

Memories of the Great Depression

A TIME REMEMBERED

John Donald O'Shea

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Contents

Preface..... v

Chapter 1—William “Willie” McAdams

*“WHEN I WAS A BOY, MY DAD HAD TWO
REMEDIES WHEN WE GOT SICK. THE FIRST
CONSISTED OF A BAG OF STEWED ONION SPREAD
ACROSS THE ‘PATIENT’S’ CHEST. THE SECOND WAS
A SPOONFUL OF KEROSENE SWEETENED WITH
SUGAR.” 5*

Chapter 2—Dorothy Kittleson

*“ON OUR WAY HOME, IT TURNED INTO A
BLIZZARD. DAD COULDN’T SEE. SO, HE JUST LET
THE HORSES DECIDE WHERE TO GO, AND THEY
SOMEHOW GOT US HOME.”23*

Chapter 3—Mike Hopkins

*“BY 1931, THINGS HAD HIT BOTTOM. OUR
CHRISTMAS GIFT THAT YEAR WAS MY LITTLE
SISTER, MARTHA, WHO WAS BORN ON
DECEMBER 22, 1931.”27*

Chapter 4—Sister Felicia Schlechter, OSF

“I ALWAYS SAID, GENE AUTRY LED ME TO THE CONVENT.” 39

Chapter 5—Maury Martin

“THE RADIO HAD WIRES WITH ALLIGATOR CLIPS THAT ATTACHED TO THE BATTERY POSTS. TO RECHARGE THE BATTERY, YOU HAD TO TAKE IT TO TOWN.” 49

Chapter 6—Dorothy T. Denkhoff

“AT THE TIME OF MY PARENTS’ DIVORCE, DAD WAS LIVING AT MOLINE’S LECLAIRE HOTEL, WHICH WAS A VERY NICE PLACE IN THOSE DAYS.” 63

Chapter 7—Donald D. Beck

“WE HAD A RADIO. IT LOOKED RATHER LIKE A CHEST OF DRAWERS. IT WAS A FLOOR MODEL. I TELL MY KIDS, WE USED TO HAVE A FISHBOWL SITTING ON TOP. WE’D WATCH THE FISH SWIM WHILE LISTENING TO THE RADIO, AND THAT WAS OUR TV.” 71

Chapter 8—Marilyn Hannon

“IN THOSE DAYS, THE FIREMEN WOULD TAKE IN OLD, DISCARDED TOYS—OLD BICYCLES AND SLEDS. THEY WOULD FIX THEM AND MAKE THEM USABLE.” 77

Chapter 9—Dan Hohmeier

“WE HAD DAD’S WAKE RIGHT IN THE HOUSE. WE COULDN’T SPARE THE MONEY FOR A FUNERAL PARLOR. SO, WE HAD THE CASKET RIGHT IN THE HOUSE.”87

Chapter 10—Dawn Bartel

“ONE SUNDAY, MOTHER DECIDED TO TAKE US FOR A WALK. WE WALKED UP THIS HILL INTO A WOODED AREA. WHAT WE CAME UPON, I LATER LEARNED, WAS A BOOTLEG STILL.”95

Chapter 11—Ardo Holmgrain

“THE GALBRAITH ADMINISTRATION DID AN AWFUL LOT TO SEPARATE THE STORM SEWERS FROM THE SANITARY SEWERS. . . . ROCK ISLAND ALSO BUILT ITS SEWAGE DISPOSAL PLANT [AND] ITS CENTRAL FIRE STATION . . . ALL THESE IMPROVEMENTS WERE DONE WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION.”103

Chapter 12—Jeanette Ross

“I CAN RECALL THAT DURING THE STRIKE THERE WAS A HOUSE, JUST DOWN THE STREET FROM US, THAT WAS BOMBED. WE WERE AWAKENED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WITH THIS BIG EXPLOSION AND WITH OUR HOUSE SHAKING.”109

Chapter 13—Kathryn “Katie” Foulkes

“NOT EVERYBODY WAS POOR DURING THE DEPRESSION. . . . JOHN AND SUSANNE (DENKMANN) HAUBERG WERE VERY WEALTHY, BUT VERY GENEROUS. MRS. HAUBERG WAS ONE OF THE KINDEST PERSONS AROUND.”.....117

Chapter 14—Carolyn Holmgrain

“YOU SHOULD ALSO MENTION IN YOUR BOOK HOW IMPORTANT SOME OF THE ROCK ISLAND WEALTHY FAMILIES WERE TO THE COMMUNITY.”123

Chapter 15—Joyce Meyer Jacquin

“MY FATHER DIDN’T GO TO ANY CHURCH, BUT HE WOULD STAND OUT IN THE YARD AND TELL YOU THERE WAS ONLY ONE GOD, AND HE WOULD SHOW ME WHERE HE WAS.”127

Chapter 16—Kay Conway Corrigan

“ONCE MOM GOT THAT DRIVER’S LICENSE, HER WHOLE LIFE CHANGED. BEFORE THAT—LIKE MOST FARM WOMEN—SHE SPENT MOST OF HER LIFE AT HOME, OR AT THEIR CHURCH. THEY ALL DID.”135

