

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Great Depression Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 465

DWIGHT JACOBS

Interviewed

by

Daniel Flood

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: DWIGHT JACOBS

INTERVIEWER: Daniel Flood

SUBJECT: National Cash Register, Radio, Silent Movies,
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F: This is an interview with Dwight Jacobs for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Great Depression by Dan Flood in Mr. Jacob's office in Poland Middle School on October 21, 1975, at 10:45 a.m.

Mr. Jacobs, why don't we begin by allowing you to give us some very specific background information, such as when and where you were born, names and ages of your family members, and the occupation your father was in at the time of the Depression.

J: Well, that should be very easy. I was born in a town called Johnstown in Pennsylvania. This is a town that sits in the bottom of four big hills and the only way you can get into the town is to drop down about a four mile hill into the center of town. I was born on the outskirts of the town, about nine miles south. My father was actually born in the town. This is the site of the Johnstown Flood, the Great Johnstown Flood of the late 1800's, about 1889. Now my father was four years old at the time of the flood and his parents had migrated here from Germany. The reason I'm telling you this is because in this flood, this great flood, he lost his father. He tells the story that he and his mother were able to get out of the house. Well, they heard the dam had broken. It had been raining a few days ahead of time. They heard this dam had broken and he and Grandma got up on the hill.

F: What was the dam built out of during that time?

J: Dirt. It was a dirt dam.

F: Dirt?

J: And they had been warned that this dam could go. They had two or three warnings.

F: They were right at the bottom of the hill.

J: Any place in that valley that that dam would have broken would have just ruined everyone. Now, the problem was they had been warned three or four times that the dam was about to break and it had never broke over a period of years. This was about the fourth or fifth warning they had, and so they paid no attention to it. When they told them the dam had broken, they didn't even believe it. It was like they called "wolf".

Dad said the only thing that he can remember is he and grandma were on the hill. Grandpa was still trying to get some stuff out of the house and the water hit, and he just floated away and he's never seen his father since.

F: He was four years old then?

J: Four years old at the time.

Now they have a cemetery up there on top of the hill at Johnstown where they have thousands of graves for people like this, whose bodies were never found. They found bodies, but they didn't know who they were, never identified them. So all they did was dig these graves one right after the other and put up a little white tombstone. They dug a whole couple acres up there.

Well anyway, my father could only go to school to grade four. I think he quit at grade level four and became a machinist. He rose up through the machinist trade. He went into automobile selling. He was quite a tinkerer with cars.

F: This was around what year?

J: This would be around the year 1918 right after the First World War.

He built a car and found out he could make more money selling them than building them. So he started selling cars right after the First World War and in 1921, by the year I was born, he went in partnership with another person in the automobile business. During the next ten years, they had a good business. By the time of the Depression, when it hit, we were well-to-do people.

When they built our house, about the year I was born, there

was no electricity in the area. But they wired the house even though there was no electricity in the area or no promise of it.

F: Really?

J: Yes, and so he put in his own dynamo and I remember this growing up, this dynamo, because we had that dynamo up until I was about six or seven. I remember when it would run low on gas the lights would flicker. But then when I was about five or six, the electric power company came in within two miles of our house. My dad built the lines from our house out to the main lines. I think at that time he said he paid \$150 a pole for this electric line to be put in. The year after he did it, the electric company came in and took the whole thing over.

F: Oh, no!

J: He didn't get a cent from it. Then everybody on our road got electricity.

F: Do you remember anything about your dad and the salary that he made, being that he paid \$150 a pole?

J: Oh, he must have made a good salary. The reason I say this is because, like I say, we were quite wealthy. I remember one time when our church was asking for contributions for overseas mission workers right after the Russian Revolution . . .

We had the first radio in our area. We had the first telephones. We built our own lines. Now, the reason I'm telling you this is to show you what happened during the Depression because we were well off and money was no problem. My parents had eleven children. We had a beautiful home.

F: You had all the money you needed.

