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THE PERSONAL SIDE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN EAST TEXAS

by Bill O'Neal

For the past several years Texas history and second semester United States history students at Panola Junior College have interviewed someone, usually a parent or grandparent, on some historical period they have lived through. The most common periods have been World War II and the Great Depression. More than two hundred interviews on the Depression, most of them from people who endured this trying period in East Texas have been conducted. Their reminiscences, anecdotes, and impressions comprise a representative expression of the personal side of the Great Depression in East Texas.

The Great Depression began in classic fashion for a few East Texans who saw investments disappear in the stock market crash. One man owned Shell Oil Company stock which dropped from forty dollars per share to two dollars per share.[1] Others lost little; with typical East Texas conservativism they felt that "if you could not afford to lose, you better leave stock alone."[2]

Relatively few people in this predominantly rural area held stock, but most East Texans were affected by the Depression in other ways. One couple owned a shoe store in Henderson and thirty acres of land. When not a single customer entered the store one day, they decided to sell their land to raise cash.[3] A Tatum family moved to a new farm and found it necessary to eat bran from the cattle trough in the barn.[4]

People who left the farm in the 1920s to work in cities returned to East Texas, often abandoning automobiles because they could not afford to replace coils or buy gasoline, which sold for nine to thirteen cents per gallon. A Shelby County man remembered fields of abandoned automobiles.[5] International Harvester repossessed a Harrison County farmer's equipment in 1930. He could not afford to pay even the one dollar and fifty cents poll tax, and this problem became so common that at times juries could not be raised in the county because only registered voters could serve as jurors.[6] One East Texas farmer co-signed a bank note of fifty dollars for a friend. The "friend" cut the fence, moved out overnight, and left the farmer to pay the note. The family sold all their eggs for five cents per dozen to pay the note.[7]

A Sabine County man lost his job in a sawmill when the plant burned. He turned to his farm for a fulltime living, but lost the place in 1937 to foreclosure. Thereafter he eked out a poor living

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for his family by farming on halves.[8] A Harrison County teenager and his brothers were transporting a wagonload of cotton to the gin. But the youth lit a cigarette, caught the cotton on fire, and caused a minor disaster for his family.[9]

Many found it necessary to rely on government programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps or the Works Progress Administration, which was forced to allot only a certain number of workdays per week because of the high demand. For women, government sewing rooms were established.

But numerous East Texans disliked the concept of government aid; preferring to retrench in a variety of ways. Quite a few men, married as well as single, journeyed to West Texas seeking employment. Generally, they picked cotton for meager wages, but one refugee from East Texas managed to buy a combination gas station, grocery store and motel in Lubbock across from the Texas Tech campus. Renting rooms to the college kids for a quarter a night proved to be the most profitable aspect of this business. "Sometimes I rented the same room four or five times a night."[10] Another enterprising young man went in the other direction. After a year of fruitless job-seeking, in 1931 he signed aboard a European-bound cotton ship, for twenty-five dollars per month, plus room and board. The round trip lasted just two months, but upon his return he and many other East Texans found jobs in the giant Kilgore-area oilfield.[11]

One family head found work in an Arizona copper mine, and made enough to keep his East Texas farm.[12] A man laid off from a railroad job loaded his family into their auto and traveled from place to place working at temporary jobs while everyone slept in the car. This nomadic life finally ended when the man was permanently employed in the Overton oil field.[13] A beautician unable to keep her job traveled about the Ark-La-Tex with her husband as an assistant. In most towns the couple opened a shop in a private home for a dollar a day and used circulars to advertise haircuts at twenty-five cents; a permanent cost a dollar. Payment often came in the form of quilts, peas or tomatoes.[14]

Those East Texans who stayed on the farm economized. Some people wore shoes only during the winter. Clothing was made from flour and feed sacks. Hunting in the piney woods increased. One man sold raccoon skins for ten cents apiece to buy diapers.[15] When rabbits were killed, meat was cut off the bones and ground with bacon fat to produce "rabbit sausage".[16]

Many people went into the woods to find cow bones, horse bones, or any type of animal bones. They sold the bones to a local buyer to make money for other necessities. Soap also was made out of these bones.[17] Another means of producing home-made

soap was from pine tree rosin.[18]

