

This is an interview of Earl McNeely conducted by his son, David McNeely, on April 20, 1975, concerning Mr. McNeely's experiences during the depression.

Son: When did you first notice that there was a depression from your own personal point of view?

Father: Well, really I thought it started back in the middle twenties because jobs was very hard to find and farm jobs at that time was about....prior to that time was about the only kind you could find work and you worked for a dollar a day. Some places you got your board....worked long hours, of course, on the farm.

Son: Were you working on the farm then?

Father: Yeah, I'd work six days, five days and a half, sometimes and a dollar a day and my board. Sometimes I'd work for a dollar a day and board myself. And then in order to raise my living standard I came to town and I hunted work from the fall of '25 until February the 7th, 1926, when I got a job at Faultless Caster working in the assembly <sup>part</sup> apartment for something like 35¢ an hour, which was at that time pretty good wages for me, and when they raised us they usually raised us about two and a half cents an hour ever six months. I worked there about a year and then I approached a master mechanic of the tool room....machine shop some people call it....for apprenticeship as a tool and die maker which started me in at 25¢ an hour and they would give me a raise once ever six months of 5¢ and that was supposed to

run for three years.

Son: So you took a wage cut to get an apprenticeship program?

Father: Right. I was up to 45¢ and I took a wage cut of 20¢ an hour. And I could just barely live on that because I was paying \$6 a week for my board and I didn't have much left for transportation because I came to Evansville from Warrick County where my folks lived. And just about at the end of my apprenticeship, why, the depression struck real hard and there was a lot of layoffs, and....

Son: You mean all over this area? Southern Indiana?

Father: Yes, well, all over the country. And I was cut back 15% before I got my last 5¢ raise. And then up in the....that must have been up in the winter of that year....

Son: It doesn't make a whole lot of difference when it was. Just go ahead.

Father: ....about '30 and I was layed off in the Spring and went back to work in September but that summer I helped a man hang paper....a neighbor hang paper and we got a dollar for hanging the ceiling in a medium size or large room and two and a half or three dollars to hang the walls and we had to move the furniture or work over it. Then I went back to work and was layed....went back for 41¢ an hour as a journeyman tool and die maker. And I worked until October until the men started to organize the shop and they was ten of us including me that was layed off for union activity although we didn't sign anyone up on company time.

Son: Was the organizing due to any wage cuts or problems, labor problems in the plant?

Father: Yes. They got real pushy and very strict and we were cut so low and then about a month after I'd went to work in the [30?] Fall of '33 they layed us off....fired ten of us....and then I borrowed some money and took my wife and one child and went to Peoria, Illinois to my cousin's place. He thought he could help me get on at the factory up there. Should I name it?

Son: It doesn't make any difference. Might as well.

Father: Caterpillar Tractor where he worked, and with my experience they seemed anxious to hire me and told me to come back the next day to fit safety glasses and shoes and I'd be able to go to work immediately. But the next day when I went back they had evidently checked back and got my work record and found out I was on strike and been released on account of this strike, or on account of union activity and they didn't tell me so but they told me that they had found a man in the plant that they could use on that job and they wouldn't need me. After that I went from factory door to factory door and....

Son: Up in Peoria?

Father: Peoria, Illinois

Son: Were there a lot of others....

Father: ...and every time I went they would, like having the picture on my wall, when I walked in they would know me and they told me they couldn't use me. And I even went to surrounding cities and it was the same story.

Son: Were there a lot of other people looking for work in the employment offices when you went in?

Father: Right

Son: Were any of them skilled workers or did you get to talk to any, to know any?

Father: Yes, just a few here and there would be skilled workers. A small percentage would be skilled workers.

Son: Were the skilled workers having any better luck finding employment?

Father: Right, they were. And after about four or five weeks of that I decided that I wouldn't get any work there so I came back home and they was a part time job waiting for me in the city at Holsclaw Brothers. They would call me anytime of day or night whenever they needed me. Sometimes we'd work a couple of hours or three hours. They might call me on Saturday night, Sunday morning, Sunday night, anytime. And sometimes we'd work for 24 hours on the straight.