J: All the money we needed. So they started a trust fund for each one of us for college. When I was born, they started a trust fund. Every year they would put so much in it. My growing up years, of course, were in the 1920's before the Depression. I remember when my brothers were in college, my mother would be packing them little candies or stuff to send off and we would just envy them because they were in college. My mom would say, "Your turn is coming. Don't worry. Your turn is coming." I remember this so well because when my turn came, there was no turn. We hit that Depression with an impact that most of the people in our area didn't hit because they weren't wealthy like we were. They didn't lose it like we did.

F: What colleges were your brothers in?

- J: They were at our church colleges, Eastern Mennonite College in Virginia and Goshen College in Indiana. They had automobiles. My dad furnished them each a car. When the real Depression hit, they were both hit.
- F: What time did they start driving, what age? Do you remember?
- J: Oh, I don't remember. It was easy to get licensed. When they finally could drive they went down and got their license. When we grew up, I didn't go to a one room schoolhouse, but I went to a two room schoolhouse.
- F: This is in what year now?
- J: Up to grade eight. I was born in 1921, so I was ten years old when the time of the Depression hit, when it really hit.
- F: I see.
- J: We lost our business in 1930.
- F: Now, he was still in the automobile business?
- J: Oh, yes. I'll tell you a little bit about that. But anyway, my grade school years, it was a two room school with two teachers. I had the same teacher for at least some subjects for the full eight years.
- F: Really?
- J: Really, the same teacher, because he was in one of the rooms, but he always taught the arithmetic to the lower grades plus his own grades. I had him for arithmetic from grade one to grade eight.
- F: He?
- J: Yes, it was a man teacher.
- F: That was unusual at the time, right?
- J: Well, they had one of the women teachers over in the lower grades. But he would teach the arithmetic and she would come over and teach the music. But the reason I say this is I had the same teacher for eight years and no one else. I had one other teacher for part of the subject. But I learned everything that teacher knew.
- F: He knew everything about you too.
- J: They were ready to build a high school in our home community by the year I graduated, but we were in the Depression and there was no way of getting any money. So when we graduated,

there was no school to go to but the city school. Since my father owned property in Johnstown, this qualified us to attend high school in the city school, which was nine miles away. Of course during the Depression, there was no way of getting there.

F: This is about 1935?

J: Well, let's see, I started when I was six. It would be about 1935. This was right in the middle of the Depression.

Anyway, let me tell you a little bit about this Depression. When it hit, of course, my father didn't think he would go under so he kept using all of the funds. Of course, he was incorporated. I remember them sitting out there trying to decide what to do as far as money goes on this incorporation thing because they couldn't take the house or our money that the family had if he went under as a corporation. It was like this thing in New York City last week. They didn't think they were going to go under, so they kept trying to get up all the money they could to keep from going under. Well, in the first place they got our savings account. They took all the money they had put away for us for college. They took it out of the savings account and put it in the business to try to save it.

My father had a brother who was in business with him that had, maybe, \$25,000 or \$30,000 so he borrowed that from him to try to keep the business going. He borrowed from every person he could to keep alive. He owed all those people that money when he finally went under. So the only way to pay it back was--like in my uncle's case--to let them come and live in our house rent-free until his money was paid back. All during the Depression my uncle lived in the spare bedroom. Five of us slept together in one room on the third floor so Uncle Otto could have that room because dad owed him that money. That's the way he paid him back.

Anyway, when the banks failed--I'll never forget that--what money they had, people just lost it. I know of one man, for instance, who worked in a farmers market who came home that Saturday night with his take, about one hundred and some dollars, put it in that drop deposit box in the bank and then overnight . . . he never got it. It was gone.

F: Never got it.

J: Never got a thing for it. Well, actually they settled them ten cents on the dollar, I think, or something

like that whewn they finally settled.

When my father lost his business, it just seemed like a calamity. We had eleven children and, of course, my brothers all had to come home from college. They had to sell their cars. We sold everything we could sell to still keep the house. He tried to keep the house. He had a third mortgage on the house. Luckily, he had bought sixty acres of land with the house. He hung onto that. My mother is still selling land off of that original sixty acres.

F: Really?

J: My mother sells a little land every year and gives us each a share of the money for Christmas. She does this because she doesn't want us to fight over money when she's gone.