One family gathered baby turtles from the Sabine River banks and sold them for five cents apiece as a source of facial cream.[19] A Panola County woman bought the first steam pressure cooker in the county. She canned all kinds of meats and traveled from house to house using the new device.[20] Another woman recalls canning four hundred jars of corn in one night.[21] Still another woman canned over one thousand jars of meat, vegetables, and fruit to sustain her family.[22] People without ice boxes commonly lowered milk and meat into their wells in a bucket. If the milk spilled, it was necessary to draw the well dry and scrape the walls with a hoe.[23] Another method of preservation was to place meat in a box, cover it with rags, and bury it in a deep hole.[24] One might even buy a cake of ice and bury it under a shade tree with sawdust around it. Perishables would be buried beside the ice.[25]

Some people kept their butter and milk in pans of cold water, changing the water five or six times a day.[26] Baby bottles posed a particularly difficult problem during the summer. After a bottle of milk clabbered during the night, more than one sleepy father had to trudge out to the barn to milk a fresh bottleful to satisfy a wailing baby.[27]

Recreation was simple and often home-made. Children made their own toys, including dolls fashioned from soft-drink bottles and straw.[28] One woman remembered a rather daring children's game. "They would take a ragball and soak it in coal oil and set it on fire and pick it up and throw it at one another like a ball of fire. It was very dangerous, but they didn't think of it as dangerous, until a girls' hair caught on fire, which ended that."[29] As a prank on the teacher of a country school, an equally daring East Texas child "put gunpowder into the heater. It blew the door off the heater and into the teacher's lap, knocking her onto the floor."[30] In another school, students disrupted the stove pipes so that the room would fill with smoke and school would be dismissed.[31] For an after-school treat, children might place a "sweet potato in the stove ashes and let it cook for awhile . . .."[32]

One spur-of-the-moment entertainment report came from a Timpson man:

> My granddaddy and his sons used to cook off syrup for weeks at a time. Before he ever started work, the man who cooked off the syrup insisted on having a fifty-gallon barrel placed by the smokestack, where it was warm. He would throw the skimmings off the sweet end of the evaporator in this barrel. It shortly turned into beer, which the

> man drank all day long. A large hole about chest deep was dug close by. The slimy, awful gray-looking skimmings off the other end of the evaporator were thrown in it. The Gulf Oil Company was, at the time, operating a pump station adjacent to our land. One evening several of its employees came over to the syrup mill to drink cane juice and taste the new syrup. One lady got into the beer barrel, also, and overindulged. By that time, it was well after dark. Being unbalanced as she was, the lady soon found herself waist deep in the hole full of warm skimmings.[33]

The radio became as popular in East Texas as everywhere else. After listening to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night, one man would take the family set to town on Monday to have the battery recharged for the next weekend.[34]

Inevitably a number of superstitions and home cures were recalled. To teach a baby to learn to walk properly, "sweep his legs down with a broom for nine days so the kneecaps would not slip."[35] To get rid of the hiccups, East Texans would "catch a live frog, throw it over your shoulder, catch it, kill it, and hang it up. You will never hiccup again."[36] Neither would the frog. Cowchip tea was used extensively for various ailments.[37] Slippery elm was utilized for sore eyes. "Get a twig from the slippery elm tree, and take off the outside bark so that the thin tissue between the bark and wood would be exposed; then place it in a glass of water. It soon forms a clear mucous-like substance and brings relief to sore eyes."[38] One old-timer believed that to cure chicken pox, "let a chicken fly over your head," and he warned that "a howling dog means that death is near."[39]

Polk Willis of Groveton assuredly was not the only East Texan to fall victim to these remedies. Early in the Depression, he was struck down with pneumonia. "In those days, instead of using penicilin for a cure, they would put you in a room sealed off from all ventilation, and then start a fire inside the room in order to break the fever." This method suffocated Mr. Willis to death.[40] Perhaps he failed to hear the local howling dog.

Almost all of the more than two hundred persons interviewed vividly recalled Depression prices, either because of desperate personal experiences or because of the astonishing contrast with today's inflated figures.[41]

Farmers remembered borrowing sums from forty to two hundred seventy five dollars to make their crops on, then facing prices as low as five cents per pound for cotton. Laborers received fifty cents a day to chop cotton, or thirty-five to fifty cents per one hundred pounds to pick cotton. A good picker would average three hundred-to four hundred-pounds of cotton

per day. It took about fifteen hundred pounds of cotton to be compressed into a five hundred-pound bale. One student expressed amazement that her parents had picked cotton for fifty cents a hundred in order to raise enough money to be married. "That's what I call love," she remarked.[42]