Chapter 17—Mildred Haynie

“A MAN WOULD COME TO TOWN WITH A MOVIE PROJECTOR, AND HE’D SHOW ONE OR TWO MOVIES IN A HOUSE THAT HE HAD RENTED.”143

Chapter 18—Curt Trevor

“WE PLAYED BASEBALL IN THE ALLEY. IT WAS PRETTY HARD KEEPING THE BALL IN PLAY AND OUT OF THE NEIGHBORS’ YARDS.”147

Chapter 19—Norma Lodge

“AT ONE TIME, THERE WERE THIRTY-SIX KIDS IN THAT SCHOOL, WITH ONE TEACHER AND EIGHT GRADES.”151

Chapter 20—Frank Lyons

“SOME AMERICANS . . . BELIEVED THAT THE CAPITALISTIC SYSTEM OF THE US WAS FALTERING, AND THAT IT SHOULD BE ABANDONED AND REPLACED WITH THE RUSSIAN SYSTEM.”157

Chapter 21—Helen Faye Green

“I REMEMBER COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL ONE DAY. MY DAD WAS UP ON THE ROOF OF THE BARN, PUTTING A POLE UP ON THE VERY PEAK OF THE BARN. THERE WAS A SECOND, SIMILAR POLE ATOP THE HOUSE, AND THERE WAS A WIRE BETWEEN THE TWO. THAT WAS THE AERIAL FOR THE RADIO.”165

Chapter 22—Robert Scott

*“WE BELONGED TO THE METHODIST CHURCH AND THEY HAD A WOMAN’S ORGANIZATION THAT WAS CALLED THE ‘GLEANERS.’ . . . [THEY] WOULD HAVE CLOTHES-PATCHING CONTESTS. . . . EVERYBODY WORE CLOTHES WITH VISIBLE PATCHES. . . . THEY HAD CONTESTS FOR WHO COULD MAKE THE NEATEST—THE BEST-LOOKING—PATCH.”*173

Chapter 23—S.M.F., O.S.F.

*“YEARS LATER, MY MOTHER WORKED AT ST. JOSEPH’S ORPHANAGE. . . . AFTER CARING FOR HER OWN TWELVE CHILDREN, MY MOTHER CARED FOR THE YOUNGER CHILDREN THERE.” ..*177

Chapter 24—Albert J. Saia

*“THE GREAT THING ABOUT THE DEPRESSION YEARS WAS IT PAVED THE WAY FOR THE U.S.A TO EMERGE AS THE WORLD’S LEADER—AS THE PREEMINENT LAND OF OPPORTUNITY—THE LAND OF DEMOCRACY, INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.”*185

Chapter Notes187

About the Author191

Preface

Why have I written this book? The answer is simple. In writing my first book, *Memories of the Great Depression: A Time Forgotten*, the process of gathering first-hand personal accounts of people who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s and preserving them became a labor of love.

My great regret is that I came late to the task. By the time I did, my mother and father were dead, as well as almost all of their siblings and friends. Their memories went with them to their graves. As I sit at my computer this January 19, 2022, fewer and fewer persons remain who lived through and survived the Great Depression.

Most historians tell us that the Great Depression began in 1929 and ran into the World War II years. Some argue that it continued until the end of the war. Therefore, to have a memory of the twelve years from 1929 through 1941, a person would have had to have been born early in 1926. That would make them about ninety-five years old today.

The people who grew up during the Great Depression are the same people who soon selflessly exchanged their civilian clothes for military and naval uniforms. They fought the war—and many of them died—to preserve a free America and the Western tradition of democracy. In the 1941 words of FDR, we fought so people in the free world could continue to enjoy the “Four Freedoms”—freedom of speech and worship; freedom from want and fear. It was this generation of Americans, raised during the Great Depression, who freely faced death and disability in the war, who have most appropriately been labeled “Our Greatest Generation.”

The period from 1929 to 1941 was truly a “transitional” period. On the farms, cars, trucks, and tractors were slowly replacing horses. In the

cities, the transition was swifter. But as late as the 1940s in Chicago, I can still recall horses plying the alleys, pulling the wagons of the “Rags, old iron men.” And I can recall my grandfather’s bottling company’s chain-driven delivery trucks, which were still in use in the early 1950s.

For the people on the farms, and even in the small towns, during the 1930s, modernization came more slowly. Central heating had not yet taken the place of the wood cook stove in the kitchen, or of the kerosene stove in the dining room. Electrification of the farms was years behind that in the big cities. Many farm radios operated on batteries. Kerosene lamps were the norm. Few farmhouses had running water or indoor toilets. The outhouse was still in common usage, and with it, the Sears catalog.

The 1930s were a time when people made do with what they had. For most Americans, it was an era of hand-me-downs, darning socks, and making do with the bare necessities.

For the more well-to-do, of course, there were still luxuries. But the wealthy who had common sense took care not to flaunt their wealth, while the wealthy with compassion used significant portions of their wealth for civic improvements and to help the poor and destitute.

Today, the idea of waking your deceased father in the living room of the family home would be unthinkable. But in the 1930s, when families had little or no money to spare, the dead were waked in their own parlors. A new baby sister, born just before Christmas, was considered the family’s Christmas present! Watching a goldfish swim in his bowl sitting atop the console radio was the “early television” of the 1930s.