Now, remember, she went through the Depression too. The only thing they held onto was this sixty acres of land and that had three mortgages on it. Whie my dad was able to pay this thing off during the war while working as a machinist and driving a school bus. He owned three school busses, and he paid back every cent. He never went bankrupt. See, our church doesn't allow you to go bankrupt.

F: Oh, really?

J: Yes. At that time you would never stay in our church if you went bankrupt. Everybody that he owed money to, he paid back after he lost his business.

F: That's something, you don't find too many people who are able to do that anymore.

J: During the Depression, I was lucky to get to high school at all. It was nine miles away. There was no bus transportation. We hitchhiked or walked. There was a railroad track. I remember we used to walk the railroad track. There was one place where the train crossed a stream on a bridge. I remember everybody getting down over the side of that bridge when a train would come. We would get caught because it was about a half a mile long.

I remember one night, my brother was walking home along the track. There was a Y in that one railroad. It was dark when he was walking the line and he got on the wrong Y, and so he walked until three o'clock in the morning. When he finally came to the town of Windber he called. I remember we were out looking that night for him. The cops were out, everybody. We didn't know what happened to him. He had walked that whole night. Finally at three o'clock he got into that

town and called home so we went and got him. This was coming home from school, high school.

We couldn't enter into any athletics or anything because it was so far away, and I really hated that because sports and music I just loved.

F: You had to get home right away.

J: There was no way of getting home after a game or anything, so we were just lucky to get our high school education. Of course, there was no point in taking college courses so I took a business course in high school, straight business. I didn't have any math past general math. I didn't have any algebra. I didn't have any sciences. I graduated with a business course because I wanted to go into business. It was the only thing to go into, with no question.

F: Right.

J: So, when I got out of high school then, there was no point in thinking about college. During my last year of high school, I got a job as a photographer, as a part-time worker. The owner of the studio was James DuPont. He had graduated from M.I.T. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] with a degree in engineering, but decided that before he went into the family business he would try photography. So he opened a studio there in Johnstown where he was born and he did really well. I was down there one Saturday and I said that I wanted a job as a photographer. He said, "Well, what can you do?" I said, "I've been at it now for about three or four years. I'll show you some of my work." I brought it down and showed it to him. He said, "Well, I believe you are a possibility." I worked with him part-time during my last year of high school. After high school I worked there often, and then on Saturdays. So I had a job there right away after I graduated from high school. Do you know how much I made?

F: How much?

J: Five dollars a week.

F: Five dollars a week?

J: The head photo printer made eighteen and I remember I used to envy him. He worked in the darkroom, and he was making eighteen dollars a week.

Clothing was a real problem. I remember that first five dollars. I needed an overcoat so I bought a coat "on time" (installment). First time I ever went into debt. I paid two dollars a month for two years to pay that coat off.

F: So that coat was around \$48?

J: Yes, it would have been, yes, about \$48 total. It was only about a \$30 coat. I paid two dollars a month, but I remember that. Out of my five dollar a week check, I paid two a month for my coat. After I got a raise to seven dollars, then I gave the two dollars to my mom for room and board. I only worked there about a year. They had just invented nylon and the family needed Mr. DuPont as an engineer for a plant in Oregon. They made him such an offer that he just couldn't refuse. He said, "How would you like to run my studio to see whether you could do it?" I was just young, about seventeen, and the other employees were also quite young. We said we would try it. But that six months that we tried to run that studio, I just went to pieces. I got an ulcer. I was on a sippy diet.

F: This was at what age?

J: This was at eighteen. We tried to run that place and just couldn't handle it. I worked day and night.

F: All the tension at that time.

J: We had three schools that we contracted for.

F: For school pictures and things?

J: Right. We had the senior high and two junior highs and we had to handle all of that, plus the weddings. And really, I was just overworked and then finally I just came down. The doctor said that I would have to quit work. I didn't know what we were going to do with the studio. So we finally just sold the whole thing out and called it quits.

