

HARD TIMES

I consider myself rotten in those ways. Because I think about these people who are really starving, right now, living in shacks—and yet I'd go completely out of my mind, so I'll think about it tomorrow. I don't want to think about it now. There's a lot of people who don't even take the time to think at all.

Honor and Humiliation

Eileen Barth

In 1933, she graduated from a university, where she majored in social service administration. Immediately, she was engaged as a case worker for the county.

I WAS TWENTY-ONE when I started and very inexperienced. My studies at school didn't prepare me for this. How could I cope with this problem? We were still studying about immigrant families. Not about mass unemployment. The school just hadn't kept up with the times. We made terrible blunders. I'm sure I did.

There was a terrible dependence on the case worker. What did they feel about a young girl as their boss? Whom they had to depend on for food, a pitiful bare minimum? There was always the fear of possibly saying the wrong thing to her. The case worker represented the Agency. We seemed powerful because we were their only source of income. Actually, there was little we could do.

I had a terrible guilt feeling. I was living rather well sharing a nice apartment with two other girls. My top pay was \$135 a month, which made me well off. Yet there were constant layoffs. I always felt that if I lost my job, I might go on relief, too. So I never really had a sense of security myself.

I think most case workers felt as I did. Though there were quite a few who were self-righteous. They felt some of the people weren't looking hard enough for work. Or they were loafers. They believed some of the

stuff that came out in the newspapers. Even then. They sometimes made it very difficult for the clients. There was a lot of hypocrisy and sham.

I worked with both whites and blacks. One could say the blacks were more accustomed to poverty. But they still said, "I wouldn't come here if I had work." There was a lot of waiting around the relief offices. Where they came to pick up their food orders. These places were mostly old warehouses, very dismal. That was another thing, dispiriting. Sitting around and waiting, waiting, waiting. . . .

The case worker was often the object of their anger. Where else could they give vent to their feelings? So they took it out on us. They didn't know the cause of their problems. Of course, there were tensions. At one time, my job was to cover the entire city. I often worked at night. I found myself in very strange neighborhoods at all hours. I took it as a matter of course. Yet I knew when these people felt put upon. . . .

In 1934, a case worker was killed by her client, while sitting in the chair at his home. A youngish white man living with his mother. The story is: she had promised him a job. CWA was coming in. He was so overwhelmed by his joblessness he became maddened to the point where he shot her. He dragged his mother to the district office. He killed the supervisor, a clerical worker and then killed his mother and himself.

We were all frightened. Bulletins were issued to all the offices: case workers could take a moratorium on visits. We weren't told we *must not* visit. So I decided I'd go anyway. I was young and felt the clients needed me. (Laughs softly.) If this were to happen now, would I go? I don't know.

I remember, for a time after that, peering into the window, before I rang the bell. I guess I was pretty scared. One family said to me it was terrible, but some case workers deserve to be killed. He looked at me and smiled, "But not you, Miss Barth." (Laughs.)

I'll never forget one of the first families I visited. The father was a railroad man who had lost his job. I was told by my supervisor that I really had to *see* the poverty. If the family needed clothing, I was to investigate how much clothing they had at hand. So I looked into this man's closet—(pauses, it becomes difficult)—he was a tall, gray-haired man, though not terribly old. He let me look in the closet—he was so insulted. (She weeps angrily.) He said, "Why are you doing this?" I remember his feeling of humiliation . . . this terrible humiliation. (She can't continue. After a pause, she resumes.) He said, "I really haven't anything to hide, but if you really must look into it. . . ." I could see he was very proud. He was so deeply humiliated. And I was, too. . . .

Ward James

He is seventy-three. He teaches at a fashionable private school for boys, out East. He was born in Wisconsin; attended school there.

BEFORE THE CRASH, I was with a small publishing house in New York. I was in charge of all the production and did most of the copy. It was a good job. The company was growing. It looked like a permanent situation. I was feeling rather secure.

I realized that people weren't secure in the publishing business. There was no tenure. We didn't have any union. That was the first move I made, organizing the Book and Magazine Union in New York.* A lot of white collar people at the time felt unions were not for them. They were above it.

Until 1935, I had my job with this publishing house. They insisted I take a month vacation without pay and a few other things, but it wasn't really too distressing. It became tougher and tougher.

I was fired. No reasons given. I think my work with the union had a good deal to do with it, although I couldn't prove it. What hurt was that I'd gotten pretty good in writing technical books for boys. I had three published. By now, with things getting tight, no publisher wanted any book that wouldn't be a best seller.

I was out of work for six months. I was losing my contacts as well as my energy. I kept going from one publishing house to another. I never got past the telephone operator. It was just wasted time. One of the worst things was occupying your time, sensibly. You'd go to the library. You took a magazine to the room and sat and read. I didn't have a radio. I tried to do some writing and found I couldn't concentrate. The day was long. There was nothing to do evenings. I was going around in circles, it was terrifying. So I just vegetated.

With some people I knew, there was a coldness, shunning: I'd rather not see you just now. Maybe I'll lose my job next week. On the other hand, I made some very close friends, who were merely acquaintances before. If I needed \$5 for room rent or something, it was available.

I had a very good friend who cashed in his bonus bonds to pay his rent. I had no bed, so he let me sleep there. (Laughs.) I remember getting down to my last pair of pants, which looked awful. One of my other

* "I was also engaged at that time in organizing the Consumers Union. Our idea was to help people of what we now call the inner city to buy more intelligently. Advertising was even less regulated than it is today. Merchants were on the make. Now, Consumers Union, still a worthwhile organization, serves the middle class well. But I'd like to think some day it will get into the ghettos and do some real work."