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# Mr. Jervis Cooke

[00:00:00]

[Song]

Mr. Cooke I always thought the strength of our country was made by the use of the talents of our people. The type of people that made this country were people who were so to speak hungry and wanted to work, wanted to make a living, wanted to get ahead.

Mr. Cooke How else are you going to develop? I think it's very important to work. Have some kind of work, some kind of responsibility not just going out and hooking it up all the time.

Mr. Cooke Obviously there were a lot of people hurt by it, a lot of never got over it. But, there weren't too many suicides because of the depression. Most of the ones that you read about was people who were in the very wealthy class who lost everything and jumped out of the window, but your average person didn't do that. He buckled down and with a little help from the neighbor and the relatives and he got through it somehow or the other. And this is the way you had to do it then because there wasn't anybody else to go to.

[Melody]

Mr. Cooke This is Rudy Valley again, stepping perhaps a bit out of character and singing a song from Americana. A song that has taken its audiences by storm. It may be explained by its theme which is both poignant and different, Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

[Song]

[00:05:22]

Mr. Cooke I worked up in above Scranton, Pennsylvania the Coal Regions. And I think we got hit up there with the depression before it happened in the rest of the country. I believe it was after 1926, a lot of layoffs and shut downs to the coal mines happened. Conditions was bad and a lot of people started leaving the Coal Region around that time and I happened to be one of them.

Mr. Cooke I was in New York working for the United *[inaudible]* [0:05:59] Power Company for a while there. I was there trying to write, try to get a job really in some sort of journalism.

Mr. Cooke My family and I were leaving down on South College Avenue in Newark.

Mr. Cooke Well at that time, we were developing a farm implement business along with a poultry operation and a farming operation which is general farming.

Mr. Cooke I was admitted to the bar during the depression and I worked as a lawyer thought the depression, that is as a private lawyer, trying to develop my private practice.

Mr. Cooke And I was an assistant county agent here in Newcastle County.

Mr. Cooke I was about 15 years old only on the day in December when the story was told about the stock market crash and I didn't begin to understand what it meant.

**[Song]**

Mr. Cooke The press and the bank thought it was a wonderful time and about '28 he thought the economy had just turned around and we were in for a boom period. I borrowed the money and put it in stocks and the value of them shrunk to about one third. It interrupted and left me in a position where I didn't have two pennies that I could rub together to call my own. And any way I could have pay my debts or that anyone could have paid my debts was for me to jump overboard and my administrator, executive could have taken care of it from the life insurance.

Mr. Cooke It didn't really mean much to me coz I didn't have stock and...

Mr. Cooke At that time they were building the first edition to Cribs' School and I remember daddy going up to the school every day and to see if there wasn't something. He was quite handy, could do almost anything as far as mechanically or with his hands or anything like that. And willing, he kept going every day and coming home, nothing, nothing, nothing...

Mr. Cooke Of course at that time I was attending college. From June, from September of 1929 until June of 1931 when I graduated. Then I went out looking for a job. And this was a very definite problem, there just weren't no jobs.

Mr. Cooke They started the layoff at the plants where I worked at. And the cutting wages and then it developed in, speedups on work and it was pretty, it was pretty hard. You couldn't get a job around here and nowhere for several years. My job was pretty steady. I worked in a plant that even though they were laying off and the people were out of work, we actually worked seven days a week because the company didn't want to spend the money to training new people.

Mr. Cooke They were lengthy, that's what especially *[inaudible]* **[0:09:45]**. You were out of work, you were out of work.

**[Song]**

**[00:10:31]**

Mr. Cooke Yes, they had *[inaudible]* **[0:10:34]** and in some of the Western, Mid-Western States too you know. But as far as I stayed around Delaware, I don't believe that I ever heard Tellop. The farmer was a better off in a way because he did get his food and he could feed his family.

Mr. Cooke We got milk, we had chickens we were having our own eggs and chickens. And we had the beef and pork and that we killed on the farm land there.

Mr. Cooke The prices went down and particularly in this area we were in the dairy business and the milk market went down some.

Mr. Cooke So I had a big crop of cannelopes one year, about a thousand crates. And I put them through our association that they are supposed to pack them and shell them, sell them and when I got my check for about 1000 crates, I got \$14.50. And the very same day, the next night I met the man that I bought the crates off and he said, "George you'll have to pay that crate bill", I said "Me pay the crate bill when I got today, I got \$14.50, how can I pay it?", "Well you will have to do it." So, the next day I sent him a note for the around \$200 and the next time he saw me he was about to murder me because I gave a note for six months when it should... a bankable note for then it was only good for thirty days, I mean about three months.

Mr. Cooke It varied because there was a great variety in the method of operation of individuals. Some of them were more conservative some not. The conservatives were in one position the other ones where...

**[Song]**

Mr. Cooke I think that our experience in Newark, especially among the black population was a little different than in other communities. We had so very little. We lived so very close to poverty anyhow that the effect on us wasn't the same *[unclear]* **00:13:19]** so we say. We lived in what was a perpetual depression.

Mr. Cooke We had a garden and we raised chickens. We had eggs and we tried to grow the things that we really had to eat and then we would sell vegetables up and down streets. We always had enough to eat. It wasn't what we wanted to eat. Plenty of time we had mash and milk.

Mr. Cooke We manage always to have eggs, not always to have meat, but we managed to have eggs.

Mr. Cooke I don't remember anything that happened bad to us in a way. We got along just about the same as we usually did because we were able to make out anyway and we always worked all of us at everything we could work at.

Mr. Cooke A time I went to Philadelphia and bought up a bunch of neckties, cheap, put them in a suitcase with a wire hanger across *[inaudible]* **[0:14:22]** this barber shop some place trying to sell a necktie. As far as having a job is concerned as I said, this necktie business that I considered you know not a job when I got really hungry I worked that hard at try to sell a few more ties.

Mr. Cooke I think it rather encouraged me to live the sort of a country supporting life that I'd always wanted to do anyway because it was really a continuation at rural life of my boyhood on a big farm where I grew up near Delaware City *[inaudible]* **[0:15:00]**. So I found myself not worrying very much about money but just being a flower child at that time.

**[00:15:14]**

**[Song]**

Mr. Cooke Yes, there would be people that would come, I can remember a knock on to the door and my mother would always give them food. If they asked for money, first we didn't have any, but she would make them a sandwich and give them food and coffee or something like that. I can remember that. My mother would share whatever we had she would have been willing and she did share.

Mr. Cooke I was younger then, a bunch of us fathers knew each other. Certainly, every two weeks one would get paid for one of those jobs we would go around the baker buy a lot of bread go home and toast it and make cocoa sat there all night talking about the depression eating, wondering if there was another place in the country where you could go to work. We hitchhiked, I did with a bunch of fellows we were all three. To great Boulder Dam which was latter named Hoover Dam, we thought we could get work there. We got there, people that were working there were sleeping in tar barrels that they were using on the project. Hardly made a nickel out of their bare existence and that would be interesting also to read that history about how that dam was built and the people that were, how they were treated as far as employees was concerned. So, all we did then is storm right back, between there and here there was no work.

Mr. Cooke Well people in those days had pride and they and they didn't thought it was really a just an awful disgrace to take anything if you really could go ahead and do it yourself. And if you couldn't make a living yourself, you were a really a failure.

Mr. Cooke In this country, I think your background as Americans has always been the pride. Because a lot of people who might have been on the relief if they thought that nobody else would ever know. But there were never on relief for that reason. I think there is a pride. People have that. People have actually starved because of that.

Mr. Cooke I think the average family back at that time would think it was a disgrace to go on public assistance and I don't think that they would want anybody... but if they did, was forced on it, they wouldn't want anyone to know it. It was a different feeling then than it was today. But then we did have the WPA and PWA which people took jobs there and I think it was a big help. It carried a lot of people over and I mean it gave them a little feeling of, that they were doing something for what they were getting I think it was a good thing myself.