I took a job as a photo salesman in one of the big department stores in town. One night we had a party and a girlfriend of mine introduced me to a girlfriend of hers. She attracted me right away, right like that, so I made a date to take her to a movie the next week. I took her to the movie, and we went to another movie. She would come to the store and we would go after work. I said, "How about me picking you up at home?" She said she lived with her grandmother. I said, "Isn't your father living?" She said, "no". So I picked her up at her grandmother's. I started dating this girl and I dated her about, oh, maybe three months and we got pretty serious. One day, I'll never forget that day, I was at the camera department and that girl that had introduced us came up and said, "Dwight, I'm going to have to tell you this, Jessie, she's married."

F: This girl is married?

J: I said, "She's married?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Where's her husband?" She said, "At home." I said, "Well, what's she doing living at her grandmother's?" She said, "She doesn't live at her grandmother's." I said, "She doesn't?" She said, "No, she lives at home. She has a three year old baby, and her name is Mrs. . . . " I knew her by her maiden name. I said, "Gee whiz, what do I do?" She said, "Well, I don't know. That's up to you." I said, "Well, you introduced her." She said, "But I didn't think it was going to go this far." Well, this girl kept talking to me. We talked about what we liked. She often did mention about whether I thought people should be given a second chance. I said, "Sure I think people should be given a second chance!" (Laughter) Just like a kid would do. I had no idea this girl was married.

So one day this guy came into the store. He said, "I hear you're dating my wife." I said, "No man. I'm not dating anybody's wife." He said, "Yes, you are because I got proof of it." I said, "Well, that was last week. From now on I'm not dating anybody's wife." He said, "I hear you are." I said, "No sir, no way." That girl wouldn't let me alone. She wanted a divorce from her husband. She wanted to name me as a correspondent. So I went back to my lawyer teacher at the high school and I asked him whether she had any legal hold on me. He said, "Did you ever write her anything?" I said, "Valentines and that junk." He said, "Did you ever give her any rings or anything?" I said, "No. I gave her a locket." He said, "Was there any inscription on it or anything." I said, "No, just a locket." He said, "I don't think she can really do anything to you. Just skip." I said, "What do you mean skip?" He said, "You're going to have to skip." I said, "I don't know anything more to do." He said, "You're probably going to have to leave." He hounded me! This guy, he followed me one night with a gun.

F: Oh no!

J: Yes, he was out to get me, at least that's what they said. I saw him following me one night on the way home. I didn't know what to do so I went into my boss and I said, "Gee, I don't know. I'm going to have to quit. I can't keep working here. This girl won't leave me alone." She would come here every day. The guys would see her coming. They called me Zeke. They said, "Hey, Zeke, she's here!" She just hounded me to death. She wanted me to marry her. She really did. I told my boss, "I'm getting along, but I'm going to have to look for other work." He said, "Well, what could you do?" I said, "I don't know what I can do." So I said I would check the ads in the paper and see what I could

do and I saw this one ad with the National Cash Register Company and they were asking for apprentices for the National Cash Register Company for their training school, for try out. So I just went down there and put my name in and one night I went down there and they put a whole cash register in front of my hands and said, "Now, I want you to look at this real close for about an hour." It was an old cash register. So I said, "Okay, I'll look at it." I looked at it for about an hour and then they took it into the back room and in five minutes they came out and had it all apart. It must have been a different cash register but it was one just like it. They said, "Okay, now put it back together again like you saw it." I said, "This thing?" He said, "Yes, that's the test." So I started and, by gosh, I got it. I got it back together. I got a real good grade on the thing, and I got hired for their training school.

Once that Depression hit, boy there was no money anywhere. I remember, all of a sudden, it evaporated. You wouldn't believe how money could all of a sudden evaporate out of the community. Nobody had money.

I remember my schoolteacher telling us this. He said, "Now, I don't care whether you school kids learn anything or not. I'm going to make my five dollars a day anyway." That's what he said, but do know he went three years without a paycheck.

F: Did the teachers at the time live in the . . .

J: Right in the community.

F: I mean, did they live with the students themselves?

J: No. He had a home. He used to take in washing, he and his wife.

F: Well, we'll stop the interview right now, Mr. Jacobs. I would like to thank you very much because you certainly have given us a wealth of practical information on how it was to have lived during that unforgettable period which we call the Great Depression. Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW