Memories of the Great Depression

A TIME FORGOTTEN

John Donald O'Shea

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I owe a major and sincere “thank you " to my daughter, Erin, who spent many hours proof-reading my manuscript. She also suggested many little manuscript changes to make my book easier and more enjoyable to read.

I’d also like to thank my illustrator, Jasmine Smith, for creating the little sketches that “introduce” each chapter.

—John Donald O’Shea

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Preface

I was born in April of 1941, in Chicago, Illinois, just a few months before the beginning of World War II. My dad was a liquor salesman. My mother was a housewife. I was born at the very end of the Great Depression, which really ended only with the coming of World War II. For that reason, I have no personal memories of the Great Depression. Indeed, I have very few of the war.

By the time I hit upon the idea of writing a book of memories from the Great Depression, my dad and mom were dead. As such, I have no tape recordings of their memories and experiences. I have only my memories of what they told me about the period.

Dad, rightly or wrongly, always said that the Great Depression was largely caused when people bought stock on 10 percent margin in the hope of making a killing in the rising stock market. Then, when it crashed, and when they received their "margin calls" to pay the 90 percent balance owed on their stocks, they couldn't.

He also talked about the runs on the banks and how the banks failed. He told me about how President Roosevelt called a "Bank Holiday" and how he called in the gold coins. But the reasons for the Great Depression and the efforts of the people in Washington to deal with it are really beyond the scope of this book. Instead, I have tried to concentrate on how everyday people coped with the Great Depression. My focus is on how they lived, how they ate, and how they took care of each other.

I can distinctly recall Dad telling me how people tried to earn a living by selling apples on the street corners. And, with affection,

how the "Chinaman on the corner" extended credit to Mom and Dad so they could eat at his place, at a time when they were dead broke. I can recall Dad telling how the only job he could find was one "selling country club memberships" at a time when people didn't have a dime for luxuries.

The things Mom and Dad experienced during the Great Depression shaped the rest of their lives. They lived according to economic rules that they fashioned for themselves based on their Depression-era experiences. And they later followed those rules all the rest of their lives, even when Dad began to earn a lot of money.

The first of those rules was: "Don't buy anything on credit. Pay cash." I can remember Mom saving pennies during the war years to buy a small radio. If she wanted something, she saved for it. When she had saved enough to pay cash for it, that's when she would buy it. With the exception of buying a house in 1948 and taking a mortgage, neither Mom nor Dad ever bought anything on credit. If they bought a TV set, or golf clubs or a new car, they paid cash. Obligating themselves to pay interest or a finance charge was something they adamantly refused to do. And they repeatedly warned me of the dangers of paying those extra fees. They all too clearly recalled what had happened when those who had bought stock on a 10 percent margin (10 percent down) faced a call for cash they didn't have. And the lesson that they taught me stuck. Except for my first home, I have always paid cash. The second of their rules—it was really Mom's—was: "Waste not, want not." I can recall Mom for many years darning socks when they developed holes. Also, although she always bought quality meats, we always ate the leftovers—and liked them.

And, perhaps most importantly, they helped their relatives for the rest of their lives. When my mother's mother died leaving eleven children, the older sisters raised the younger sisters. Louise and Aileen immigrated to Chicago from Canada. Then they brought Kay to Chicago to live with them, then my mother,

and then Nora. The boys, who were younger, followed. Bob (age 16), and Dan (age 14), came to live with Aileen. Aileen, by this time, was married with two small daughters of her own. Bob and Dan slept on sofas. And when Bruce and Vince came to Chicago, they too were raised and supported by their older sisters. Years later, when my Uncle Bruce's wife died, leaving him with three small children, his older sisters—Kay, Mom, and Nora—took his three children and raised them as their own. When another of my uncles needed investment funding for his business, the family provided funds. If a brother needed financial help, he got it. Even when my mother needed physical help in her old age, two of her younger brothers, Bruce first and then Dan, whom she had helped to raise, ferried her to doctors' appointments and ran errands for her. My mother had eleven siblings, including Tom who died at the end of the flu epidemic of 1919. Two more, twins, had perished in utero when Grandmother died during the flu epidemic. My dad, on the other hand, had only four siblings. All were proud people, and all—with one exception—worked and lived comfortably and made better lives for their children. The thought of living on welfare or "on the public dole" would have been anathema to all of them.