And it was an age when faith in God animated many lives. Neighbors shared with neighbors. When a father died, his neighbors would provide little jobs for their deceased neighbor’s sons. Neighbors and families would hand down used clothing. Firemen would refurbish broken toys to create Christmas presents for children who would otherwise go without. The wealthy built WMCAs, YWCAs, and large dormitory facilities for those without shelter and for young, single women who came to the cities looking for work. Food was routinely provided for “hobos” who came to the door in search of a meal.

It was an era when a girl could find her vocation as a nun either in the kindness and vibrance of a nun teaching at her school, or in a Gene Autry movie—in which Gene returned to find that the girl he loved had taken the nun's veil. It was an era where a father could stand in his yard and point to the sky and show his daughter where God was. It was also an era during which the deacons of the old Baptist church would sit in their reserved places in the front of the church, proudly wearing their best black Sunday suits and spats about their ankles—and when, at the prescribed time during the service, they would lift up the floorboards behind the pulpit to expose the baptismal water into which the minister would then plunge the baptismal candidates.

It was a time when children, and even adults, knew they were poor, but knew everybody else was, too. (You knew you were poor when you had to wear an itchy old woolen swim suit.)

But looking back now, most of the young people who grew up during the Depression would say,

“Being poor didn't hurt us. The Depression taught us all a lot of lessons. It made us stronger. In some ways it was a very simple time, because nobody had a lot. What made it bearable was that if you went without, you knew your friends also were going without—as long as you had food.”

But if life seemed normal to the children raised during the Depression years so long as they had food, things were not normal for their parents and other adults. It was not uncommon for a parent to scavenge the city dump for food to feed his family, or to cut dandelions along a railroad track to harvest greens for dinner. Adults remembered and they saved. They feared the coming of the next Great Depression.

“I think people who were a little older were affected more by the Depression. I had older cousins and friends that I remained in contact with throughout my

life. They never got over the need to have things— to have possessions. I've always felt I had enough. I've always felt very fortunate to have had 'enough.' I never felt deprived."

The accounts contained in this book are the original, first-hand stories of folks who lived through the Great Depression. I have taken their accounts as they were given to me on my tape recorder. I have changed nothing of substance, but I have organized the materials to create coherent accounts and to avoid redundancies. And of course, I have supplied the punctuation. But the stories are entirely theirs; not mine.

John Donald O'Shea

Note: If you have a story of life during the Great Depression that you would allow me to use in a possible sequel to this sequel, please contact me at irishplaywright@gmail.com.

**WHEN I WAS A BOY, MY DAD HAD TWO
REMEDIES WHEN WE GOT SICK. THE FIRST
CONSISTED OF A BAG OF STEWED ONION
SPREAD ACROSS THE ‘PATIENT’S’ CHEST.
THE SECOND WAS A SPOONFUL OF
KEROSENE SWEETENED WITH SUGAR.**

**- WILLIAM “WILLIE” MCADAM -
(Born 1928)**

“Hey, don’t throw that out!”

“But Daddy, it’s no good; the expiration date has passed.”

“I’m a Depression baby. We never heard of expiration dates. We tasted it or smelled it. If it wasn’t sour or stinky, we kept it.”

My kids have heard me say that many times about the “old days.” And they have had no desire to hear again “how we flattened both ends of tin cans and squeezed toothpaste tubes completely flat during the war.” So, they would quietly leave the stuff by the garbage can and let the old man takeover. I could hear the faint mumbling, “I wish he would get off that Depression stuff.”

My father was William McAdams. My mother was Helen Davis. Both of my parents were born in Missouri. Dad was born in 1893, and Ma in 1904.

My parents, William and Helen Davis McAdams, had three children. I was born in 1928. My brother David was born in 1930. And my sister, Helen McAdams Allen, was born in 1931. I was named after our dad, and my sister, Helen, was named after our mother.

My mother's father was Charles Davis. His father was Leslie Davis. Leslie Davis was born a slave in 1852 in Missouri. He last saw his mother at a slave auction when he was nine years old. Great-grandfather Leslie died a free man in Illinois in the 1920s. My mother talked about how much she cared about him. She wondered if anyone else remembered him.

Grandpa Charles Davis had always been a farmhand until he received a letter from a friend who had moved to Moline. That friend told Grandpa that he was making \$15.00 a week! That was double the \$7.50 they had been making on the farm. Grandpa decided to see for himself. He told Grandma Georgia, his wife, that he was going to Moline to look for a better-paying job. Before long, Grandpa began sending Georgia cash in an envelope to pay their bills. One day, he put in extra cash. Grandma Georgia immediately announced to their two children, Helen (my mother) and Chester, that, "We are going to Moline!"

In 1912, my Grandmother Georgia, with Helen, age eight, and Chester, age five, arrived at Moline. Later, Grandpa and Grandma had two more children, Martha and Chuck.

When Grandma Georgia, Helen, and Chester arrived in Moline, the family moved in with Grandpa's sister, Matt, who was married to Will Bishop. The Bishops lived in the front unit of a small duplex at 1616 9th Street, Moline, with their three children, Della Mae, Pansy, and Leon. Years later, my mother, Helen, told me, "Lord, I don't know how we all lived there! But that's the way folks did it in those days."

After a while, Grandpa Charles and Will Bishop found better-paying jobs in canal and road construction. They then moved their families

farther east to the 27th Street and 10th Avenue neighborhood of Moline. Eventually, Grandpa Charles found employment at John Deere.