Mr. Cooke For the young boys there was the...

Mr. Cooke And the CCC's which was...

Mr. Cooke Young boys.

Mr. Cooke I think it did a lot of good for the boys and I think they did a lot for the country as well.

**[Song]**

**[00:20:22]**

Mr. Cooke Hoover on those days history may prove you know much more intelligent man than what he was accused of, but that was a disgusting name in those days to even mention the word "Hoover" during the depression. He was always preaching prosperity around the corner. Well too many people had too much time to go around the corner and look and got disgusted and quit looking.

Mr. Cooke People were disgusted, they were willing to do anything. In other words, they had their Hitlers and their Stallions in other countries. I believe if it wasn't for Roosevelt and the way people felt, I think we could have had the same thing here. I certainly feel people were on the verge, they would accept anything. I don't care whether it was communist or what it was, it's what they had it begin to look that way. They were willing to accept anything, but the way it was.

Mr. Cooke Mr. Hoover and the congress at that time, they never seemed to get with it in the Hoover administration to look after their constituents from the point view of Federal Law adjustment or whatever you want to call it and Mr. Hoover well, I think he was a great man personally. He wasn't a people man that Roosevelt was and he wasn't the politician. He, I don't guess that Mr. Hoover really ever was sure who elected him.

Mr. Cooke Well we always thought Herbert Hoover was the... oh, my, we thought he was really a good man and was doing everything he could for the country. And we weren't in favor of Roosevelt.

Mr. Cooke But you see it wasn't so much that Hoover was a bad guy, but Hoover didn't know what to do.

Mr. Cooke This is a feeling that the country was, had been at the brink of collapse and revolution. Hoover couldn't have pulled it off no matter what happened. Somehow Roosevelt did.

**[Recording]**

Mr. Cooke Remember, that was quite a reaction at that, at that time. A feeling of looking forward to things getting a lot better, not overnight so to speak, but little by little you could feel that this was the answer to what we had been going through.

Mr. Cooke I figure that if he had...if he did carried out what he said he would do, then we would have a wonderful country to live in and a wonderful economy. But he did not do those things. He, maybe he did what had to be done under the conditions, I don't know, but he was a prolific spender and a dollar didn't mean anything to him so long as it wasn't his and he had a wonderful and large income of his own. I was not one of his great admirers as you can see. Now, he had a wonderful personality and he was an excellent speaker and he did...was able to rally the people around him. But people at that time were more willing to be led than they are today.

Mr. Cooke Franklin Roosevelt, yes, I remember that. He made a mess of his stuff I'll say that much when he was in there. He had people stand out, just stand out doing practically nothing and paying them. I believe in paying people for what they do but I don't believe in paying them when they do nothing. I had no use for him. He, he stood up the mess that we've had ever since he has been there. That's the way I believe about it. I may be talking against what you believe [laughter] but that's the way I feel about it and I always have.

Mr. Cooke You know there was always the critic. It was done for one purpose, to put the bread on table of those people, the most people that they could possibly do it with.

Mr. Cooke Franklin Roosevelt exposed ideas that probably never ended the thought of the predecessor republican administration. I think the most noble thing and one of the things most inductive of the fact that Roosevelt and the era which he inaugurated in this country was different than what had preceded, was the fact that *[inaudible]* [00:25:43] which had after that time been thought of as face for the adherence of the republican party flocked on us to the democratic party.

Mr. Cooke The whole thing changed.

[00:25:55]

[Song]

Mr. Cooke I mean we, I mean that was one of the reasons we went and I was able to organize through the Wagner *[inaudible]* he didn't have too much volunteers in Delaware. I know I was threatened a few times as they call you a radical or a communist at that time which I didn't even know what a communist was to be honest with you. And we had warnings; my family was warned by the police here in Delaware that I'd be in a lot of trouble if I didn't quit this organizing and that, which nothing never developed.