Until we moved from Chicago to Lincolnwood in 1948, we were a one-car family. Before that, Mom had a gas stove, a Frigidaire, and a radio, which she bought with the pennies she had saved. The television came only after we moved to Lincolnwood. But from the time I was born in 1941, we always had electricity, central heating, and indoor plumbing in our Chicago apartments.

When I was four, Mom decided to visit Canada. She had lived just across the border from Detroit. I can vividly recall pulling into the train station. There was a vast concrete expanse. Across that expanse, there were flatbed trailers parked with hard rubber tires. I had never seen hard rubber tires in Chicago. And that was the first of many new experiences. My trip to Canada was a trip back in time to the Depression era.

Almost immediately upon leaving the train station in an older car, I found that we were driving on a one-lane gravel farm road. There were no electric poles or telephone poles! As we pulled into the curtilage of my great-uncle's farmhouse, to the left there was a pasture and pigs—and a two-hole functioning outhouse. It had to function, because the lovely old farmhouse had no indoor plumbing—except perhaps the chamber pots which graced every bedroom. Kerosene lamps and candles lighted the house. In the "summer kitchen" was the old wood-burning stove, an icebox, and in the corner a large galvanized tub, which I soon learned was where I would be taking my Saturday bath. The water was always heated on the woodstove and came from the fully functional pump on the counter, which rather matched a large one that sat on the gravel just outside the house.

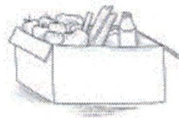
I think Mom took me to Canada to see the old house where her grandparents had lived and perhaps to show me how lucky I was to be living in the twentieth century in Chicago, rather than in nineteenth century Canada. Mom's sisters made annual sojourns to Canada to visit "the relatives." Mom made only that one trip with me. She preferred to live in the twentieth century, and to put the Canada of her youth behind her.

I write this little book to keep alive the memories of those, like Mom and Dad, who lived and survived the Great Depression.

Chapter 1

"MOM, WHY ARE YOU CRYING?"

- JIM GARTELOS -
(Born November 26, 1911. February 17, 1997.)



This is a true story of the days of the Great Depression. My name is Jim Gartelos. I'll be eighty-one on November 26, 1991. I was twenty-one years old in 1929-1930. My dad was a food peddler. We were a family of seven—mom, dad, my brothers, and one sister.

The Depression was very severe. I remember not having even twenty-five cents in the house. I was the oldest of the boys. I couldn't find a job, or anything of the sort, anyplace.

I remember coming home one day, and I saw my mother in the kitchen. For some reason, I recall she was wearing an apron. She was a heavyset woman, and she was crying. I asked her, "Mom, why are you crying?"

She said, "Can't you see our plight? We don't have milk for the baby."

We had a charge account at the corner grocery store. But we owed eighteen dollars, and we didn't have the money to pay it. So I asked my mother, "Why don't I go and get some milk for the baby?"

"We owe eighteen dollars," she said, "and I'm afraid the grocer might say 'no more credit,' and that would be very, very embarrassing."

In those days, I felt I could whip the world, but I couldn't do anything about this problem. So, on my own, I went to the store—to see the grocer—and I asked him for a job. He already had a clerk there, and said, "I can't afford two clerks. Business is really bad, and we just can't make it." But he added, "If he quits, then I'll call you."

