

Monday, May 11, 1992.

Dear family,

Thank you for the phone calls yesterday. I felt loved and supported; I am proud of each of you. Dad gave me the day off so it was a very relaxing day ~~off~~ as well. He was really proud of himself in the dinner he and Unk Lou set before us---Pen and me! They both grinned with satisfaction when we congratulated them on the efficiency, presentation, and taste of the meal. It was good! And yes, we no dummies, so next year we may get the same treatment.

Your encouragement about recording my history encourages me to write on. Today I thought that I would write about the great depression and how it effected us. From birth on it seemed we were a depressed people as with Dad's small salary and so many children, we were always in want! The country was in the roaring twenties when I came along and supposedly everyone was on top of the world. I had 6 living siblings ahead of me so the house was already pretty full. It was nice being the 7th as I got close to my older brothers and sisters and yet have a lot of rapport with the younger ones too. I was sandwiched in between 2 brothers (Don and Dick) and there was 6 years difference between Gee and me. I got to do all the boy things! Sometimes I was used as a football (I got tackled a lot) and was used in the outfield in our baseball games. I was the family "tomboy" and had a hard time living down that idea. Many was the time I would hear from my parents and siblings that I was a tomboy and I got so that I was proud of it. Then I discovered the term as was used in a derogatory sense and I resented it very much. It is hard to ~~don't~~ bring that image up----not that I did not deserve that name. I really did do all the boy things and played with them a lot. You will remember that the railroad track was very close to where we lived and the area next to it was our playing field. By the middle of summer, the grass would be overgrown and that was the time to hide-and-seek and get mosquito bitten. I remember counting hundreds on my legs. We used smudge pots (a tin can filled with rags that you kept smoking) to deter the bugs. The fun thing was to put strings on the can so that you could make circles with it over your head and keep the rags smoking. The bugs found us anyway!

When the banks failed, we had no account to fret about and I don't remember that our neighborhood bank went out of business. In much later years when Mom got half of Don's insurance money, it was put into that bank and Mom had her first account. The loss of jobs among the Poles was extensive as with no buying productivity ceased too. Most Bay Citians were employed in the near coal mines, sugar beet industry, and some manufacturing of auto parts. When Dad lost his job, that was the end of meat in our diet every day. Now it was depression soup (a mixture of oatmeal, onions, water and salt and pepper). Mom did a lot of canning in the fall so that we had canned foods (whatever the boys could beg off the farmers just before they left the market on Saturday morning) and she made sauerkraut. We would have a barrel of it in the attic every winter. The boys and the old rusty wagon brought home many cabbages once the frost hit us. The market was about a mile and a half from where we lived. Don and Ernie were usually the beggars and brought many tomatoes back with them. Those were easy to get as the farmers could do little about saving ripe tomatoes. We had a pear tree and Mom canned wonderful pickled pears. Busia Janowicz had a plum tree and would share those with us and Mom would preserve those. And where did all that sugar come from you might ask? Well, that was one commodity that welfare gave us and Mom used it wisely. In the winter when the canning was over, we would take the allotted sugar and make judge!

Going on welfare was a shaming experience for our family! In those days there was no money given that I knew of but surplus food, some clothing, and even a mattress now and again if you had an overwhelming need. I remember Dad taking that trusty, rusty wagon to the fire station early Friday mornings to pick up the food. We could depend upon sugar, unbleached flour, sometimes peanut butter, canned beef from Argentina, and GRAPEFRUIT from Florida which was a treat for us.

We had to have some cash, of course, and most of this was earned by Mom who took in washings and ironings. We kids would take that wagon and fetch it. In the winter we used a sleigh and had to tie it down to prevent accidents. Sometimes this meant going a couple of miles each way and it was Don and I who did most of the transporting. I told you Al became a baker's helper and he earned a modest sum and we were allowed to buy yeast for a nickel with which to make our bread. The unemployed Dad did that as Mom was busy with the washings. One of the most pleasant memories of those days is coming home from school and finding the house filled with the fragrance of freshly baked bread! Never mind that this was unbleached flour (we now know that was healthier for us) as it smelled just wonderful. Fact is neighbors would appear at the door and want some too. We had no butter or oleo (could not afford same) so instead for a few pennies you could buy from the meat market fat-back from pigs and Mom would melt that down and what we then had was lard and bread. You flavored

it up with a little salt and ate away. My Mom loved fat! No wonder she had a cholesterol problem and high blood pressure. Milk was too costly so that we were brought up on coffee. It was very cheap in those days-- a mere 39 cents for 3 pounds at the AP which again meant a 2 mile walk each way. As you may assume, I did a lot of walking and that is probably why I now have good bone structure and pretty good health.