Son: Did you get the same rate of pay as you had...

Father: They gave me 55¢ an hour and I was friendly with a fellow there that was a journeyman tool and die maker and about all we talked about was our favorite hobbies and sports and things and he was building a boat. He was a very efficient man and they got suspicious of us talking so much so after a few weeks they fired both of us. They didn't tell us what it was about, they just handed us a check and told us to get our tool boxes and get out. We took our tool boxes and set 'em down on a curb. We were so shocked we didn't know what was wrong. They didn't tell us and there we parted. Then I had my application in at Sunbeam Electric, which is Whirlpool now, here in 1975....they became Whirlpool perhaps

ten years ago....and they called me on February the 8th, 1934.

However, in the meantime I had picked up other extra work.

Altogether I was out of work about eight months from the factory but I picked up extra work such as spading flower gardens, cleaning house for people. I worked in a grocery where I cleaned shelves and rearranged and built shelves, cut up the wooden boxes and bundled them for kindling to sell for the storekeeper. He would send me out on errands like installing stove pipe for people that were cutting back and moving to smaller quarters where there wasn't any heat and they had to use stoves. Even went to the farm for this farmer in the summer and pick apples and hauled apples in for him to sell.

Son: During this time you were out of work did your family have to change their style of living any, eating habits change, or anything like that?

Father: Well, very little. Because I was working for this groceryman and he furnished me with the necessary food that I needed and while I worked for him why he deducted that from my grocery bill and when I got this job at Sunbeam Electric of February 8, 1934, I owed him something like \$12 to \$15. He wanted to mark it off the bill. He was a very, very congenial and a good man. And I told him "no", I said I would pay that when I got a pay day. In the meantime I had, while all this was going on, I had moved from a house where I had been paying rent from \$20 and got it down to about \$16, and then I moved back into a house that was where I could have rent for \$6 a month. It wasn't as much room but we got by with it.

Son: So you had to move into a smaller house to save money?

Father: Right. I had to move into a smaller house in order to save about \$8 a month on the rent which helped a whole lot. During those times I was out of work I just picked up anything I could do. I repaired cars, put transmissions in cars, and worked on engines. They were more simpler than they are now and you didn't have to have the instruments you need now to work on a car.

Son: Were you able to keep your car through all this?

Father: I was able to keep my car but I used it at a minimum. I did all my repair work and repair work for other people.

Son: Did you have any savings at the time you were first layed off, any laid aside?

Father: I never had any savings. I wasn't able to have any because in the Fall of 1929, in August '29, my mother died and my dad was sick and he came to live with me for two years and that's why I had to have this house where I paid \$20 a month rent. And I lived there about two years and he passed away. And then I continued to live there and the depression kept getting worse and I had to go back in this smaller house for \$6 a month and the man told me I could pay it when I got it and I got back behind about six months in rent and he said he know I would pay the rent when I got work, which I did.

Son: Did all these hard times have any effect on you later on in your attitude towards savings or work?

Father: Well, being from the farm and not having too much all through

my life I was very conservative. The family began to come on and it took what I could to buy insurance and provide for family. The first child was born in '30, next one in '34, next one in '36, and the last one was born in '43 during World War II. And I was never able to accumulate any money in savings until the third child left. However, in the meantime I, in 1936, through a good streak of luck and a friend, I was able to start purchasing a home by paying some back taxes on it and setting the amount per month on an installment plan to pay for this home.

Son: Were the hard times pretty well over in this area by 1936 for the bulk of the people?

Father: Well, for me they were but not for everybody. The reason they were for me because I was a skilled journeyman tool and die maker. And they were beginning to get in great demand in '34 and from '34 on I had steady work.

Son: After you went to work at Sunbeam Electric were there any more wage cuts or did wages begin to climb again?

