

The March

Jim Sheridan

It is a large hotel: a halfway house for its hundreds of guests, who are convalescing from nervous breakdowns. The benches near the entrance—and the lobby—are overflowing with the elderly and the young, engaged in highly animated conversations. On this summer's evening, it was certainly the most alive area in the neighborhood.

He is sixty-three years old.

THE SOLDIERS were walking the streets, the fellas who had fought for democracy in Germany. They thought they should get the bonus right then and there because they needed the money. A fella by the name of Waters, I think, got up the idea of these ex-soldiers would go to Washington, make the kind of trip the hoboes made with Coxey in 1898,* they would be able to get the government to come through.

D. C. Webb organized a group from Bughouse Square to go on this bonus march. Not having been in the army—I was too young for World War I and too old for World War II (laughs)—I was wondering if I would be a legitimate marcher. But the ten or fifteen other fellas were all soldiers, and they thought it would be O.K. for me to go. Webb said, “Come along, you’re a pretty good bum.” (Laughs.)

We went down to the railyards and grabbed a freight train. Our first stop was in Peru, Indiana. We jungled up there for a little while, and then we bummed the town, so to speak. Go to different grocers and give them a tale of woe. They would give us sausage or bread or meat or canned

* In 1894, Jacob S. Coxey led a march of unemployed into Washington. It failed in its purpose. The small size of the group led to the coinage of the derogatory phrase, “Coxey’s Army.”

goods. Then we'd go back to the railroad yards, the jungle, where we'd build a little fire and we'd cook it up in these cans. We'd sit around the fire and eat. . . .

Peru was the first division point outside of Chicago on the C & O * We'd stop off and rest and scrounge up something to eat. We'd generally be told by the conductors the train was made up and ready to go out. Some of these fellas had come with their families. Can you imagine women and children riding boxcars?

The conductor'd want to find out how many guys were in the yard, so he would know how many empty boxcars to put onto the train. Of course, the railroad companies didn't know this, but these conductors, out of their sympathy, would put two or three empty boxcars in the train, so these bonus marchers could crawl into them and ride comfortable into Washington. Even the railroad detectives were very generous.

Sometimes there'd be fifty, sixty people in a boxcar. We'd just be sprawled out on the floor. The toilet . . . you had to hold it till you got a division point. (Laughs.) That's generally a hundred miles. You didn't carry food with you. You had to bum the town. It was beggary on a grand scale.

In one town, D. C. Webb got up on the bandstand and made a speech. We passed the hat, even, among the local citizenry. The money was used to buy cigarettes for the boys. Townspeople, they were very sympathetic.

There was none of this hatred you see now when strange people come to town, or strangers come to a neighborhood. They resent it, I don't know why. That's one of the things about the Depression. There was more camaraderie than there is now. Even more comradeship than the Commies could even dream about. That was one of the feelings that America lost. People had different ideas, they disagreed with one another. But there was a fine feeling among them. You were in trouble . . . damn it, if they could help ya, they would help ya.

One incident stuck in my memory. We had reached a place in Virginia. It was a very hot day. In this jungle, there was a man, a very tall man. He had his wife with him and several small children. We invited them over to have something to eat with us, and they refused. Then I brought something over to them in an old pie plate. They still refused. It was the husband who told me that he didn't care for anything to eat. But see, the baby was crying from hunger.

Finally, me and some others went down to bum the center of the town. I remember going into a drugstore and bumming a baby bottle with a nipple. Now, can you imagine a guy bumming a baby bottle with a nipple? It took me a few guts to work it up. I explained the circumstances. Then I went and bummed the milk.

When I got back to the jungle camp, it was kinda dark. I first reported

* Chesapeake and Ohio Railway.

in to Captain Webb and then he kidded me about the baby bottle. "Christ," I said, "that baby there's gotta eat." And he said, "This afternoon you got pretty much of a rebuff." "Well," I said, "I'm gonna try again." So I went over and addressed myself to his wife. And I told her: here is the baby bottle. We had even warmed up the milk. But she looked at her husband, and her husband said he didn't want it.

What could I do about it, but just feel blue? I didn't look upon it as charity. It seemed to me that here was a fella's pride getting the best of him.

The tragedy came when the train was going through Virginia.

We had to go through these mountain countries. The smoke from the stacks of the engines, and the soot, would be flying back through the tunnels and would be coming into the boxcars. So in order to avoid getting choked, we'd close the boxcars and hold handkerchiefs over our noses. There was quite a discussion about this. What would happen to the little infant? We was afraid it would smother. The mother was holding the baby, but the baby seemed very still. The mother screamed. We didn't know what the scream was about. After we reached Washington, we found out that the baby had died going through the tunnels.

When the baby died, a feeling of sadness came over those in the boxcar. It seemed that they had lost one of their own.

When we got to Washington, there was quite a few ex-servicemen there before us. There was no arrangements for housing. Most of the men that had wives and children were living in Hooverville. This was across the Potomac River—what was known as Anacostia Flats. They had set up housing there, made of cardboard and of all kinds. I don't know how they managed to get their food. Most other contingents was along Pennsylvania Avenue.