And how did we keep warm? I'm hazy here but I do believe welfare gave us some coal but not enough to keep our drafty house warm. We are not proud of this, but we stole some from the trains that would pass near us. A few blocks to the east of us the train had to slow down to make a turn and the older boys would hop atop the coal cars and when they would get within blocks of our house, they would toss coal off as fast as they could. When the train would slow down, they hopped off and gathered their booty in burlap bags and carried them home. Sometimes eager neighbors got there before us and helped themselves. Things got so bad at times that the boys would hop a night train and go out early to pick it up. In desperate times you do desperate things to provide for your family. The begging and stealing stopped as soon as money started to flow into our house, of course. Being on welfare made us feel like thieves, too, and made us feel as last class citizens. It is awful to feel that dependent upon society. It is shame of the worst kind and you seemed to lose pride. To look people in the eyes was a hard thing to do. Lots of people were on welfare but because it was common it did not make it any easier so you pretended it was not so. Dad would cover the wagon with the surplus food, for example, to try to hide the fact.

Canning days will live with us always. When we got home from school in the fall we would find Mom busy with the canning. Often we were helpers; washing the jars, scalded the tomatoes for skinning (first washing them) and helping to pack them in 2 quart jars. These were the days prior to the present porch so that the screen door affixed was direct entry into the house. Thousands of flies affix themselves to the screen so that you had to shoo them away before you entered. This only meant fewer flies came in but loads made it in. We used a lot of Flytox and sticky paper to help control them but there was always a bunch that had to be swatted. I remember well Dad's evening job of waiting for the flies to settle down and then swat away at the ceiling. It took a long time as when he hit one, many would scatter and he would wait for a lull. My ears hear it now "bang! bang!" as I recall the event. When canning was being done, there was little time for anything else. It all tasted very good in the winter and we were happy we had the food. Unlike the Little Red Hen who could find no helpers, there was no such thing as saying "not I" to Mom. We did as we were told! Once the canning season was over and the baking bread smell filled the house, we did have our rewards! Al used to bring left over bread to fill our bellies when canning was being done. The bleached flour bread tasted mighty good to us! With lard as the spread, however, something was missing and we ate less of it.

We worked hard with Mom those days and once in a while we got a nickel to spend. What a treat! This always was a Sunday treat. You could go to the corner drugstore and get a variety pack of candy. Some candy came 3 or 4 for a penny so a nickel went a long way---or you could get a Halloway sucker (a chocolate-caramel confection) which could last the afternoon if you nursed it along. That was usually my choice. Dick and I would take the confection in hand, follow the railroad track to the cemetery and water relatives graves. We often would water graves that looked uncared for and dry. (Maybe this has some bearing on why I am a path and creek cleaner to this day!) Then there was the long walk home again but it sure beat staying home and doing nothing.

Long about this time we almost lost our house to unpaid taxes. Where were we to get money? With no real source of income, what bank were there were not giving to poor risks---and we sure filled that definition. A lot of people were in the same boat so there were others with the same sad story. Those few with money cleaned up buying properties, holding them to resell when conditions improved. Ours was up on the "chopping block" (so to speak) and a placard was affixed to the house to be sold^{at} auction. We were so ashamed that somehow the notice got all splashed with mud so no one could see it. This was done to try to save face, of course, and we fooled no one but ourselves. I don't know how but somehow Busia Janowicz lent us the money to pay the darn taxes and we were years paying her back dollar by dollar. So there was a happy ending to that story.

Believe it or not, there is still more about the depression that I can share with you---if you are interested. I must be shattering your ideals (if you had any about me) as to what went on in my life. These early years were tough and there was no denying it. I can attest to things getting better and looking back, I can almost believe it all as truth---but not quite. It seems like it happened to someone else or that I dreamed it all. My life today is so different and I look to a happy ending---God willing. More another time.

Much love,
mom