Father: There was no wage cuts from there on. It gradually went up. They were hard to come by but they gradually went up. If you were efficient worker and punctual in arriving and worked while you were on the job, why, there were no wage cuts.

Son: So wage raises depended on the boss?

Father: On the boss, how well he liked you and your ability.

Son: I see. When did Sunbeam Electric become organized?

Father: Well, they were in the process of organizing when I went there in August '34. Well, I'm getting confused here. February the 8th, 1934, they were already in the process of organizing with

the AF of L and the company said they would never recognize the union and it was two men fired there for their union activity. I was approached to join, which I did, and I couldn't very well work with them fellows without belonging. However, I didn't take any active part because I just about had it from the other experience I had with the first factory I worked at, which was Faultless Caster. There's where I served my time as a tool and die maker. Now the one good thing I could say about that company was that it was a good place to learn a trade. They had the wherewith and so forth to learn a trade.

Son: When was it that you were first able to get a contract with Seeger?

Father: Well, as I said before, Sunbeam Electric said that they would never recognize and finally the union got so strong that they sold out to Seeger Refrigeration Company and after that they recognized the union and made a contract and that was Local 813. What was that, IUE?

Son: UE probably.

Father: UE. And it was there for quite a number of years.

Son: Did you have to strike to get your first contract?

Father: I don't recall it but they was a number of strikes as long as we were under UE. They was a number of strikes, a number of wild strikes and it was more or less a left wing outfit. And there was a lot of dissention among the union members for that reason.

Son: Were the production workers in the same bargaining unit as the skilled workers?

Father: Everything was under the same bargaining unit. And somewhere

along there I was a member of that. However, before the UE got in there, the machinists union got in there. What is it, I....Independent.....

Son: IAM. International Association of Machinists.

Father: Yeah, International Association of Machinists got in there. And they were ousted. And then the UE came in and did fairly well until the left wing came in, then there was a lot of dissention among the workers. There was so much that I dropped out and I went to the boss one day with a problem. I wouldn't exactly call it a grievance or anything, I don't know whether it was a raise or what I wanted to talk to him about. But he told me, he says, you'll have to deal with the union and I wasn't a union member at that time. I had dropped out. So I just walked out in the shop and found the steward and got me a card and signed up and paid my dues right there and from then on I was in the UE until the IUE-AFL came in. And then I belonged to that as long as I worked there. And it was a very good department. In '37 I changed from the tool room, what they called the tool room where they make tool and dies, to an experimental machine shop which is comparable to the tool and die shop only we made experimental units and all even though in there I made jigs and pictures and dies and tools for experimental work.

Son: Going back to the harder times of the depression, did any of your neighbors or friends have a little harder time of it than you did?

Father: Oh, yes.

Son: Could you tell us a little about what their experiences were?

Father: Yes, when this first came in I was rather disturbed at first and I didn't know which way to turn and I went over to the trustee and made application for I guess you would call it welfare. It wasn't welfare then, it was just where the trustee helped out those that didn't have anything.

Son: This was when you were first layed off?

Father: That was when I was first layed off at Faultless Caster and I was very fortunate because I started to picking up a little work here and there and I never did go back to get anything off of the township or county or the state.

Son: So you weren't off or without long enough for the trustee to come through with help?

Father: Well, I was supposed to go back and get the next week or so, get my groceries or whatever I needed. I was fortunate enough and had friends that helped me out, such as housing and the groceryman helped me out that I never did have to go to the trustee.

Son: Did some of your friends or neighbors have to get help from the trustee?

Father: Yes, lots of them. Lots of the fellows I worked with had to go to the trustee to make a living. Those that were less skilled than I were had to do this.

Son: Did they have any problems getting enough to live on from the trustee to keep their bills up and their groceries?

Father: Well, they just got barely along. They probably got behind on their rent, their doctor bills, and all. And I could tell you some pretty bizarre tales but I don't think you would want them to go on the recording for future references.

