

burden. I felt people were losing their initiative to get out on their own instead of: Please hand it to me. Of course, we hadn't seen anything then compared to what we have now in this respect. But today, we have all this private involvement that is so interesting and expansive. It offsets the other. I don't want to be too critical of Mr. Roosevelt, because he did, in our period of history, do something.

*This is—to use a Rooseveltian phrase—an “iffy” question: suppose he didn't step in with these programs, what do you think would have happened?*

We had to have some of them. If he hadn't done it, someone else could have. In one way, you could say he saved it because he was our leader and he surely had the support.

*At the time of the collapse that stunned so many, was there some doubt about our society?*

Not as it is today. It is a different sort of thing. It was bewilderment. Of course, we hadn't been used to the affluence we have today. I didn't think our people were poor, many of them. They ate well, and so on. But the unemployment continued on and on and on.

Today, attitudes have changed. There'd be some rebellion that you didn't have then. It was peaceful then. It was law-abiding. You could walk down the street and have money in your pocket, and no one would take it from you. You might have a beggar ask you for something. But there wouldn't be the kind of feeling that you'd have it taken away from you. There was more respect for law. Now there is this demanding thing. It's general, it's in all the world now.

POSTSCRIPT: *“When I first came to Washington, Doc Townsend visited me. He was a nice looking gentleman, gray-headed, thin. A good country doctor, I felt. Well, he had a crazy idea which you couldn't talk him out of: a tax on all the desposits that went through the banks. I said, ‘Somebody would have to pay for it.’ He said, ‘Look at all those billions of dollars. We don't have to take but a small amount of it.’ He didn't realize, however, you raise it, it's going to be a burden on somebody. But he was a spokesman for a great lot of older people, and he gave them hope. I thought he was a little daft on this concept. On the other hand, he served a purpose at the time. He gave old people the idea of a pension. And now they're organized.” (Laughs.) “I respected the old man.”*

## John Beecher

*Poet. Two of his anthologies, To Live And Die in Dixie and Hear The Wind Blow, concern the Depression in the South.*

*He is of Abolitionist ancestry, a great-grandnephew of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. His maternal grandfather, an Irish-American coal miner, was a member of the Molly Maguires, terrorist mine organizers in the 1870s. . . . “He was the principal subversive influence in my life. . . .*

*“My father was a top executive of a southern subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation. Fortunately for me and possibly fortunately for him, he lost most of his money in the stock market crash of '29. He had a hard time recovering from it, psychologically.*

*“I remember how, after dinner, he'd just lie on the couch in utter despair, night after night, for hours. A man who was interested in music, read all kinds of literature, novels, plays, history, economics and so on—there was this man so knocked out. We were afraid he was going to commit suicide. His close personal friend did take a header out of the fourteenth-story window. He was still getting an excellent salary, but he felt—up to that time—the measure of a man's success was the amount of money he accumulated.*

*“But he did recover. He became a kind of coolly critical intelligence. He was ready for any kind of change in the system—perhaps this system was not eternal, perhaps there should be a more cooperative society.”*

I HAD my first job in the steel mills, back in the Twenties. You could say the Depression commenced in this town, Ainsley, Alabama, a steel mill suburb of Birmingham. We had the first bank to go bust in the early days of the Depression. All the workingmen trusted the banker.

In the fall of 1929, I left my job as metallurgist on the open hearth to teach at the University of Wisconsin. For Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College. Of course, the students became turned on very rapidly during the Depression. At commencement, you'd see fellows in caps and gowns selling apples at the doors of the stadiums, where they were handing out the programs. This was kind of a demonstration, just to show . . . highly gifted chaps, you know, going to work in dime stores, after they got their degrees. And lucky to get the work. So they were radicalized by the Depression the way kids are radicalized today by the Vietnam war and the whole drift of our society. . . .

In the summer of '32, I played hookey from the academic rat race. I was doing a doctoral dissertation on the novels of Dickens and hard times

back in 1832. I decided to find out what was happening in my own time. In my home town. I found out with a vengeance. This led, actually, to my going out into the Depression. First, as a volunteer social worker and then as a New Deal administrator.

For eight years, starting in '34, I worked as field administrator all over the South . . . with white and black, rural people, coal miners, steel workers, textile workers, a fertilizer plant people, turpentine camp workers and sharecroppers.

*Was theirs an attitude of resignation?*

No, indeed. The ferment I discovered in Birmingham was just tremendous. The people were ready, really, to take action. They, of course, didn't know which way to turn. Few people believed, in '32, that Roosevelt was going to be the answer.

I remember passing through Chicago on my way to the South. I stopped off at Hull House to see my literary idol, John Dos Passos.\* He thought we were on the road to revolution . . . that Roosevelt would, of course, be re-elected, but that he wouldn't rise to the occasion. He seemed to believe some kind of anarcho-syndicalist solution would be found. The American labor unions would lead the way. Of course, they were not leading the way. And Roosevelt surprised everyone by coming up with emergency programs which did take most of the bite out of popular discontent.

I remember in Ainsley that year, in the relief headquarters, a woman had been arguing and arguing to get some milk for her baby. You should have seen the things they were giving babies instead of milk. I remember seeing them put salt-pork gravy in milk bottles and putting a nipple on, and the baby sucking this salt-pork gravy. A real blue baby, dying of starvation. In house after house, I saw that sort of thing.