While Grandpa Charles Davis was working in one of the John Deere plants, he became acquainted with a number of men who had served in World War I. One was a fellow Missourian named William McAdams. Like Grandpa, William McAdams was a very religious man. But unlike Grandpa, he loved to dance. Their friendship soon expanded to include the whole Davis family (including Aunt Matt and Uncle Will Bishop).

My father had come to the Quad Cities with a few friends and cousins, and lived at first in East Moline. Eventually he moved to Moline. Later, when I took Ma somewhere, she would point at a house and say, “That’s where your dad once lived.”

Grandpa had previously lost his first wife. Now Georgia died, as did her son, Chester. That left Grandpa’s oldest daughter, Helen (my mother), who was in high school, to care for her baby brother Chuck and infant sister Martha. Helen raised her younger siblings with help from her cousins, Della Mae and Pansy. This was just one reason why our families were always very close. That’s what families did in those days.

Grandpa and his three children, Helen, Martha, and Chuck lived in the house at 15th Street and 26th Avenue, at the northwest corner of the intersection. It sat directly north and across the avenue from the Tabernacle Baptist Church. Grandpa’s house faced south, toward the church. It looked very much like something out of a Grant Woods painting—the one with the older couple standing in front of an old Gothic house. Grandpa remained in this house, with his two teenage children Martha and Chuck, until my dad died in 1935.

Even before my mother met my dad, Ma had a very active social life. She was a very talented pianist. The church members had a hard time trying to persuade “Mr. Davis” (Grandpa) to pay for her lessons. Grandpa finally gave in and fifty years later she was still playing for the Tabernacle Baptist Church. Later, she would take her two siblings with her to Chicago, and all three lived with another one of Grandpa’s sisters while Ma took training for a job back in Moline.

When William McAdams (my father) met my mother, she was a recent Moline High School graduate. By that time, she was the regular pianist for the Tabernacle Baptist Church. Ma said that Dad was very patient with her while she decided just how serious their relationship was going to become. When their courtship turned serious, it was soon followed by their marriage. In August 1926, they became man and wife.

The newlyweds, William and Helen McAdams, rented a house on the southeast corner of the intersection at 15th Street and 26th Avenue, across the street and directly east from the Tabernacle Baptist Church. The owners were colored. They had originally come from Missouri, as had many in the neighborhood.

Three corners of the intersection of 15th Street and 26th Avenue were then occupied by colored families, with the church on the fourth (southwest) corner.

Our house was a two-story wood frame building. Even then, our house had running water and electricity. A potbelly stove in the living room provided some heat in the house. It and the kitchen stove burned coal. There were grates in the living room ceiling to allow the heat to rise to warm the upstairs. We did not have a hot water heater. Water was heated on the kitchen stove in large pots. We washed ourselves in a wash basin in the sink, or bathed in a large tub set out on the floor. To do the laundry, water was heated on the kitchen stove and poured into the tub—the same tub in which we bathed. The clothes were then scrubbed on a washboard with Fels Naptha soap chips. They were then hung up to dry on a clothesline. To press the clothes, mother used an iron that she put atop the stove until it got hot.

Our basement had a dirt floor. The walls were slabs of rock. There were shelves along the wall that held many Mason jars filled with preserves that Ma made. There were no inside stairs going down to the basement; the entrance was outside. It was covered by what they called a “grade door.”

One day “someone” chopped into that door with a hatchet. David told me about it, and I asked David if Dad looked mad. I told him, “Don’t say anything about it.” Neither of us was punished, but I would guess

that Ma told him he should not have left that hatchet out where his little boys might find it and play with it.

Behind our house, we had a garden, and to the south there were several trees. A boxelder tree in front, near the sidewalk, was my favorite tree to climb because of its long horizontal limbs. There was a cherry tree in back that was also fun to climb, from which Dad would make cherry wine, which he placed in a big crock jar to let it ferment. The biggest tree was an elm tree, which was in the center of our yard. It, too, had its use. Uncle Chuck, who still lived across the street, strung a rope way up high on one of the limbs. He then tied an old tire on the other end. It made a great swing. Then, there was an old wooden door, lying in the backyard, which covered a well from which the pump had been removed. We were constantly cautioned to stay away from it so we wouldn't fall in the well.

We had a telephone during the Depression. Then the bills got too high, and it was removed. I can remember one day the telephone serviceman came in and just took our phone out. During the Depression years, times were very bad. I often heard that people had been "thrown out in the street." Years later, I came across a letter to Dad from our landlady in Chicago, who thanked him for an overdue payment. I don't remember exactly how much he had paid, but I recall that it wasn't even \$10. I later learned why she was so thankful. She, too, she was struggling and needed the funds.

Today our old house is always lavishly decorated for each holiday throughout the year with gigantic inflatable creatures, blow molds, colored lights, flags, or anything else that would be an appropriate holiday decoration. When I lived there as a boy, the only decorations we had were soaped-up windows for Halloween.

The Tabernacle Baptist Church in those days played a very large part in our lives. Our church, like many others (white and black), moved to a better location as its membership grew. Tabernacle Baptist Church originally held its meetings in family homes. Then for a while, services were held in the old library building downtown, north of the railroad tracks, on 15th Street. By 1912 a few more colored families had moved

into the Moline area, so the church members bought a little church on 7th Street and 15th Avenue. They then moved it to the corner of 15th Street and 26th Avenue. (A newer church building is on that site now, but it is still Tabernacle Baptist Church.) When you walked into the vestibule of the church, you noticed an old rope hanging from the ceiling. This rope must have been connected to the bell in the steeple, but I never heard nor saw the bell.

