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Interview with Mrs. Clarence Burriss, Sr. at her home in Silverbrook, Delaware, March, 1971, by Myron Blackman. Project: Delaware in the Depression.

Q Can you recall the first time that the Depression had any effect on you or your family?

A Well, what bothered me the most was when we couldn't pay our interest on our mortgage on our home. That was what hit us first, I think. Because, you know, you have to keep paying. And of course a lot of other people were in the same boat up and down our street. We weren't the only ones that was like that. Finally, I don't know whether it was the United States government, I guess, come out with the idea that they'd hold a moratorium on people that could not pay. And so we didn't have to pay any interest or any payments for--I don't know just how long that kept up, but of course, soon as Dad got to work, Daddy, you know, why then, of course, why we started paying. But that was the greatest help that we ever had.

Q And do you remember--was this something that Franklin Roosevelt did?

A Well, I was trying to think what President was in then.

Q He came in about 1933.

A '33 . . . and when was Dave born?

B [Unidentified female] . . . closed the banks right away, didn't he? Mother, remember, he closed the banks that day.

A Well, it was around the time Dave was born, that was the Depression.

Q Well, that's not important. Your husband was unemployed during the Depression, during the early part?

A Yes. Of course, he was the kind, he would go out and do anything. So he would go a day here and a day there and whatever he could get, he would take. It didn't make any difference to him. And we had a garden and we raised chickens, we had eggs--we tried to grow the things that we really had to eat. And then we would sell vegetables up and down the street.

Q Where were you living then?

A We lived right over here in Colonial Heights, not too far away.

Q Were the neighbors--all your neighbors were in a similar position?

A They were in the same boat, yes. Most of them--I think the only man that I remember on our street that had a steady job was a Mr. Hughes, and I don't know how come he had it. That's the only one--could you recall anybody else?

B Well, he was more or less a professional man.

- Q Do you remember--did you ever have the feeling that this was something--an unusual occurrence, that it shouldn't have happened? That you shouldn't be suffering as much, everything should be . . .
- A No, we were so busy trying to get things done. We had a big family, listen, there were seven kids in this family. And everybody had to get out and help, but you don't have any time left.
- Q Can you recall when it first got difficult to keep up your family, to you know, buy food and everything? I guess when your husband first lost his job.
- B Well, Daddy was in business for himself.
- A See, we always had enough to eat. It wasn't what we wanted to eat. Plenty of times we had mush and milk. But people those days didn't think of going on charity. They wouldn't ask for anything. And anybody that had plenty of something, you know, they would bring you something. Your neighbors shared with you what they had and you shared with your neighbors.
- Q Was it just that time or were the neighbors very helpful all the time? Or do you think it was especially during the Depression?
- A Well, neighbors were different those days; you knew everybody on the street. And now I don't even know the people up in these apartments.
- Q Do you remember when Franklin Roosevelt was elected? I was reading a book, and the first chapter was called "The Gloomy Depression of Herbert Hoover," and the second chapter was called "The Exhilarating Depression of Franklin Roosevelt.
- A Well, we always thought Herbert Hoover was, oh my, we thought Hoover was really a good man and was doing everything he could for the country. And we weren't in favor of Roosevelt.
- C [Unidentified female with heavy accent] He recognized the Russians, no?
- B Who?
- C Roosevelt. He recognized Russia.
- A Oh, I know what you mean, he favored Russia.
- C Had diplomatical relationship with the Russia, also how about the--[sounds like "Nichols"], provision warden, you know. He started, let them sell the liquor and you know, that's why the Kennedy family didn't have to make some other way.
- A We didn't favor W.P.A.
- Q But if Roosevelt, you know, brought the moratorium on the . . .
- A Well, I don't know if Roosevelt did it. I don't know who did it. It

seemed to me like it was Hoover.

Q Well, that could be; I'm not really sure.

A I'm not a bit sure about that, it's so long ago. But I know that we weren't in favor of Roosevelt.

Q Was there anything--one thing that you wanted to make sure you would always have for your family? Was there something that you had to maintain for your family, for your children?

A Our home. That was the thing that bothered us the most, to think that we couldn't keep up the interest payments and things like that. You see, my husband had built that house himself. We just started from scratch. We bought the ground and then went ahead and built as we could. See, in those days, that was the common thing. Now people don't do that way.

Q Your daughter mentioned the schooling.

B Yeah, she wanted to make sure we all went to school.

A Oh, sure, they all got to school, uh huh.

Q Gee, I wish I had more questions.

B But we didn't feel that W.P.A. was a good thing.

Q Could you tell me why not?

B Yeah, there was a bunch of loafers on it.

A Just like they are on the welfare now, it's the same thing, you know.

B They worked right in front of our house.

Q You mentioned about welfare--relief, rather--and I found this with other people I interviewed, that they would do anything not to get on relief.

A Sure, they'd rather go without, uh huh.