Wages in other enterprises were equally bad. Men worked in East Texas gravel pits for a dollar a day. A four A.M. to two P.M. ice house shift paid fifty cents per day. One could make fifteen to twenty cents an hour in an East Texas sawmill. Men hauled cross-ties for three cents per tie. Pulp wood loggers earned forty cents per day, while one East Texas syrup mill paid its workers one gallon of syrup per day. One man worked for peanuts as well as syrup, and claimed this the origin of the phrase "working for peanuts."[43]

Most rural schools ran about seven months per year, but often closed a couple of months early when the district ran out of funds. Teachers were paid fifty to eighty-five dollars monthly. Some East Texas rural districts accepted individual bids, filling positions with teachers who agreed to work for the lowest salaries.[44]

Professional men certainly did not fare well, often receiving minimal fees in produce. A fairly standard house call charge was a dollar and a half. One physician was paid a hundred pound sack of potatoes for a delivery.[45] Another doctor received a chicken dinner for a similar service,[46] while a doctor who delivered twins was paid *two* dozen eggs.[47]

Eggs sold for twenty-five cents, fifteen cents, ten cents, or even five cents per dozen. Tomatoes were priced as low as ten cents per bushel. Bread was a nickel a loaf, and a hamburger could be purchased for nine cents.

Land often sold for one dollar per acre, primarily because farm products were so cheap. In addition to prices already quoted, cattle went for eight or nine dollars per head, live chickens sold for fifteen cents apiece, fresh churned butter was three cents per pint, milk was seven cents per gallon, watermelons a nickel each, and corn ten cents for a dozen ears.

Along with monetary figures, the killing of cattle by the Federal government made a vivid impression on East Texans. One woman offered this description: "After paying about five dollars a head, government men would go out to the farms, shoot the cows, slit their back flank and pour one teaspoon of kerosene in this slit. This ruined the meat. A hole was dug and the cows were put in it and burned."[48] The idea, of course, was to raise the value of surviving cattle.

A Harrison County man recalled: "The U.S. government ordered a large number of cattle to be slaughtered in the Gill and Piney Grove Community. For a long period of time, people had to put up with the flies and the stench of the carcasses. The government paid five dollars a head."[49]

To protect their herd, one Cherokee County couple hid the half to be killed and told the government they were already dead.[50] Roger Williams of Shelby County said that the cattle to be killed were penned and had an overseer. This overseer would shoot the cows and then pour oil over them to keep them from being devoured by humans. These cows were then hauled to a disposal spot, burned, and guarded to prevent anyone from securing the carcasses. After dark, Mr. Williams' father would walk to the site of disposal and find meat that had not been seared too badly. He would cut the hind quarter or fore shoulder and fetch it home. To preserve this dubious meat, he would make a batter out of flour pastry, cherries, black pepper, milk, and water. He would make a paste and plaster the meat to the side of the log barn. After several days of this preservation technique, the meat was pulled from the wall, placed in a container to remove the plaster, cooked and eaten by the family.[51]

A black woman appreciated federal aid, pointing out that "if it hadn't been for the grace of God and the WPA we wouldn't have made it."[52] One woman recalled that as a schoolgirl "for some reason we could not get on the soup line, but we were not able to afford a lunch. I'd get so hungry at lunch time as I stood at my class window and watched the kids line up at the soup kitchen."[53] At a typical East Texas soup kitchen the recipient was given a cup of tomato soup and three or four crackers.[54]

But many East Texans wanted no part of soup kitchens or any other organized form of charity. "My husband and daughter were employed by the WPA. Without the little money they brought in, we wouldn't have been able to survive. Many times I thought that some days we would have to go downtown to those soup lines, but with the help of God, we never did."[55] This statement expresses the old agrarian reluctance to accept charity. It was acceptable to receive aid from one's family in old age or other time of need, but a social stigma was attached to government aid. Another woman stated, "My grandfather would never go for Direct Relief, PWA, or WPA. His pride would not let him be a part of it. Mothers' friends took part in the programs and ate and dressed better than her."[56]

Another woman stated that, she, her husband, and their seven children took no free benefits from the government, and were proud of that fact. "The good Lord was with us." The hus-

band was briefly a member of the WPA, but later got out of it because he came under condemnation and felt guilty about it.[57] In East Texas the WPA built many outhouses, and several people recalled the less than good-natured nickname, "We Piddle Around".[58]

Still another woman proudly recounted that "my husband would never work on any government job."[59] The author's grandfather, born into an agrarian environment two years after the Civil War, was eligible for retirement benefits when the Social Security Act was passed in 1935. He lived another twenty years in East Texas, steadfastly refusing to accept a nickel from the government. During these same two decades, however, he regularly took money from his children. Family charity was accepted, but government handouts were humiliating.

