the man that was the head of the W.P.A., John K. Jennings and then as I said the CCC Camp there was also the Salvation Army, of course, helped the people very much because they had soup kitchens. The country did not really get back on its feet until the start of WW II. I remember when my husband first started to work he was making a salary as work progressed his salary was constantly increased and at that time the government established the Federal Reserve System which, of course, insured the savings of the people who had their money in the banks, and had control over some of the speculation. Of course, in the beginning when the stock market crashed it was caused by extensive speculation by people who did not have the money to back it up and of course that is the reason for the stock market crash. The Depression of the 30's did not affect me too greatly because, as I say, I was mostly in school and I did not feel really the severeness of it. And as I say, my father owning his own home helped a lot and, of course, as I said, he lost everything he had in the bank and I had a small savings account which I had started and, of course, I lost it, too. But I am not a good example of the Depression area. Sorry I said area, I really meant era. We always had plenty to eat and we had clothes and we were always clothed, and we always had a warm home and of course many did not. I could tell you about some of the homes I visited in Chicago, of course, I did social service there and went into many of these homes where people lived in one room, no heat, many of them stayed in bed all day. They would use newspapers on their windows to keep the light out. They lived very poorly and, of course, had a very difficult time. Also, people in Evansville, a lot of them, had a very difficult time. Also, in Evansville, at that particular time, my aunt who was public health nurse, and, of course, she visited many homes. And there was an area called Box Town where the houses were mainly made out of boxes and who had a very difficult time. They did not have enough food, clothing but they got medical aid from the different organizations in Evansville at that time and the Evansville Public Health Nursing Association, always helped them when they could. They always had free clinics and free medical aid when they needed it. The reason many people lost their homes and their money was because they lived above their means, of course that is a human failing, people still do it at this particular time.

Q: In conclusion, the Depression had a great effect on most people's lifestyles, and also the Depression has helped us in later years because the laws and policies that were enacted such as the Federal Reserve System. Incidentally, Mrs. Althaus is my great aunt and I would like to thank her very much for her information.