Well, this woman was determined to get real milk for her baby. She raised all the cain she could, until the top supervisor agreed to let her have a quart. When they handed it to her, she got back as far as she could and threw it up against the wall—Pow!—and smashed it. This was the kind of spirit, you see. Not unlike the kind of thing you see today amongst the black people. But it was white people then, principally. They seemed to be the most militant ones—at least down South.

As an administrator, I worked with Rex Tugwell's rural resettlement programs. Rex had written, when he was an undergraduate in Columbia, a poem in praise of socialism. They kept dragging up this undergraduate poem on Poor Rex. You recall how viciously he was attacked? Actually this program, of which I was a charter employee, wasn't as radical as I would have liked it to be.

It was a stop-gap, dealing with rural problems. Grants-in-aid, to small

\* Dos Passos was covering the Republican and Democratic conventions for *The New Republic*.

farmers, so they could hold on and continue to produce crops. I managed a group of five of these communities.

I switched to the migratory labor program. I set one up in Florida for migratory farm workers, who at the time were poor blacks, displaced sharecroppers from Georgia and Alabama. Also displaced whites who had been, largely, packinghouse workers.

We built a hospital, clinics, community centers, schools and a number of temporary camps. They were at least better than the grass huts, tree houses and all those terrible barracks in which they were living.

I was down in the same area last winter, almost thirty years later. I found those "temporary" camps still standing there, deteriorated and disintegrated. In one place the ground had dropped ten feet. These places were way up in the air, on piles, because the land had subsided. In 1968, they were still living in these camps we had built in the Thirties.

*The migratory workers, then, were not really affected by the New Deal?\**

No. When the war came along, all the domestic programs were swept under the rug. They turned our migratory camp over to the local communities. The kind of thing we hear so much about today: local control. So the local people got hold of it. . . .

We had built a big hospital in the Everglades for the black people. There wasn't a hospital bed for fifty thousand people, not one. They had all kinds of things wrong with them, and there was nowhere they could go, so we built a hospital. It was the first thing of its kind the Administration had ever done. It was designed primarily for the black people.

The minute it was turned over the locals, in the days of the war, they evicted all the black people. They repainted the hospital inside and out and made it a white hospital. I was talking recently to one family in the black camp—in those days they kept everything separate. The black camp is still a black camp, and the white camp is still the white camp—still segregated.

They told me down there, this last winter, they're not allowed to have community meetings any more—or any kind of self-government that they had. They didn't even have dances any more in the community centers we had built for them. They were run by white managers and white deputies and all this sort of thing. The very thing we had been trying to get away from, a generation later had been reinstated.

The migratory labor program was the most advanced thing I encountered in the whole Administration. The resettlement communities were more paternalistic. They carefully selected families, according to criteria handed down from Washington. In the camps, we had to rely on the people to do it. So they made all the ordinances, and they ran all the camps and did a much better job than the bunch of bureaucrats.

\* See Cesar Chavez, p. 53.

(*Half-tells, half-muses a poetic remembrance.*) They were living on the canal banks in stinking quarters and barracks, sometimes thirteen people in a room. Or in tarpaper huts, in shelters in the weeds. Every morning before dawn, they climbed onto trucks, bound for the bean fields. Where all day, everybody that could pick, down to five or six years old, picked. Kneeling in the black Everglades mud. It would be dark night again when they got back to quarters. And all night long the gyp joints stayed open, where whiskey, dice and women ate up the earnings of the day.

That was the white growers' idea of how to hold labor: Keep the Negroes broke, they said. Instead of a church or a school, the grower would build a gyp joint at the center of his quarters. To get back at night what he paid out in the day.

When the Government came in and started to build a model camp for the Negroes, with screened shelters and shower baths and flush toilets, and an infirmary, a community center, a school and playgrounds, laundry tubs and electric irons—the growers raised hell. What was the Government's idea anyway, ruining the rental value of their canal bank quarters? And fixing to ruin their labor with a lot of useless luxury? Besides, the Negroes wouldn't use the camp. They liked to be dirty; they liked to be diseased; they liked to be vicious.

When the growers saw the Government was going ahead anyway, they said: You'll have to hire a bunch of camp guards, white guards, and have them control the camp with clubs and pistols or the Negroes won't pay the rent. Or they'll stop working entirely and they'll take the camp to pieces.

I was there. I was in charge of the camp. When the day came to open, we just opened the gate and let anybody in that wanted to come in. No hand-picking, no references or anything like that. It was enough for us that a family wanted to live there. We didn't hire white guards, either, and nobody carried a club or a pistol in all that camp that held a thousand people.

We just got them all together in the community center and told them it was their camp. They could make it a bad camp or they could make it a good camp. It was up to them. And there wouldn't be any laws or ordinances, except the ones they made for themselves through their elected Council. For a week, they had a campaign in camp with people running for office for the first time in their lives. After it was over, they celebrated with a big dance in the community center. Nobody got drunk or disorderly and nobody cut anybody with a knife. They had themselves a Council.

The Council made the laws and ordinances. The Council said nobody's dog could run around loose, it had to be tied up. The Council said a man couldn't beat his wife up in camp. And when a man came in drunk one night, he was out by morning. The Council said people had to pay their rent and out of that rent, came money for baseball equipment, and it kept up the nursery school.

Finally, the Council said: It's a long way to any store. And that's how the Co-op started, without a dollar in it that the people didn't put up.

Some of the men and women on that Council couldn't so much as write their names. Remember, these were just country Negroes off sharecrop farms in Georgia and Alabama. Just common ordinary cotton pickers, the kind Lowndes County planters say would ruin the country if they had the vote. (*He opens wide his half-shut eyes.*) All I know is: My eyes have seen democracy work.