They were tearing down a lot of buildings along that street, where they were going to do some renewal, build some federal buildings. A lot of ex-servicemen just sort of turned them into barracks. They just sorta bunked there. Garages that were vacant, they took over. Had no respect for private property. They didn't even ask permission of the owners. They didn't even know who the hell the owners was.

They had come to petition Hoover, to give them the bonus before it was due. And Hoover refused this. He told them they couldn't get it because it would make the country go broke. They would hold midnight vigils around the White House and march around the White House in shifts.

The question was now: How were they going to get them out of Washington? They were ordered out four or five times, and they refused. The police chief was called to send them out, but he* refused. I also heard that the marine commander, who was called to bring out the marines, also refused. Finally, the one they did get to shove these bedraggled ex-

* General Pelham D. Glassford.

servicemen out of Washington was none other than the great MacArthur.

The picture I'll always remember . . . here is MacArthur coming down Pennsylvania Avenue. And, believe me, ladies and gentlemen, he came on a white horse. He was riding a white horse. Behind him were tanks, troops of the regular army.

This was really a riot that wasn't a riot, in a way. When these ex-soldiers wouldn't move, they'd poke them with their bayonets, and hit them on the head with the butt of a rifle. First, they had a hell of a time getting them out of the buildings they were in. Like a sit-in.

They managed to get them out. A big colored soldier, about six feet tall, had a big American flag he was carrying. He was one of the bonus marchers. He turned to one of the soldiers who was pushing him along, saying: "Get along there, you big black bastard." That was it. He turned and said, "Don't try to push me. I fought for this flag. I fought for this flag in France and I'm gonna fight for it here on Pennsylvania Avenue." The soldier hit him on the side of the legs with the bayonet. I think he was injured. But I don't know if he was sent to the hospital.

This was the beginning of a riot, in a way. These soldiers were pushing these people. They didn't want to move, but they were pushing them anyway.

As night fell, they crossed the Potomac. They were given orders to get out of Anacostia Flats, and they refused. The soldiers set those shanties on fire. They were practically smoked out. I saw it from a distance. I could see the pandemonium. The fires were something like the fires you see nowadays that are started in these ghettos. But they weren't started by the people that live there.

The soldiers threw tear gas at them and vomiting gas. It was one assignment they reluctantly took on. They were younger than the marchers. It was like sons attacking their fathers. The next day the newspapers deplored the fact and so forth, but they realized the necessity of getting these men off. Because they were causing a health hazard to the city. MacArthur was looked upon as a hero.*

And so the bonus marchers straggled back to the various places they came from. And without their bonus.

POSTSCRIPT: "After the Bonus March, I bummed my way to New York. I couldn't get on relief there because I wasn't a resident. So I resorted to one of the oldest professions—that is, begging. I became a professional panhandler. I had quite a few steady clients. One of them was Heywood Broun. Every time I put the bite on him, he'd say, "For Chrissake, don't you know any other guy in the city beside me?" (Laughs.)

* He was aided by General George Patton and Major Dwight Eisenhower. "Thank God," said President Hoover, "we still have a government that knows how to deal with a mob."

A. Everette McIntyre

Federal Trade Commissioner.

ON A PARTICULAR MORNING—I believe this was on the twenty-sixth or twenty-seventh of June, 1932—the police blocked the avenue and turned the marchers back. The bonus men had undertaken to march around the White House. The President didn't like that. A lot of other people didn't like it, either, because they were clogging up Pennsylvania Avenue, in the busy part of the day.

About five thousand of the bonus marchers and their families were camping in some of the demolished buildings. The police encircled them. There was some brick-throwing. A couple of the police retaliated by firing. A bonus man was killed and another seriously wounded.

During lunch time, the following day, I heard some army commands. To my right, down by the ellipse toward the monument, military units were being formed. It looked like trouble. We didn't have long to wait.

A squadron of cavalry was in front of this army column. Then, some staff cars, and four trucks with baby tanks on them, stopped near this camp. They let the ramps down and the baby tanks rolled out into the street. When the army appeared, the bonus people, who were in these old buildings, started beating on tin pans and shouted: "Here come our buddies." They expected the army to be in sympathy with them.

One of these staff cars unloaded—not very far from where I was standing—and out of it came MacArthur, Chief of Staff. He had a youngish major as an aide. His name was Dwight Eisenhower. With their hands on their hips, they surveyed the situation.

The 12th Infantry was in full battle dress. Each had a gas mask and his belt was full of tear gas bombs. They were given a "right face," which caused them to face the camp. They fixed their bayonets and also fixed the gas masks over their faces. At orders, they brought their bayonets at thrust and moved in. The bayonets were used to jab people, to make them move.

Soon, almost everybody disappeared from view, because tear gas bombs exploded. The entire block was covered by tear gas. Flames were coming up, where the soldiers had set fire to the buildings to drive these people out. The infantry was apparently under orders to drive this group toward the bridges, across the Potomac. Through the whole afternoon, they took one camp after another.

My colleagues and I decided that the army would assault the camp in Anacostia Flats, across the river. There were about twenty thousand to