Son: What do you mean, along what line?

Father: Well, I'm moral....

Son: You mean there was crookedness in the trustee's office. You suspect there might have been?

Father: No, no. Between property owners and the renters.

Son: I see. Were landlords gouging the people somewhat?

Father: Right. They would take advantage of their family life. They would reduce their rent or something like that for....

Son: Well, sexual favors, I guess.

Father: Sexual favors, right. However, I never run across any of that myself but I had friends that did.

Son: That actually told you that happened to them? That they were approached....

Father: The landlord would get to sleep with the wife a few times a month during the month for a reduction in rent.

Son: You said some of your neighbors had other problems, too, I think awhile ago. Were the biggest part of them out of work in your neighborhood?

Father: Yeah, there was quite a percentage. I wouldn't know how to rate it, but there was a good percent of them out of work.

Son: And what were their experiences looking for and finding work?

Father: Well, naturally some of them had luck and some of them didn't.

Politics played a good part in it especially in getting relief. I knew of one party that wasn't 21 yet but he was married and had a child and he wasn't able to get any relief because his father voted on the wrong ticket at that time. And they just

wouldn't give people like that anything and it was either root hog or die, and people like me, if I just had a little I'd give them part of it. And that's just the way the thing went.

Son: Did people have any problem getting credit at the grocery store at that time?

Father: Well, those groceries that could stand it did give credit. Some of them went broke by giving credit. The man that helped me most the depression cost him between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars but he survived. He was able to survive. He was always very conservative.

Son: He didn't go out of business by extending credit?

Father: He didn't go out of business, no.

Son: Were there any grocers in your neighborhood that did fail?

Father: Well, there was a few. There was some, yes, not all but there was I would say 40% of them maybe.

Son: What were people's attitude about the middle of this? Were they optimistic that things were going to get changed and get better or were they getting pretty discouraged?

Father: Well, they were hopeful. Things began to look up in '32 when Roosevelt was elected and he got this CCC organization for the young men of the country to do public work and so forth. And then he organized the WPA for men with families to do park work, road work, street work, lake work.

Son: Was there any evidence of those projects in Evansville? Any of them carried out that you know of?

Father: Well, yes, they did a lot of road work. I don't know just where

at right now. In Boonville they built Scales Lake. They built that dam up there with wheelbarrows and shovels. And they built roads and cleaned parks.

Son: Did you know of any of the people that worked on WPA projects?

Father: Yes, at that time I did but I can't recall just who it was now.

Son: Were they paid a pretty good wage?

Father: They were paid a living wage. I don't remember what it was. I'd have to go back and check with some of them and find out, if there's still any of them around.

Son: How long was it after Roosevelt's election before you could see some change in the economy in the local area?

Father: Well, I would say it was a year. He brought things around pretty fast. I don't remember what year but there the people making runs on the banks and drawing their savings out and when they did that he closed down the banks for a few days and that squared away and then he opened them up and things began to settle down pretty good then. I can't give the dates on that.

Son: Do you recall hearing President Roosevelt on the radio during the early part of his administration talking to the people about the economic problems of the country?

Father: Yes, I recall but I just can't recall just what he said anymore but he was encouraging them to stand by and he was getting this public works thing together which was the WPA and CCC. My father-in-law was inducted in the army because he was a journeyman carpenter foreman and he supervised building the CCC camps at Spencer County at Lincoln State Park. He supervised the construction of the dam

there for a lake and to keep these boys busy he built trails and with his help they put up markers on historical places.

Son: Did Roosevelt's talks on the radio during the early days of the administration seem to help in this area? Did they give people hope and encouragement?

Father: Absolutely. They believed he was the man of the hour and the day. I'd hear people not very long ago praise him even though they found out that he didn't have the moral standards that they thought he had at the time but, nevertheless, they had confidence in him and they still praise him for what he done and he did do a great job as far as the poor people was concerned.