One student discovered that her grandparents had been eligible for benefits but refused. Because of their pride, they thought it would make them "sorry."[60] Another East Texan rationalized, "I never applied for PWA or WPA because as long as I could hustle there was no point in beating the other fellow out of a job."[61]

East Texas, of course, politically remained a part of the Solid South, voted a straight Democratic ticket and, in many quarters, openly idolized President Franklin D. Roosevelt. One man recalled, "He was President from the time I was six years old until the time I was seventeen. I thought he would live forever, but he didn't and neither did the Depression."[62] An East Texas woman typically thought that FDR was "wonderful." She said that "he did bring them out of the Depression."[63] No one gave credit to John Nance Garner; people at the time were unaware that Garner and East Texan Sam Rayburn were in great part responsible for the passage of New Deal programs, and when these two powerful figures split with FDR in 1938, no further New Deal legislation was passed.

Paradoxically, while committed unshakeably to the Democratic Party, most East Texans were quite conservative in nature, and at least one felt that "Herbert Hoover was the best President the U.S. has ever had."[64]

The impression was widespread that East Texas was not as hard hit as other areas: "The Depression didn't really bother my dad's family. They had been poor farmers, so they didn't realize that money was scarce."[65] Many people felt that East Texans were better off than many Americans because they could raise their own food.

One East Texas woman offered the startling, although probably not unique, opinion that "it would be good for this country to

have another depression, because then maybe they would get right with God."[66] A different point of view is expressed with this reflection from another depression veteran: "I don't think that the people could stand a depression during this day and time."[67]

Considering that East Texans, like many other Americans, entered the Great Depression from the modest circumstances of a rural economy, it does seem that today's generation, accustomed to color TV's and new cars, would undergo almost unendurable culture shock if faced with economic conditions comparable to those of the 1930s. One young interviewer seemed to sense this, interjecting the comment: "Personally, I don't feel that I would have enjoyed living during the Depression years. I really like the times of today where a person can reach out and get just about anything that they want."[68]

Some people, of course, regarded the period with nostalgia. "These were happy days. Time like these brought my family closer and closer together. We depended on one another, and everyone did his part. The depression held for me some of the happiest times I've ever known."[69]

But just as many felt that "they are not 'the good old days'. People who think of them as 'the good old days' either have a rich imagination or a poor memory".[71] Another exclaimed, "the only thing good about 'the good old days' is I was younger!"[72] And one Depression veteran grimly stated, "I am sure if I had to live through it again, I would just stick my head in the oven and turn up the gas."[73]

NOTES

[1]Interview with Walter Jacob Norvell, March, 1978, by Lane Norvell.

[2]Interview with Mrs. C.A. Vaughn, April, 1977, by Anne Williams.

[3]Interview with Shellie Gipson, April, 1977, by Ricky Williams.

[4]Interview with Cecil Williams, May, 1976, by Eldora Allen.

[5]Interview with Robert T. Rogers, April, 1977, by Gary Rogers.

[6]Interview with Sandra Morrow, April, 1976, by Larry Morrow.

[7]Interview with Lela Brown Welch, August, 1977, by James Humphries.

[8]Interview with Iva Lou Ferguson, April, 1977, by Melinda Jacks.

[9]Interview with J.T. Barr, April, 1976, by Charles Barr.

[10]Interview with Tom Westbrook, III, April, 1976, by Sabrina McDonald.

[11]Interview with Walter Jacob Norvell, March, 1978, by Lane Norvell.

[12]Interview with M.T. Agrava, March, 1975, by Lydia Agrava.

[13]Interview with Robert Smith, August, 1976, by Ann Morris.

[14]Interview with Amy Horton, March, 1975, by Mike Horton.

[15]Interview with Chester and May Cates, July, 1976, by Beth Saunders.

[16]Interview with Iren Rand, April, 1975, by Darlene Rand.

[17]*Ibid.*

[18]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. A.T. Baker, March, 1977, by Iola Baker.

[19]Interview with Cecil Williams, May, 1976, by Eldora Allen.

[20]Interview with Gus Alvin Davis, March, 1977, by Annette Davis.

