

Bob Leary

A part-time cab driver, part-time student. During a tortuous ride through Manhattan's narrow streets, there was time for fragments of conversation. . . .

MY FATHER spent two years painting his father's house. He painted it twice. It gave him something to do. It prevented him from losing all his—well, I wouldn't say self-respect, because there were many, many people who were also out of work. He wasn't alone.

He belonged to the Steamfitters' Union. They were putting up the old Equitable Building at the time. But I guess they ran out of steam, just around '29.

He never forgot it. I guess it does do something to somebody to be out of work so long. It can affect your confidence in yourself. Not that it destroyed my father's self-confidence. But I could see how it affected his outlook on life, his reaction towards success. He was inordinately impressed by men who had made it in business. It's my feeling the Depression had something to do with this.

Bonnie Laboring Boy

I've worked in the Susquehanna yard
I've got one dollar a day
Toiling hard to make a living, boys,
I hardly think she pays.
They said they will raise our wages
If they do, I won't complain.
If they don't, I'll hoist my turkey*
And walk the road again.

—Traditional Folk Song

Larry Van Dusen

Fifty-five years old, he's been a labor union organizer most of his life. "I was nineteen when I left home and never went back. Bummin' around on the road—Colorado, Texas—hitchhiking, ridin' box cars . . . oh, coming back home once in a while and finding the family on relief. Checking out. . . ."

He was a social worker in Kansas City during the early Thirties; organized unemployed councils; participated in strikes; was arrested several times. . . .

I STILL PLAY a little game with myself, shaving. To get shaved before I'm picked up by the cops. Once I was picked up and I had a two-day beard

* A bindle: possessions wrapped in a handkerchief.

on my face, and three days in a-hundred-degree weather in a Kansas City jail, I developed a terrific rash on the neck. It still comes back once in a while. So that's just a little gimmick you work . . . if they're gonna get you this time, you're gonna go to jail clean-shaven. When I want to entertain myself now, I still think: I'm gonna get shaved before the knock on the door.

The brutality in the jails, the treatment of the unemployed, especially Negroes—I remember this cursing crash of some new arrival. They were dragging a big Negro into a cell next to ours. The din and the hell-raising we made to try to get him medical attention. We assumed, because nobody came, and he was taken out pretty stiff the next morning, that he died in the cell.

In those days, Chicago was quite a place to be arrested in. They had a system of moving you from precinct station to precinct station, so that it might be two or three days before your lawyer could find out where you were at. It was rougher than I had been accustomed to in Kansas City. Police stations at the time had these gimmicks, like seats with electric shocks. We were kept six or eight to a cell. Arrests of this sort were common enough for people who were organizing.

Unemployed councils, in my opinion, laid the basis for much of the New Deal legislation. . . . They attracted people who subsequently became labor organizers, particularly in the CIO. They were youthful in character and in ideas. They were not hidebound as left-wing political parties were in that period, although Communists and Socialists took part. They sort of threw away the rule book and just organized people to get something to eat.

The unemployed council people out in St. Louis were responsible for the first strike I ever saw—a tiff* miners' strike in southern Missouri. The housing was primitive. It was a miserable existence—literally, digging one out from the ground. They were trying to get better prices, so there was a strike. They tried to withhold their product from the market. I watched the meeting of the miners broken up by the local police and vigilantes.

Like most strikes of that period, it made more of a political than an economic point. There was a lot of publicity in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and other papers. It pointed up the miserable conditions of the miners. It put into focus right on Park Avenue and Grosse Point and Winnetka . . . what was really going on. All the left-wing groups had a part in dramatizing it. And this reflected itself later in Roosevelt's New Deal measures.

One of the most common things—and it certainly happened to me—was this feeling of your father's failure. That somehow he hadn't beaten

* "Tiff is a material used in making paint, comparable to white lead. It was dug out of straight shafts, like little wells. The miners didn't own the land, of course. They were simply sinking these wells, getting the tiff out and selling it to big companies."

the rap. Sure things were tough, but why should I be the kid who had to put a piece of cardboard into the sole of my shoe to go to school? It was not a thing coupled with resentment against my father. It was simply this feeling of regret, that somehow he hadn't done better, that he hadn't gotten the breaks. Also a feeling of uneasiness about my father's rage against the way things are.

My father was very much of an individualist, as craftsmen usually are. He would get jobs he considered beneath his status during this period. Something would happen: he'd quarrel with the foreman, he'd have a fight with the boss. He was a carpenter. He couldn't be happy fixing a roadbed or driving a cab or something like that. He was a skilled tradesman and this whole thing had him beat. I think it bugged the family a lot.

Remember, too, the shock, the confusion, the hurt that many kids felt about their fathers not being able to provide for them. This reflected itself very often in bitter quarrels between father and son. I recall I had one. I was the oldest of six children. I think there was a special feeling between the father and the oldest son.