Mr. Cooke You know violence it's only your interpretation of violence that matters. Is it violent to cause somebody to be hungry? Is it violent to keep pledges down? Is it violent to not give you any future perspective to pattern yourself? There's all these things violence. I don't know you know whether people look at it that way or not, but if you got me hungry, you've got a violent man.

Mr. Cooke I think it gave us dignity and the freedom was more important actually than the wages and the other things. It was the dignity we had and the freedom that we were able to act as a human being and not a part of their machinery.

Mr. Cooke The involvement of blacks in the CIO was a very stimulating thing as far as blacks were concerned. Because for the first time they gained admittance to a national labor organization on a basis which the organization itself had to proclaim was a basis of equality. And I think that this was certainly stimulating to Negroes.

[Song]

[00:30:12]



Mr. Cooke People in the farming industry were given funds whereas they would have been... a lot of them were broke anyway but they would have been in even worse condition without that.

Mr. Cooke Well we saw the amount of foolishness but the county agent made us... tried to talk us into taking, that was later, taking the different subsidies because he said we had to pay for them we might as well take them.

Mr. Cooke And all of Mr. Roosevelt's programs didn't make sense either, but at least you had the feeling that you were trying and you always feel better when you try. There were things to do and the farmers... a good many of these federal programs were administered and I use that word advisedly by local farmer committees. And they felt like they had a part in this thing. And they weren't any longer the forgotten man.

**[Song]**

Mr. Cooke It was a good Radio and we weren't allowed to touch it and so but in the evenings when Mr. Rustle was there, we were able to listen to the news. Lo Thomas and what have you and one had to be very very quiet because we were just anticipating you know, better times better times. And Lo Thomas came on first and then Anderson Andy came on. I think it was a 15 minute program and this was a big treat to listen to these programs.

Mr. Cooke Frankly I never spent much time, not as much as many people do at least listening to the radio.

Mr. Cooke Yes we had a radio we used to listen to the radio what we call soap operas now you know Amison Andy and the all American boy and the squeaky duo thing, what was the name of that the Intersectim and Febra McGee and Molly and Owens Ally and all of these things were in the problem middle and late thirties when radios really came into town.

Mr. Cooke You can just have your dates about some certain thing when Roosevelt would come on you just forget about it. It was just Roosevelt and nobody else. No matter how dark things had been looking for the last few days when he came on with his poetic side chat it would just clear up all of that.

Mr. Cooke Right through depletion though depression and I think he *[inaudible]* **[0:33:16]** invasion cropped into my house when my mother had just been operated on was land on a carpet, just brought her home from hospital. And she was advising the rest of the family to get in the car and start. Now you know that's to nowhere. They didn't know what they would do and she says, "Whatever you do when you go out the door turn the gas on." My family, when I walked in the house they

**[inaudible] [0:33:42]** so all I said was, "Well, how did this program come on? Well I didn't hear the beginning." They had just tuned it in. I said, "Well I want to hear it, the beginning before I get in any car and start anywhere because if it's going to happen there it's going to happen here, I might as well stay." But there was an awful lot of people who took that serious because of the way they had to live you know.

**[Song]**

**[00:35:10]**

Mr. Cooke Yes aha, yes I liked the movies. The movies was only 10 cents. 20 I believe it was 25 cents. Would take us 15 cents for the car fare, meat was 30 and 10 cents for the movies and 5 for the candy. I can't really recall what I did, who was popular then. Wait Temple, I remember Shirley Temple very well and I think we managed to see all of her movies and how she seemed to win the heart of everyone. And the dancer I can't... Yes Freta Stair and Ginger Rogers, yes and Zigzio Follies the musical, it was mainly musical whereas strictly comical.

Mr. Cooke It was a relaxing situation. And in Bridgeville for instance there was a very sizable movie house and they showed pictures every Saturday night and occasionally other times. And it was standard procedure to, well most of the people at community or many of the people in community to go at a larger movie house and it was filled every Saturday night. Until we got into the depression and people didn't have the money to pay.