As luck would have it, about four or five days later, the clerk left, and the grocer called me. I went to work for him at the grocery store. I worked there six and a half days a week—the half day on Sunday. Of course, in those days there was no Social Security and no withholding, and I was getting paid fifteen dollars per week. I told him, "I don't want money. All I want is to have access to whatever groceries we need, and I know that we owe you eighteen dollars. We'll just take it off the bill every Saturday night." So, I said, "We need groceries at home now."

He said, "Get whatever you want." I got a forty-nine-pound bag of flour and some olive oil. Then I got some meat, eggs, milk, and whatever we needed. I filled about four or five boxes. In those days, pork chops were fifteen cents a pound; butter was fifteen cents a pound. You could get a lot of groceries for very little money.

Anyhow, I took the groceries home, and when I walked in the door, I'll never forget what happened. My mother thought I had held up somebody to get all these groceries! She started crying.

I said, "Mom, I got a job at the grocery store. From now on, order whatever you want. We'll have plenty to eat." Of course, she was thrilled. Now you must remember, we were a family of

seven people. But we ate real good. We never had to go hungry, because of that job.

I worked there two years. Every Saturday night, the grocer would even up with me: I took what we needed, and every Saturday night he'd take fifteen cents off our bill.

My dad was an immigrant, a food peddler, as I said. When he'd go out, nobody in the neighborhood had any money to buy any food. It greatly affected him; he was just a lost cause. But I always said I was proud of my dad. He was too proud to go on relief. He simply would not. We had an alderman, who was a very good friend of his, who begged him to go on assistance. But my dad never did go on relief.

To make a long story short, it took a little over two years to get that bill down to zero. And that's how we survived the Depression.

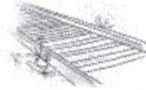
From a tape-recorded interview

Chapter 2

"MAMA, MAMA, WE'LL NEVER HAVE TO LEAVE HERE. OUR HOUSE IS ALL PAID!"

- EFFIE SKAFIDAS -

(Born May 10, 1926. Died October 28, 2018.)



My father came from Greece as an eleven-year-old boy. He settled in Aurora, Illinois, and eventually worked in the shops there at Barber Greene, a company which built road paving equipment. From there, a brother-in-law loaned him a few hundred dollars to start a small business. Dad opened a four-seat shoeshine parlor, and he had a hat-blocking machine. In that era, everyone wore hats. There were a great many Panama hats. Indeed, the men of the early thirties wore Panama hats all summer.

Dad also had a pressing machine. Men in those days did not have a lot of suits. So, if you were a man and your suit became a little rumpled, he had a little booth that you could go into, and

for fifty cents he would press your suit while you waited. He was meticulous. A lot of professional people came to him. Dad's business was situated kitty-corner from a bank. The people there were very nice. And he developed many good relationships.

Among those relationships was one with an attorney. This man was paralyzed from the waist down and was confined to a wheelchair. Due to his circumstances, my father would carry him up the many metal steps to his office, which was upstairs. Over time, the attorney became one of Dad's personal friends.

When my father decided to buy a house, the attorney said, "Tom, you don't have very much, and you purchased this home. You should have mortgage insurance." And my father said, "I barely make enough to make my house payment of thirty-three dollars each month." But the attorney said, "You must have it. You can't afford not to. You have three small children and a wife who doesn't speak any English. You must; no matter what else you are going to do without, you must have it."

In that era, men did not discuss their financial affairs with their wives. So my mother never knew what my father had done. She just knew, "$33 per month."

My father died on July 28, 1941. To try and save our house, my mother collected the rents from the boarders. She then sent my older brother, who was fifteen, to the Savings and Loan. My brother went there with the rent money and a message from Mom that we were going to try to keep our home, that we children were going to try to get through high school, and that we would all do our best so we wouldn't lose our home.

When my brother arrived at the Savings and Loan, he was sent to an officer in one of the back rooms. Before he could even give the man the message, the officer said, "I have been trying to contact your mother since your father died, but you don't have a telephone." He then said that he had wanted to ask my mother to come down so he could tell her that the house was debt-free because my father had mortgage insurance. At first, my brother

did not understand what that meant. The officer had to explain it to him.