[21]Interview with Mrs. H.H. Hicks, April, 1975, by Wayman Blair.

[22]Interview with Rita Hollis Conway, July, 1975, by Rita McCord.

[23]Interview with Chester and May Cates, July, 1976, by Beth Saunders.

[24]Interview with Captola Grant, April, 1976, by Axie Smith.

[25]Interview with Rita Hollis Conway, July, 1975, by Rita McCord.

[26]Interview with Ocia Moody, March, 1977, by Tina Moody.

[27]Interview with Spurlin Powell, March, 1977, by Penny Almeida.

[28]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Lonnie B. Chimney, April, 1975, by Pam Gates.

[29]Interview with Ida Mae Thomas, April, 1978, by Sharon Brown.

[30]Interview with Ralph Lamr Ware, April, 1977, by Bryan Bowlin.

[31]Interview with Louise Searcy, August, 1977, by Alice Searcy.

[32]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. G.W. Bounds, March, 1976, by Susan Bounds.

[33]Interview with J.S. Magness, April, 1977, by Kathy Magness.

[34]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. G.W. Bounds, March, 1976, by Susan Bounds.

[35]Interview with Lois Pellum, April, 1975, by Billie Carol Pellum.

[36]*Ibid.*

[37]Interview with Minerva Weaver, August, 1977, by James Weaver.

[38]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Butler, August, 1976, by Harriet Butler.

[39]Interview with Mamie Henderson, May, 1977, by Betty Johnson.

[40]Interview with Mrs. Panola Perkins, March, 1976, by Robi Willis.

[41]Many of the figures presented in the following paragraphs were compiled or computed from dozens of interviews. The author has an expansion envelope filled with price quotations from which the listed figures were drawn.

[42]Interview with Gladys Hayes Ritter, February, 1979, by Glenda Edge.

[43]Interview with Robert T. Rogers, April, 1977, by Gary Rogers.

[44]Interview with Dr. Ralph Steen, February, 1979.

[45]Interview with Mrs. J.B. Baldwin, April, 1977, by David Sanders.

[46]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. W.I. Moore, April, 1977, by Mike Moore.

[47]Interview with Mrs. J.B. Baldwin, April, 1977, by David Sanders.

[48]Interview with Jency Smith, August, 1975, by Al Standard.

[49]Interview with Carl Cooper, March, 1977, by Carlyle Cooper.

[50]Interview with Macy Maines, April, 1976, by Valerie Guice.

[51]Interview with Roger Williams, March, 1977, by Kim Jamison.

[52]Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Lonnie B. Chimney, April, 1975, by Pam Gates.

[53]Interview with Iva Lou Ferguson, April, 1977, by Melinda Jacks.

[54]Interview with May Adams, April, 1978, by Harleaux Cooper.

[55]Interview with Lela Nickerson, April, 1976, by Amelia Arnick.

[56]Interview with Louise Searcy, August, 1977, by Alice Searcy.

[57]Interview with Dorothy Christine Harris, April, 1975, by Richard Lynch.

[58]Interview with Kathlen McCay, March, 1976; by Gina McCay; Mrs. Lawrence Martin, April, 1978, by Keith Bennett.

[59]Interview with Jeanette Brinson, March, 1978, by Pam Brinson.

[60]Interview with Ben B. Donald, March, 1978, by Martha Donald.

[61]Interview with Georgia Morton, April, 1978, by Leeann Morton.

[62]Interview with Dr. Edgar Allen, March, 1976, by Mark White.

[63]Interview with Mrs. C.A. Vaughn, April, 1977, by Anne Williams.

[64]Interview with Samuel Smith, March, 1977, by Wes Smith.

[65]Interview with J.R. Dunlap, April, 1977, by Ray Dunlap.

[66]Interview with Esther Williams, April, 1977, by Becky Krutza.

[67]Interview with Sybil Whiddon, April, 1977, by Yvonne Phillips.

[68]Steve Langford, April, 1978.

[69]Interview with Mrs. Jack C. Cannon, April, 1975, by Sherry Cannon.

[70]Interview with W.W. Craig, March, 1977, by Christie Craig.

[71]Interview with J.P. Duncan, March, 1976, by Susan Neal; Travis Lamar Hughes, August, 1977, by Martha Hughes.

[72]Interview with Willie Hill, August, 1977, by Wanda Watson.

[73]Interview with Hilda H. Hill, April, 1976, by Robert Wood.