Mr. Cooke **[inaudible] [0:36:40]** and it was just, it was a lot worse than I was so I thought that was it. Why look for something to keep you tomorrow, your spirits are down try to improve if you can. It was hard to do.

Mr. Cooke Songs like I can't give you anything but love baby because that's all I'm dreaming of baby I'm like your escapist. So on release it reflected the times, maybe it wasn't what escapist so much was reflecting.

**[Song]**

Mr. Cooke One of the things that stands out in my mind, it was during the depression days. The young boys used to run across the country to hitch hiking or riding freak trains and that, and everybody was saying they were lost. That they were no good bunch of bums, but then you had you World War II come on and they give these boys an opportunity, jobs and factories and plants and that and they turned out to produce more than was ever dreamt of in the same way as the fighting man. So it just goes to show if they were given the opportunity that they would prove themselves and I believe that's the same thing today.

**[00:40:00]**

Mr. Cooke I'm thankful for everything that I have today, very very thankful for it. Because of the contrast of my young life.

Mr. Cooke Yes there was a quest for security. I think that that it was... there were too many people interested in this. It kind of cut down the number of gamblers and made people, they got a little money ahead. And they did feel secure and accumulated some land or some property of some kind. And they held onto it. And they didn't really use, I mean they still had to have some talent in order to get to this place where they felt secure. Well my argument is that if they had to use this town and gamble a little bit those who did really made money and still are. People my age have made the mistake for 20 years, I did it too. They think an awful lot of the material things in life but when you have a youth like ours I mean naturally you want those.

**[Speech]**

Mr. Cooke I think the depression should be forgotten, yes. The depression is history, the depressions are on record. The depression's there. It's like anything else bad and that the lesson has been learned I believe because of the different changes in the law.

Mr. Cooke I don't think the American people would stand for another depression and I think we got a lot of safeguards such as social security and unemployment compensation and pensions and that which I think might be able to tie things over until they can get the economy moving again. I believe we're in a different situation, the economy is in a different situation now.

Mr. Cooke But to be perfectly honest I don't know what they could do but accept it and do the best they could. This is it, what are you going to do about it? Certainly a revolution or anything of that type isn't going to help the situation any.

Mr. Cooke I think they would panic. Well we all really had a lot in these last 20, 30 years and the generation, your generation and my children, possibly we have not really taught them, maybe it hasn't even been taught in school the conditions that existed during that particular era. Because they just can't you know \$1.25 cents a week, what is \$1.25 cents to my child today? A Hamburg plate and it's gone. So I think that they would almost panic.

Mr. Cooke The generation that you're speaking of would fair better in a depression. Unless it got too rough. But most of them are innovative enough and have succeeded

long enough that they aren't going to take this thing lying down and they're going to do their utmost to get come out as well as they can.

Mr. Cooke I don't think they would take it like the people that are in their 30s. I think they'd demand, I think they would demand something to be done about it and I think it'd be in... it could be through politics or what it is, but I think there'd be a demand there that this would have to change. It'd be some kind of a change would have to come. I don't think they'd sit back and just let it take its course.

**[00:45:01]**

Mr. Cooke I am not certain that young blacks would feel that they could be ahead anymore by an economic depression that many of them feel as they are hurried at this time by what they proclaim to be a lack of opportunity to develop in this country. Beyond that I could not say. I think that they're as you must certainly be aware from Legan various black organizations that are presently somewhat the sufferers in this country. There're many blacks who feel that they are now just about as far down in the scheme of things as they can be. And I don't think that they would think that an economic depression could make them very much worse off.

Mr. Cooke I believe the poor people would be better off in a depression, in a real depression, a top depression than they are now. Because in other words if they got a hold of a dime they'd be able to buy something with it. Now a dime is no good to them. Is it making sense what I'm saying here? Yes, I believe that the very hungry are better off when things are bad than they are when things are good.

Mr. Cooke I don't know maybe it would do them good.

Interviewer: Why?