I'll never forget my brother—we lived up on top of the hill—running and yelling to my mother in Greek, "Mama, Mama, we'll never have to leave here. Our house is all paid!"

To us, it was really a prayer answered, because then we knew we could make it—with the boarders, and with my brothers helping. We were also able to keep the shop going. My mother would go down there, and she gradually learned English.

One of the first lessons she learned had been about money. (Before his death, my father always controlled the money.) One day, a customer said, "Here you are, Mrs. Chioles. Here's fifty cents." But we had told her that when she pressed a suit, it would be "half a dollar." And so she replied to the customer, "No fifty cents! Half dollar!" That was the thing we remember best about Mom's "career" as a businesswoman.

Mom lived until she was seventy-two, and over time she developed a fine personality and a rapport with the customers. She became friends with them, and they were very good about advising her. When she went over to the bank to get change, they were all very helpful.

Until the day I got married, I always felt there was someone around to guide us, and to open the door. Someone always opened the doors. My mother worked hard. We all worked hard. We didn't have a choice. But it taught us a good lesson. We never went on relief.

In 1941, self-employed people didn't have Social Security. So consequently, for my mother's entire life, she had no Social Security. She had her house, and until my brothers married, they helped pay her expenses. After they left home, they still cared for her. My older brother would figure her income and expenses. She continued to take in boarders for many years, but my brothers would pitch in if there was a shortfall.

So during the Depression, how did we get by when we didn't have any money? In the neighborhood at that time, if someone had a good week—if someone made a little more money than usual—they'd help someone who needed it. For example, my father's brother lived a few doors down and worked in a shop. If he had a good week, he'd give my father a few dollars. If my father had a good week, he would share his pay. It was a matter of reciprocating.

You also shared clothes. I was the only girl, with two brothers, so I'd share with a neighbor who had a daughter. I don't recall having new clothes until I was old enough to work. Everything got passed down. In the same way, after my younger brother had worn the clothes, Mom would pass them down to a neighbor. It was a matter of everyone helping everyone else. I have many fine memories of being raised in an environment where everyone shared their belongings. They were generous not only with material things, but with their love for each other, too.

We lived on the east side, which was considered the blue-collar area. They called it "Hunky Hill" because there were a lot of Hungarians and Rumanians. On the west side were the townsfolk who were thought to be more educated and financially fixed—your professional people.

Still, I don't remember any neighborhood fights, like we hear of now. I don't remember neighborhood animosities. If we as children did something wrong, a neighbor would correct us. If a neighbor's children had done something wrong, my mother would try to correct them. No one was afraid that someone was going to become angry. I am not talking about spanking children; I'm talking about correcting them. And it was like everyone was "family."

In that era, people visited each other; they had no other recreation. Most of them did not have cars. If it was mealtime, the table would "automatically" be set, without any discussion, for

more than the five of us—Mom and Dad and us three children. Adults shared the food with any drop-in visitors.

I remember our meals in that time. My mother served a lot of oatmeal, which we all loved. She'd also chop up potatoes and brown them with eggs. We thought that was a luxury. That's what she would substitute for meat. We also ate an awful lot of greens. Yes, there was an *awful* lot—I'll certainly say that again! The greens included endive, the dandelion green.

My mother would go and pick dandelion greens along the railroad tracks. She'd take us along, and she would give each one of us a small knife. She warned us not to pick the dandelions with flowers on them because those were the bitter ones. The hardest part of eating endive was washing it, because you had to wash and rewash it. Then she'd boil the endive. She would chop in some onion and add vinegar, and she always had Greek olive oil. We thought it was a tasty treat. Our only dessert we had as we grew up, that I can remember, was Jello, and we loved it. Mom served it every Sunday.

From a tape-recorded interview