Because of my restlessness in church (the grownups called it “cuttin’ up”) when I was very young, I had to sit with the deacons. Grandpa was one of the deacons. For whatever reason, their shoes were laced above their ankles, and they wore a funny piece of cloth with buttons wrapped around each shoe. I think they were called “spats.” They were old, stern, serious men. Grandpa had a rule that there was no cooking or laundry done in either of our homes on Sunday. That being said, I occasionally did detect an aroma that certainly was not aftershave. And I know the odor was not coming from my grandfather. It was a persistent rumor that some of the deacons were known to frequent a place called “Old Settlers” in downtown Moline.

I can recall one particular Sunday when all the deacons remained seated. Then, as the congregation began singing, men began lifting up the floor boards behind the pulpit. Next, the Reverend Fulton, wearing a black robe and hip boots, marched up the aisle while reciting scriptures. It suddenly dawned on me that I was about to witness my first Baptism. I was five or six at the time.

The Reverend Fulton then stepped up behind the altar and greeted the candidate, who was also dressed in a bathrobe. Both stepped into the water tank. The Reverend placed his arm under the candidate’s back, pinched his nostrils, and immersed him in the water. Then, as they both emerged from the tank, dripping water, I recall the congregation singing “Wade in the Water, Children.”

And another similar memory comes to mind. About ten years later, my brother David, my sister Helen, and I were all baptized. By then, I was a pretty big guy, and when Reverend Allen plunged me into the

water, my size and weight nearly pulled him under too! (Later, my sister Helen's married name was also Allen; they were not related.)

The Depression affected everybody. Important questions that affected our community were discussed at church. One such question, which was discussed as a matter of church business, was, "What should a boy do when he turns sixteen?"

Should he quit school and help out at home? Should he continue in school and graduate at eighteen? Some boys wanted to quit and help out, but quitting usually meant working at a hotel as a bellhop or in a shoe-shine parlor. Or it could mean joining the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and getting a regular paycheck. Others felt the best choice was to stay in school. My Uncle Chuck made his choice and was very fortunate. He stayed in school and graduated, and then got a job at John Deere. He retired forty years later as a superintendent. For many other boys, the coming of WWII settled the issue.

Ours was a racially mixed neighborhood. The area was called Stewartville.

The first two houses across the street, north from us, were colored-owned—they were owned by the Laniers and Barnes. The rest of the houses on that side of the street were white-owned, including the Bethel Baptist Chapel.

But we were lucky. There just happened to be a large house on 30th Avenue for sale. My folks scraped up enough money to rent and later buy it. Once again, the family lived together in one house. My Uncle Chuck stayed with us, even after he married. He and his wife and their two children stayed with us until after the war ended.

This house was much larger. It even had inside stairs to the basement! And there was even a furnace in the basement! The whole house was heated by hot air through the floor registers. There was running water. But we were not connected to the city sewers; our sewage system drained outside to a septic tank. Periodically, my brother David and I had to clean out the tile pipes which would get clogged up with grease. There was a horrible smell! Ma would have to hire someone from time to time to empty that tank when it filled up. Another set of

pipes channeled the overflow toward the low ground between us and 15th Street.

We had a radio. For good reception a wire was connected to it that led to a metal rod outside. That was the antenna. We still burned coal in the kitchen stove and kept food in an icebox on the back porch.

There was a garage, which soon was converted into a chicken house. We raised chickens and always had meat and fresh eggs. On Saturdays, Ma would grab a chicken by its legs and wring its neck. I thought that was too cruel, so I used a hatchet.

There were three empty lots close by. We used them for a “victory garden” during the war. It was normal then to plant a garden. We would plant beets, carrots, asparagus, tomatoes, and potatoes. We also had pole snap beans and peas. There was a grapevine which produced preserves, juice, and pies. We also grew mustard, turnip greens, collard greens, and onions. And rhubarb! We were never hungry—just poor.

There were woods nearby and Uncle Chuck hunted. He provided many rabbits and squirrels, which we ate.

As I mentioned above, the Tabernacle Baptist Church sat at the southwest corner of 26th Avenue and 15th Street. Kitty-corner from the church sat an empty lot, which was shared as a parking lot by the church and Garfield School.

Behind Grandpa's house, on the north side, the land sloped downward to a flat bottom. Actually, it was more like a hollow. That part of the lot was below street and sidewalk level. Grandpa farmed in the hollow. That's where he had his garden. He was a farmer. He planted potatoes and corn down there. From the west side, it was easy to go down there with a mule or a horse. I followed him several times while he plowed. I was only five or six at the time. He also converted an old shack on the property into a chicken house.

Grandpa's house now is long gone. The land behind his house where he farmed has now been filled in. The power company's substation now sits where his house did.

A half-block south from where we lived were a few empty lots and a farmhouse with hogs. My friend Teddy and I wrestled there, and I

stepped on a pitch fork. The word “lockjaw” was mentioned, but my folks couldn’t afford a doctor. So, band-aids and iodine were applied, and I healed just fine.

A little farther south, 15th Street ended at a deep hollow, which drained under 30th Avenue into a creek. Beyond 30th Avenue was pasture. In those days, 30th Avenue and the southernmost block of 15th Street were not paved. They wouldn’t be for years after.