Mr. Cooke Well things where people had too much money these last few generations. Children were raised too easily. They didn't know what responsibility was in many cases, most cases. They had everything. They didn't have to wish for anything much like we did and like their parents did. I don't, me I don't think poverty does anybody any good. I think that these children just had too much now they went flying too high and they didn't know they don't know whether **[inaudible] [0:47:19]** money yet. They don't know what to do to get that money really like we did.

Mr. Cooke What? There is a difference. I believe the younger people of today I know from our experience just are not willing to get out and work. I didn't mind taking a sledge hammer if we had some concrete to break up. I didn't mind using a pitch

fork and loading manure in the pound. You can't get people to do that today, this is a machine age.

Mr. Cooke I haven't the least idea. I haven't the least idea how anybody would act nowadays there's so much stuff that is different to my ideas of being what it ought to be that I wouldn't know what to say on that line.

Mr. Cooke A great many of them who seem to go for the simplest kind of life would be quite able to take it. I think there always would be some young people who were ambitious to make their mark in some other way that would suffer from it. I think everybody would suffer including the people who thought they wouldn't. But as I think about that now, and I have thought about that too, a lot of the kids I see going around with raggedy pants and somehow wouldn't look a lot worse now than the kids who were in a depression look a lot more. They're not the bad off they are not the broke. Some of them are not doing well, they're... my hunch is that great many young people, other young people who are in college at least that I see on the campus down there wouldn't worry about it very much. At least their taste is rather simple, aren't they?

**[Song]**

**[00:52:21]**

Mr. Cooke Well oh yes I think that all those kinds of things teach people a lesson, but I don't know just exactly what I would say is the lesson they taught them because everybody don't think alike. But I should think it taught them that they should be careful about letting a thing like that happen again, that's what I would think.

Mr. Cooke Maybe it didn't teach them a lesson, but those children who came through the depression turned out very well. They came through and they made good citizens. And I think most of the people I know that went through the depression know how to handle their money better than that. What do you think? Don't you think people that came through the depression handle their money better? Most of them? Most of them, I don't know. But most of my friends who lived in those days handle their money well.

Mr. Cooke I feel that it established the principle, when people are in need it's the government's function and responsibility to not only give them relief but to give them some satisfaction by work and work relief, that was a lesson the country should learn I feel.

Mr. Cooke Deposit prior to that time I was keenly aware that many Negroes themselves wanted to see a closer conformity in this country between the ideals expressed in our historic documents such as the constitution, the declaration of

independence and practice with respect to Negroes. I say I knew that Negroes wanted to see a coalescing of ideal with practice. But for the first time I suppose I became aware that there were large numbers of non Negroes, non blacks who at least professed that they wanted to see the same thing.

At the same time I learnt that there were large numbers of non blacks who were economically disadvantaged like Negroes were and that many of these people were also disadvantaged in other ways. They were disadvantaged socially and they felt this. And so I became aware of the fact that in many respects, the struggle for equality had a root and a basis which was broader than the struggle of Negroes as such and that Negroes could find people who at least professed to be allies in their struggle outside the ranks of blacks.

**[00:56:00]**

Mr. Cooke      So it's an experience that we, I went through that I can't say that I would want to go through it again, of course I wouldn't. But it's, I suppose it has taught me many things. I try not to relate to my children my experiences when I was your age you know I didn't have this or I didn't have that because I feel that this is unfair to them. Personally I feel that this is unfair because it was not a happy time and I think we want our children to grow up in a happy atmosphere.

Mr. Cooke      I can sit here and tell you how hard and how bad an up *[inaudible]* **[0:56:54]** is to go through because but you wouldn't pay me a damn bit of mind. This is not going to do you any good. But if I tell you what's good for you and how to prevent it you might listen. And I think this is what we have to be concerned with now, the future not so much what went on in the past. I don't like to rehearse the depression. I thought that it's something that took a lot of years away from my youth where I could have maybe done something different. Maybe I could have furthered an education, maybe I could have done a lot of things. I don't say I would have, but maybe I could. But the opportunity wasn't there and this always hurts.

**[Song]**

**[01:00:45]      End of Audio**