

Q: How did the Depression affect you and the members of your family?

A: Well, there were six children and one grandparent living with us in a small town in Western Kentucky. My father, prior to the Depression, had owned a small newspaper and did job printing for the surrounding area; in fact, was quite prosperous and did very well. But, like a good number of people during that period in order to have the equipment that he needed in order to run a shop and a newspaper, he had overextended himself, gone into debt in order to get the equipment. Of course, with the crash of 1929, he quickly lost everything that he owned, including his home. And when I say he had been prosperous, he used to like to tell us how he was the first man in that small town, population of about 3,000, to own two automobiles. But he lost everything that he had...the home, the cars, the business, and of course, went through a period of where he had to search for something to do outside of what he was trained to do and that was a printer and a writer of some, I suppose, limited talent...enough at least to put out a fairly decent small town paper. He then had to, as many others did during that period, wait for the federal government to come into the community and start the WPA programs before there was anything at all for him to do; and he accepted work totally out of his area of training and that was just working on a road. There were no art projects such as existed in the larger cities and no highly cultural kinds of projects. It was, for the most part, just labor in repairing roads within the county. I can recall that we went from a period of having practically anything that we wanted to a period of having absolutely nothing. I can recall the discussions that my mother, father, and grandmother had when the time came for some people who were extremely proud and had typical small town, Southern attitudes toward any kind of welfare, then were totally opposed to that, but there was that time when they had to depend on the federal government and the so-called commodities that they would provide them with. I can recall my father being too proud to go and accept these commodities, and in fact, that became the task of the oldest son, that was me, to go and claim these things and bring them home. I can recall, too, during this period that about the only way any of us had, at least the kids that I used to spend quite a lot of time with, the only way any of us had to attend the movies, or to have a soft drink, or to have a glass of milk (all of these things were considered luxuries) we had to go out and find scrap iron or scrap copper, or metals of various kinds. There was always a ready market for that. I think, if I recall, iron was about a penny a pound and if you were fortunate enough to find some copper or aluminum, they would pay you about a nickel a pound for these things. I can recall the prices, and of course, this is a well-known fact, people like to talk about how prices have changed during the period, but my goodness, I can recall that eggs, they would practically give them away, milk was ten or twelve cents a gallon, bread a nickel a loaf, steak twenty-five cents a pound, and that was high. Of course, there were very few people around who could afford it, any part of it.

Q: What are your most vivid memories of the Depression?

A: Well, of course I was very young, but my most vivid memories are the ones I've already alluded to...having to watch my family adjust their lifestyle completely, having to not have adequate medical care, having no dental care unless it was an absolute emergency of some kind. I can recall a member of my family had a serious dental problem; and in fact, had the dentist come to the home and extract about sixteen teeth within the home, if you can imagine that, with very, very limited care. Then, of course, having to go claim the food that the federal government was giving to a good number of people during that period. Those are my most vivid memories.

Q: Did you and your parents move to Evansville to find work, and if so, what kind of work did they find after they got here?

A: Well, I can recall that my father never was able to get back to the business that he was trained to do. He was never able to get back into printing or into the newspaper business in Western Kentucky. That period from 1929 to 1939 of course was very slow for everyone in that area from the standpoint of economics. We moved to three small towns within Western Kentucky with no significant change in lifestyle at all. In fact, those three moves were so that we could be closer to some of the relatives of either my mother or my father, so that families had a tendency to pull pretty close together during this period so that they could assist each other in different kinds of ways and as far as possible. Certainly, economically during that ten-year period from 1929 to 1939 to 1940, just prior to the time when World War II started, there wasn't any great change in our economic situation. As far as moving to Evansville... When the war did begin, of course, both my parents then came to Evansville and accepted employment in war industry, and this had an immediate effect on all of us. Of course, we, as children, stayed in Kentucky and my parents commuted for the first year, which made it difficult on all of us, travelling back and forth each day for a distance of some 130 miles round trip, and then working the night shift too. So, the children, all of us, had to more or less shift for ourselves during that one year. Then we did come into Evansville, and of course, that had an immediate effect on all of us. We quickly (my brother and sisters and I) quickly adjusted to a different way of living up here, totally different school system where I found just how far behind we were, after having been trained in a rural area with very, very limited offerings, and to come to Evansville and find things that I had never dreamed possible to take in school. This really fascinated me, made a big impression on me, and then I believe teachers were somewhat different up here too. I have some memories of teachers; one that really stands out in my mind is a third grade teacher (in Kentucky) that I had who from time to time in the class would call on members of the class (I suppose she was concerned about nutrition), but I can recall she used to ask, "what did you have for breakfast this morning?" Each child in the class had to stand and say what they had. Well, of course, I am sure a good number of us were pretty alert to the fact that we had the kind of breakfast that it stated in the books you ought to have. I can recall having oatmeal with no milk, and perhaps very little sugar. When the teacher would ask what we had, I can recall doing what a good many others did, I always had the bacon, the eggs, and the juice, the cereal, the toast, all the things of course which [simple] didn't exist for us. Evansville certainly made a great difference. After the war, they of course, my father was able to finally return to his trade, that of printing, and spent the rest of his life in the printing business here in the city. Yes, I guess you could say that our whole lifestyle changed after we came to Evansville. Opportunities were available to all of us.

Q: Do you feel that many of your values are a direct result of your experiences during the Depression?

A: Certainly; I am convinced. If we wanted to see a movie when I was a boy, if we wanted candy when I was a boy, if you wanted to do anything that required any money at all, you had to have the initiative to earn that money. I worked; I delivered newspapers, gathered scrap iron, worked as a "soda jerk" worked as a stock boy in a grocery store. I can't ever recall, in fact, from the third grade on when I didn't work. I'm a firm believer in the work ethic. I believe everyone should have the experience, and being involved as an educator today, I see what I believe to be the result of too many youngsters who have too much time, too much in the way of material things. This, of course, helps to, I believe, to be

Interview with Patrick Henry

Interviewer: Mark Henry

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dependent for perhaps too long. I certainly wouldn't wish on anyone that they have an experience such as a depression in order to create independence in them, but as I look back on what I consider to be some pretty unhappy experiences, still I feel that I was able to grow and was able to become highly competitive; I suppose as a result of having nothing and wanting something.