I don’t remember too much about my early life. But while we were still in our first house, we three children were taught to say our prayers each night before bedtime. Ma or Dad would be right beside us, and we would kneel down by the bed, put our elbows on the covers, and clasp our hands as we repeated after them, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” My wife Charlotte and I did the same with our kids. I described this nightly scene to a couple of them many years later and we all laughed because we remembered how one of them fell asleep in that position—knees on the floor and elbows on the bed.

And I can still recall vividly a time when my sister, Helen, was lying in her little baby crib, breathing rapidly and forcefully fighting for her life. She had pneumonia. It was awfully bad. She was just breathing so hard. I could feel the tension and anxiety in the house as we all looked and listened. Everybody thought she was going to die. I didn’t understand. I had never seen death before. I didn’t know what was going on. But somehow, she survived. She turned out to be pretty tough. I think this was the first time in my life that I became aware of things surrounding me. I can remember hearing them say that she had “bronchitis.”

I think one of my earliest memories comes from something that happened when I was out in our backyard playing. I was very young. I heard this loud noise, and when I looked up in the sky to see what it was, I saw this huge cigar-shaped thing. I ran back to hide in the house. My mother or my Uncle Chuck explained to me that what I had seen was a dirigible. That dirigible nearly frightened me to death.

Bicycles were nothing new during this time, but when the balloon tires (pneumatic) were being advertised as a must-have, a boy simply had to have them. Uncle Chuck was working in a hamburger-chili place

on 16th Street which has since gone through many changes over the years. It is now a Mexican restaurant. Back in the 1930s it was owned by a black fellow from Michigan. Chuck soon made enough money to buy a Liberty Bike, with fancy tires and fenders. (I may be confusing this bike with a Schwinn model.) I snuck a ride on it once. I fell. Chuck noticed the dent, and believe me, I never touched his things again. Later, it was stolen and never found. But soon afterwards, Chuck's attention turned to Ford automobiles. "Oh, see your Ford dealer, the price is low, and baby how those used cars go! The word is getting all around. Ford used cars are the best in town." Chuck became a believer and for the rest of his life, it was a Ford . . . or a Buick.

When I was a boy, my dad had two remedies when we got sick. The first consisted of a bag of stewed onion spread across the "patient's" chest. The second was a spoonful of kerosene sweetened with sugar. I don't know where he came up with these remedies, but I can remember my mother telling me that Dad was taught to smoke and chew tobacco as a child by his grandmother, who smoked a pipe! So, perhaps . . .

In September 1933, my mother registered me at Garfield School. A short time later, she told me that I had to wait until January to start school because of my birth date. That was the rule in Moline schools. If I had been born in September instead of October 1928, I would have been eligible to start school in the fall. I bawled like a baby. I couldn't understand why.

Two months later, on Monday, the eleventh of March, I left to go to Garfield School. I was six at the time. I had just gotten into first grade. My sister was just three. I had assumed my dad had gone to work. But on the way to school, which was only a half block from our home, I saw him coming down the street with his lunch bucket. That was odd, because he should have been working the first shift then. When I got back home, my mother told me that he came back home sick and had gone up to bed. His bedroom was upstairs. And he never got out of bed again, except to go to the bathroom. I can remember seeing him wearing an old nightgown. I guess a lot of people wore them in those days.

As a little kid, I didn't understand what was going on. David was just going into kindergarten.

But even at my age, I knew that there was a lot of fear and tension among the grownups. They kept using the word "pneumonia." I overheard someone say that "Mr. Mac was getting along better." So, the next day after school, I went out to play with my friend Teddy. Around supertime, Mrs. Moss came across the street to tell me that I had to come home. My first thought was about my dad. I asked her if he was dead. She answered so softly that I didn't pursue the subject.

Mrs. Moss and I entered the back of the house through the kitchen. A bunch of relatives, mainly those on Ma's side, were already in the living room. I saw some of my cousins for the first time. I remember one named Velma, which was an unusual name to me. We all waited in the living room. Soon two undertakers brought down a wicker basket, carrying my dad's body. The undertakers carried him out of the house and over, I think, to Mr. Brown's Funeral Home in Rock Island. That was Thursday, March 14, 1934.

The next day in school, one of my oldest and best buddies, Frank (Cork) Mahar, was the only one that I can recall who mentioned my dad's death and who offered condolence. How quickly the news of Dad's death travelled in our very friendly neighborhood!

On Saturday, his body was brought back to our house. That's where the visitation was held. We kids were in the kitchen, and every once in a while, we would look into the other room, where my dad's body was, and say, "Oh, he moved!" We still didn't understand what death was—all we could see was that Dad was sleeping. That Sunday, the funeral was held across the street at the Tabernacle Baptist Church. From there his body was taken to the Arsenal Cemetery. One of the members of the honor guard was Mr. Thor, who was our neighbor and the custodian at Garfield School. I remember that some of the gravestones near Dad's grave had the letters "UK" and "COL." Those letters were used by the army to indicate "Unknown" or "Colored." I had no idea what those letters meant. I was only six and a half.

When the family returned home, I remember that Ma checked Dad's lunch bucket. She found an orange and a Milky Way candy bar, which she had cut into three pieces—kind of a symbol for Dad's three kids. It had been in there since Monday morning.