Q Why would that be?

A Well, people in those days had pride, and they thought it was really 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 really a failure. That's the way they regarded that. But nowadays people don't try anymore.

D And they really, Mother, people really felt they had to be just down and out to take relief. They didn't do it very casual-like.

A Yeah, you'd have to be just starving.

B You don't mean that it was a disgrace, but you really had to be incapacitated to accept it.

A It was, too . . .

B A man really was honored if he worked even for a dollar a day, and thankful for it, to get it.

Q Can you remember the kind of jobs your husband would do? Was it in construction?

A Yeah, he was always in construction work, and it was anything in the building line. But he didn't care. He would do road work, too. Anything, he would do.

Q Did you have a radio in the house?

A I'm trying to think how far back we had the radio.

B Yeah, we heard the first fight that was on the radio.

A When we came off of the farm--I don't think we had it then on the farm.

B No, but we heard the very first fight, Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey.

Q Yeah. That was the late '20's, I think. But you don't recall anything about what you listened to on the radio?

A Yeah, we used to listen to the war news.

Q But that was much later. Some people I talked to said that they would listen to--every night--Lowell Thomas.

A Yeah, I remember Lowell Thomas. Yeah.

B And Billy Sunday, Mother.

A Yeah, Billy Sunday.

Q And Amos and Andy?

A Oh, yes, that's right. Oh, yes, everybody'd break their neck to get into the living room to hear that. Oh, me. Oh, yeah. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that for years.

Q Were there any other programs?

A Did you recall anything else?

B [Inaudible] Theater had a drama on one night a week for an hour. We always listened to that, just like going to the movies, we thought in those days. And I think Eddie Cantor goes back pretty far. . . and Jack Benny, and Dad listened to them.

Q Did you ever get to the movies, since you mentioned it?

B We went once during the Depression, we saw Amos and Andy.

Q Just once?

B We weren't allowed to go, because we couldn't afford it--there was seven of us. It was just ridiculous to think of it. So we went once and saw Amos and Andy. But we were coming out--in the middle of the Depression, probably.

Q It seems remarkable to raise seven children during such a hard time. It must have been quite difficult.

A It was strenuous, all right, I'll tell you.

Q Did you--I'm trying to think of the questions.

B Mother sewed and made our clothes.

Q Um hmm. And you had your own garden.

B Right. And we really sold fruits and vegetables and Mother made jams and preserves. And a lot of time in the winter we'd be able to sell 'em when we couldn't in the summer. We had a railroad track in back of our house, and we didn't take coal, but our neighbors did.

A The men didn't mind it. They'd stop the cars down there, 'cause they understood what was goin' on. And some of the men had worked on our street, you know, Mr.--across the street from us.

B Mr. Bircher [sp].

A Yeah, he worked on the engine when he could, and they just stopped and would throw the coal off.

Q Really?

A That's right. Yes. Up and down our street. Yeah.

Q You were near the railroad tracks. Did people ever come to your door and ask you for food?

A Yes, we used to have a steady line.

B Then Mother got a system. She said, "The next man that comes, I'm going to tell him to do the garden work and I'll pay him." That worked out very nicely.

Q And you didn't find anyone to do the garden work?

B No. Because they just came so much, you know, that it was just a common ordinary thing, every day, two or three.

Q I see. Do you think that Mr. Hoover could have gotten the country out of the Depression?

A Yes, I think he would, if he'd a went on. We always thought he was a good

man. My dad used to talk about . . .

Q Well, he didn't get a chance, Roosevelt was elected. Do you think the Depression has taught the country a lesson, taught the people a lesson?

A I don't know; I don't know. Looks like they're doing the same thing over again to me. All the money in the world's not gonna help things if people don't get out and do for themselves, I don't think.

Q Do you think anything good came of the Depression?

A Well, I tell you, people were very independent, and the ones that came through it, I think they was always glad that they--well, they had it to look back on and know that they could get through a hard time like that themselves, see. I don't know how to express it, exactly, but I just think they deserved an awful lot of credit, for not crying for help.

B Don't you think it brought families closer together, Mother? We couldn't go anywhere.

A That's right, too.

B Our families visited us and we visited them and baked a cake and that was it. But today people--families don't have that close relationship. This one's going here and that one's going there.

A The neighbors, they don't come in like they used to. We'd sit outside the house in the afternoons, maybe sewing, or just sit there talking, people from up and down the street.

Q You mentioned that you remember listening to the war news. Do you remember before the war, hearing what was going on in Europe, or Hitler and Mussolini, and . . .

A Yes. Uh huh, we always listened to the news. That was one thing we always listened to.

Q Were you much concerned about this?

A Yes.

Q If there would be another depression--and I hope not, but if there would, do you think that people nowadays, let's say the people who were born maybe in the Depression but mostly after, the ones who can't remember the Depression, do you think that they would do any better or worse in a Depression than you did in the '30s, or the people did in the '30s? Could they manage as well?