We had bitter arguments about new ideas. Was Roosevelt right in making relief available? Was the WPA a good idea? Did people have the right to occupy their farms and hold them by force? The old concept that there was something for everybody who worked in America went down the drain with the Great Depression. This created family strains. A lot of parents felt a sense of guilt, a feeling of shame that they had to be rescued by WPA and building a dam. A craftsman like my father felt pretty silly pouring concrete for a wall on the bluffs around the K.C. railroad yards . . . when the nation needed houses and his craftsmanship could have been used. Men like him suffered indignity, working at projects they considered to be alien to the American concept of productive labor.

My father led a rough life: he drank. During the Depression, he drank more. There was more conflict in the home. A lot of fathers—mine, among them—had a habit of taking off. They'd go to Chicago to look for work. To Topeka. This left the family at home, waiting and hoping that the old man would find something. And there was always the Saturday night ordeal as to whether or not the old man would get home with his paycheck. Everything was sharpened and hurt more by the Depression.

Heaven would break out once in a while, and the old man would get a week's work. I remember he'd come home at night, and he'd come down the path through the trees. He always rode a bicycle. He'd stop and sometimes say hello, or give me a hug. And that smell of fresh sawdust on those carpenter overalls, and the fact that Dad was home, and there was a week's wages—well, this is something you remember, too. That's the good you remember.

And then there was always the bad part. That's when you'd see your

father coming home with the toolbox on his shoulder. Or carrying it. That meant the job was over. The tools were home now, and we were back on the treadmill again.

I remember coming back home, many years afterwards. Things were better. It was after the Depression, after the war. To me, it was hardly the same house. My father turned into an angel. They weren't wealthy, but they were making it. They didn't have the acid and the recriminations and the bitterness that I had felt as a child.

I remember coming back that day. My mother had roast beef. It was very good, and there was plenty of it. There was meat left over on the table when we finished. During the Depression, one day a week, if we were lucky enough, we got round steak. I was nineteen or twenty before I knew there was any kind of steak except round steak. I can remember all the kids sitting around, eyeing that meat, hands on forks, poised and ready. Depending on which way my father started that meat: that decided who got the first choice. There was one piece of meat per kid, and you were still hungry after the meal was over. I think of this very often when I see my wife trying to force food down my children's throats.

I don't think most children escape this. The oldest son, like me—it had the effect of getting me out of the home earlier. It's not a question of disowning your family. Any great economic upheaval, I think, alters patterns. Children develop doubts about their parents. They leave home early, out of necessity. They must find jobs quicker and quicker. Different from the current generation.

It comes through clearly these days when old labor leaders like myself try to talk to young workers who come into the shop. You try to talk to them about what we've been through, when we were organizing a plant—the blacklist, how we'd go under other names . . . you tell them about the Memorial Day Massacre . . . you tell them about the troops in Flint and sit-down strikes and the revolution this represented in the auto industry. . . . Well, they listen, if they're polite. But it doesn't really touch them, these things. These things that mean so much to us.

The young worker comes into the plant very often having the same values as his parents. The parents were a Depression couple. But years have passed, fights have been won, and this couple now has a suburban home, a child or two to college or high school. So the youngster comes into a plant where the workers are much more middle-class than we were.

The Depression left a legacy of fear, but also a desire for acquisition—property, security. I now have twenty times more shirts than I need, because all during that time, shirts were something I never had.

Jose Yglesias

Author. Among his works are The Goodbye Land, In the Fist of the Revolution and An Orderly Life.

"Ybor City is a ward of Tampa. Spanish-speaking. I didn't learn English until I started public school."

It was built in the 1880s by Cuban cigar manufacturers, seeking a hot, damp climate and freedom from labor troubles. "Within two months, there were strikes. (Laughs.) Cigar makers are the most radical workers you could find. Wages were bitterly fought for. They had many, many strikes." There was no union recognition until the beginnings of World War II.

"People date their lives from various strikes in Tampa. When they refer to a scab, they say: 'It's no surprise he's trying to break this strike since his mother did it in 1921.' In my home town, strikes were passionate affairs. Nobody considered it outrageous to make the life of a strikebreaker totally miserable. It was a stigma never forgotten.

"Women beat up women scabs. Women worked in cigar factories from the very beginning. Their pay was equal to that of the men. Oh yes, the women were very militant."

IN THE SUNLIT TOWN, the Depression came imperceptibly. The realization came to me when Aunt Lila said there's no food in the house. My aunt, who owned the house we lived in, would no longer charge rent. It would be shameful to charge rent with \$9 a week coming in.

The grocery man would come by and take a little order, which he would bring the next day. When my mother would not order anything because she owed, he'd insist: Why are you cutting down on the beans?

There was a certain difference between the Depression in my home town than elsewhere. They weren't dark, satanic mills. The streets were not like a city ghetto. There were poor homes, that hadn't been painted in years. But it was out in the open. You played in the sunlight. I don't remember real deprivation.

Ybor City was an island in the South. When an American got mad at any Latin, he called him a Cuban nigger. This was one of the first feelings I remember: I want to be an American. You become ashamed of the community. I was an ardent supporter of Henry Ford at the age of twelve.

The strike of 1931 revolved around readers in the factory. The workers themselves used to pay twenty-five to fifty cents a week and would hire a man to read to them during work. A cigar factory is one enormous open area, with tables at which people work. A platform would be erected, so that he'd look down at the cigar makers as he read to them some four