They said he died of bronchitis.

At this time, I was too young to realize the burden of death that had once again settled on Ma's shoulders—three kids, a house, and a very small income. Of course, Grandpa, Chuck, and Martha helped, but I still recall overhearing words like “put out in the street,” “bills,” “rent,” and “overdue.”

We three kids didn't see Ma all day, because she worked in other folks' kitchens. When she would return from working all day, she knew how to relax. All those piano lessons she had taken came to good use. Ma would sit down in front of the piano, which had been her wedding present. The three of us kids would watch and listen as she played classical music. And I can remember us saying, “Now here comes the good part”—those runs in Chopin's, Liszt's, and Rachmaninoff's works. We were thrilled! Martha would often join her, and they played duets out of those Modern Music and Musicians Philharmonic volumes, which had also been a wedding present. I still have them in my house, but I still can't play them to this day, because I hated to practice. On the other hand, David loved to sing. Ma accompanied him on the piano, which steered him into becoming a vocalist all his life. I personally believe he still has one of the finest voices I have ever heard. I can still recall him, in later years, playing the role of Joe and singing “Old Man River” in the Quad City Music Guild's production of *Showboat*.

Before Dad became sick, he and Ma were taking evening courses. Dad had earlier taken courses during President Wilson's Administration, and Ma had taken a typing and shorthand course while in high school—despite some teachers trying to discourage her. But after Dad passed away, only domestic jobs were open for her.

Two months after Dad died, on Decoration Day, Ma took me over to the Arsenal Cemetery to visit his grave. We caught the streetcar, got off downtown and then walked to the island. It was the first of many trips

over there. The most unforgettable memory that I had was noticing Ma crying at Dad's grave. Sixty-eight years later, I was standing at that same place, and watched the workers open Dad's grave so they could place Ma's coffin in with his.

At the time of his death, my dad was at "Union Malleable," which was part of John Deere. I believe he was a molder. My uncle and my grandfather were both molders.

After my father's death, to pay the bills, my mother did domestic work in other people's homes, right up until the end of the war. Ma seriously considered selling her wedding ring to someone who was collecting gold. To help make ends meet, we had roomers from time to time. To help us, people bought Mom's homemade bread. Mom did most of her cooking from scratch.

I will never forget the kindhearted neighbors who gave us water when ours was shut off. They offered David and me odd jobs, such as cutting their grass, digging their small gardens, window washing, etc.

Some of my clothes came from donations collected by our church. I was always embarrassed when I had to wear knickers — "Little Lord Fautleroy" outfits. Everyone knew it meant that I was poor. I even had to wear an old, itchy woolen swimsuit when we waded in the Browning Field pool.

David and I would carry home a gallon of skim milk from Anderson's dairy, which was at about 18th Street and 21st Avenue. It was a long walk, and that pail was very heavy.

Ma made root beer. She also made homemade ice cream. Not even candy tasted as good as when we got to lick the dasher.

And I have quite a few memories of my days at Garfield School. Some good, and some not so good. The principal was Ms. Alice Wheelock, from an old, prominent family in Moline. She was considered to be an old maid. Full-time teachers, in order to keep their jobs, were not allowed to get married.

I remember one day I got a called into the office of Mrs. Cross. She said, "I have been watching you all day." I was a little bigger than some of the other boys—and I am sure being colored made a difference. But

anyway, she talked to me as if I had been bullying the other kids. I wasn't, but that was a warning to me—"I am always watching you."

But she never seemed to notice the boys who teased and taunted me daily. One time, Joe Daebelliehn spoke out and said, "My mother said they are just as good as we are." Yet, if I got too rough with a kid, she did notice that! I would get called into her office. My buddy Teddy Reid, who was quite familiar with office summons, advised me to "shed tears or cry a little" (fake it, in other words).

Although I was often the object of derision from some of the white boys, I also noticed that they picked on Jewish kids. Jack Zukerman never seemed to let it bother him. He would usually smile and walk away. Even the girls didn't escape this unwanted attention. It has been over eighty years, and I still recall that when one girl would walk by the boys, some of them would hold their noses, lie down on the ground, and pretend that they couldn't breathe because she smelled so bad.

One of the teachers during this time was Ms. Gryce, who told us about the Titanic, and how fortunate her aunt had been to have missed the boat. Until then, I had never heard of that ship, but since then, I have never forgotten the Titanic tragedy.

One of my teachers at Garfield was Miss Warner. Our home was only two or three houses south of where she once lived. She taught our class songs from the slavery days, like "Shortnin' Bread" and she read us stories like "Little Black Sambo." It was commonly understood in those days that, if you were a Negro, your ancestors would have most likely been slaves. I have often wondered if she would have taught us that song and read us that story if she had thought a bit more carefully. Or if she had known, as I have previously mentioned, that my great grandfather, Leslie Davis, who had been born in 1852, had been a slave, and had seen his mother auctioned off at a slave market in 1861. But that's just the way things were in those days. I have never borne ill will toward her. I never felt she meant to hurt anybody.

I also have fond memories of some of the other teachers and staff. It was a great honor when Thor, the janitor, chose one of the boys to ring the bell for everybody to come into the school. He was never "Mister,"

just “Thor.” But when an adventurous kid stuck his tongue on the iron railings (naturally it froze), Thor would come to the rescue. Everyone respected him.