A Well, some of 'em could, if they put their mind to it. There's lots of kids who can make out right now doing things. But then some of 'em's just gonna lay down. It's gonna be a tossup now. A lot of them will think, "What's the use? I might as well do it the easy way." I think the ones that have a family in back of 'em that came through it the hard way, I think they have

got that to look back on. But I think that people that's been on welfare, they keep right on being on welfare and they don't know any other way. See, that's the first thought they've got in their head when anything happens. You hear it on the radio all the time, how many generations back these people have been that way. And it's just--it just looks like they follow a pattern. They don't seem to do any different. I'm really puzzled over it, why they don't, when they have all the advantages of education now. I can't understand it.

Q It seems remarkable that--I've read about it and heard about it from a few people--that people would refuse to go on welfare, no matter how bad off they were.

A Sure. That's right.

Q 'Cause they were too proud to do it.

A Yeah, and that's right.

B But more than the pride, though, there was a belief that they, too, could handle the difficulties.

A If they could stand on their own feet and be independent, I think that's--well, that's the way our country started.

B Right. And we often didn't have good food--I mean delicious food, it was never delicious, but it was good food, you know, it was . . .

A Yeah, we never starved to death, but we . . .

B And our neighbors were very good to us and we learned how to do things economically. Mother bought the milk by the can and the skim milk--we couldn't afford other milk. But also our neighbors would buy a little bit of that from us, that was a little excess, and that would help us. So Mother learnt many ways to compensate for the fact that we weren't earning an income.

Q Do you feel that you've learned something from the Depression?

B I don't know if I've learnt anything or not, particularly about the Depression, but I feel it's something that people can go through. I think it probably was very good for that group of people. And I do think that in many of our lives experience certainly is the best teacher. And also I feel as Mother does that hard times and hard work aren't going to hurt anybody. It's usually good for them. And too much--a lack of work causes a man--his thoughts to go in other directions which aren't usually profitable for him.

Q Do you think the government can help in any way to keep us out of a depression?

B Do I? Well, I certainly don't anticipate going into another war as a means of keeping us out of a depression. And I think many times the idea of war



is one of the levers that's used for prosperity, and the things that result, the industries that result from war. There must be a better way than that. We're a prosperous country.

Q I hope so. O.K. Thank you very much.

[Tape is stopped, then begins again. This seems to be Mrs. Burris speaking.]

A This place that she run was called Beard's [sp] Mission, and it was a branch of West Presbyterian Church. She was really up in years when she started there, she must have been in her 70's. And when things really got so bad, people that had a little extra food, they'd bring it to her, and then two or three times a week, she'd get the soup started. And people had to bring their own containers, but she'd keep that soup pot goin', and anybody'd come--and then anybody else that had anything extra that they wanted to give, they could give, and then she would give it to whoever needed, and the same way with clothes. She did that all during the Depression, everybody gave things.

Q Where was this?

A This was at 2nd and West. I don't know how many years did she run that mission. She was a great friend of ours, and she used to come to our house and bring a class of boys or a class or girls and we'd have a big table of just things growing out of the garden, not luxuries, you know, but just homemade things. She'd bring these children out whenever she could and whenever they could get somebody to help them get out. You had to ride the trolleys then, you know. You didn't have anybody taking you around in cars. And it meant you had to have your car fare to pay your way then. But she did that for I don't know how many years.

Q She just did it by herself?

A She was what they called . . .

B She was a minister's--she was a missionary.

A Well, she run this mission, that's what she did, but I don't remember what they called her. What did they call her? She was the head of the mission. But it was like a branch of West Presbyterian Church. And some of the people in that church--of course that was a church that had a little more money then, it's not like it was now. There was quite a few well-to-do people, and they did help her a little bit, too. But--all that work she did of her own, and just a few people around to help her.

Q That area of Wilmington is mostly apartment houses now.

A Oh, my, it's a mess now. You ever go down there?

Q Yeah, I drive through it. They're tearing it down.

A Yeah.

Q I imagine a lot of workers, factory workers, were there.

- A Yeah, they were all working people. Well, you know that breakfast mission, too, Nance, they did an awful lot during that too. What's her name--what was that woman--Sarah Hawthorne. Yes, they had a soup kitchen down there, too.
- Q Where was this--still in Wilmington?
- A That was a couple of blocks over further, was . . .
- B Around 2nd and [inaudible], I forget.
- A I believe that was down on Front wasn't it?
- C No, West. It was the same place, I think. 2nd and West.
- A It was just a few blocks away. But that was mostly the men off--there was a terrible lot of men out of work, and they would come there mostly to that Sarah Hawthorne's place. What did they call that mission then?
- C City Mission.
- A I don't know if that was called that then or not. But that's what went on there. Oh me.
- Q O.K.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]