I was in one play about Christopher Columbus. I was a sailor, and my one line was “Look, I see a light!” But Columbus gets all the credit for discovering America in 1492. (The lookout—me!—also helped to discover America in 1492, according to my one line in that school play.)

Whenever I watch a football game and see the players pile up on the ball carrier, I think of a similar grade school game: “Let’s play n—r pile.” Most of the boys, except for me, would run and jump on an ever-increasing pile of kids and make-believe that they were having fun.

I enjoyed sports but I never had the advantages that many other fellows had. There was no YMCA for me. Until I went to junior high, what I learned, I learned from my buddy, Cork. While at Garfield School, we played a game called “tag ball.” A boy named Bob Harrah threw a tennis ball at me, and I just stood there . . . and watched it hit me in the eye. No damage was done, but it taught me that I had a lot to learn about sports.

In the fall, while we were still in Garfield School, Cork would organize the guys into a football team. We’d challenge other grade schools. We’d play wherever we could find an empty lot. Of course, it had to be within walking distance. Our usual football field was at the corner of 15th Street and 28th Avenue, about three blocks south of our school.

That fall, our plans were about to be changed. Someone had driven stakes into the ground to mark off where a new owner was going to build a house. Soon stakes were being knocked over by some of the “gang”—probably with parental guidance—who were unhappy about having a new neighbor. I told my Ma about this, and then I learned that the new owner was a black doctor. He told Ma that he changed his mind about coming here.

He remembered a race riot in Chicago, and seeing his father with a gun in his hand, sitting at a window in their apartment. He didn’t want to go through that again, so he left Moline. That lot remained empty for a few more years. Sometimes, when I drive down that street, I look at the house with the brightest, burning red bush at the front door, and I

am reminded of the old days when my buddies and I used to play football with no interference from adults.

When I was young, I can remember a “game” that my Uncle Chuck taught me. Chuck was about ten years older than I was. He and his friends were having a party. The game was “postmaster.” Chuck taught me to go to one of the girls and say, “I have a letter for . . .” and then I’d name the girl. She’d then come out, and she might get kissed by Chuck or one of his friends.

And then, when I was nine, I can recall getting a newspaper at Carlson’s grocery store. The headline said that the German dirigible Hindenburg had crashed and burned at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

And on many hot summer days, we didn’t even need a hose. A water department guy would bring out a huge wrench and would open and flush the hydrants, and we would scamper about in the water.

Another thing we did as boys and girls was sit on the curb and watch the cars drive by. In the 1930s, curbs were much higher than they are today, and the streets in Moline were mostly made of paving bricks. There are still some brick streets in Moline; 13th and 14th Streets still have their bricks. In those days, we had a game, the object of which was to be able to identify cars by their makes. On Sundays, the street was full on both sides with parked cars, waiting for the owners and passengers to exit from the two churches. It was fun for us kids to try to identify the different cars. Whoever could identify the most, won. In those days, there were a lot of different makes of cars that are no longer around today—Pierce-Arrows, Duesenbergs, Marmons, Cords, Grahams, Nashes, Hudsons, DeSotos, Studebakers. And of course, there were Pontiacs, and Chevys, Cadillacs and Olds, and Fords and Lincolns . . .

In the evenings, the block was very quiet. I could hear male voices singing the popular songs of the time like “Sweet Adaline,” “Darling, I Am Growing Older,” “It’s a Long, Long Way to Tipperary,” etc.

As I grew older, I became very familiar with 15th Street, from the railroad tracks along the Mississippi River all the way south to 30th Avenue. In the downtown area, the library strongly attracted me. I loved to read. And there was a device there called a stereopticon which

produced life-like images. The stereopticon was a slide projector that combined two images to create a three-dimensional effect, or make one image dissolve into another.

One time, as I walked back up 15th Street, near 16th Avenue, I noticed a small crowd gathered by the old Roxy Theater. So, I crossed the street to see what was going on. They were all looking at a human-like creature whom they called a “pinhead.” The pinhead was staring back at the people who were staring at him. When I squeezed in to get a better look, suddenly the pinhead looked straight at me and laughed. I was highly embarrassed, and needless to say, I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. I later learned that a “pinhead” is a person suffering from a condition that results in him having an undersized head.

During the Depression, many men plied the streets to make their living.

In those days, most of us had never seen a refrigerator. The iceman would come down the street. He’d take out his pick and chop off a piece of ice from one of those great big fifty-pound cakes he had in the truck. Sometimes, he’d give us kids who were hanging around the splinters. Nothing tasted so good on a hot summer day! Well, almost nothing. Of course, if we had a nickel or a dime, we could go up 16th Street to Whitey’s and get an ice cream cone.

And then there was the ragman. He’d come down our alley and yell something that sounded like, “Oops, allah rags.” He was hard to understand, but we all knew he wanted rags.

This was in the days before they had the Goodwill or Disabled Veterans stores. Sometimes, the ragman had a horse-drawn wagon, and sometimes, a truck. When he had a truck, it was fun to watch him stick his crank in the hole in the truck’s grill, wind it, and let it go. The engine would cough up smoke, as if it had been sleeping, and the ragman would climb back into his truck.

And milkmen also made deliveries using a horse or a truck. In the wintertime, if the milk was left on the porch too long, it would freeze, expand, and push the cap off. That would expose the rich cream that