

Other Books by Studs Terkel

DIVISION STREET: AMERICA
GIANTS OF JAZZ

STUDS TERKEL

HARD TIMES

*An Oral History
of the Great Depression*

PANTHEON BOOKS

A Division of Random House, New York



E
806
T45

FOR

my wife, my son and my editor

Copyright © 1970 by Studs Terkel. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 69-20195

Manufactured in the United States of America

9 8 7

179328

A Personal Memoir

(and parenthetical comment)

THIS IS a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic. In recalling an epoch, some thirty, forty, years ago, my colleagues experienced pain, in some instances; exhilaration, in others. Often it was a fusing of both. A hesitancy, at first, was followed by a flow of memories: long-ago hurts and small triumphs. Honors and humiliations. There was laughter, too.

Are they telling the truth? The question is as academic as the day Pilate asked it, his philosophy not quite washing out his guilt. It's the question Pa Joad asked of Preacher Casy, when the ragged man, in a transient camp, poured out his California agony.

"Pa said, 'S'pose he's tellin' the truth—that fella?' The preacher answered, 'He's tellin' the truth, awright. The truth for him. He wasn't makin' nothin' up.' 'How about us?' Tom demanded. 'Is that the truth for us?' 'I don' know,' said Casy." *

I suspect the preacher spoke for the people in this book, too. In their rememberings are their truths. The precise fact or the precise date is of small consequence. This is not a lawyer's brief nor an annotated socio-logical treatise. It is simply an attempt to get the story of the holocaust known as The Great Depression from an improvised battalion of survivors.

That there are some who were untouched or, indeed, did rather well isn't exactly news. This has been true of all disasters. The great many were wounded, in one manner or another. It left upon them an "invisible scar," as Caroline Bird put it.† To those who have chosen to reveal it in this work, my gratitude. And to those hundred or so others, in scattered parts of this land, whose life-fragments I did not include, my apologies as well

* John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, Viking Press, 1939), p. 261.

† Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York, David McKay Co., 1963).

as my profound appreciation: they have enriched my own sense of this neglected time.

There are young people in this book, too. They did not experience the Great Depression. In many instances, they are bewildered, wholly ignorant of it. It is no sign of their immaturity, but of ours. It's time they knew. And it's time we knew, too—what it did to us. And, thus, to them.

I myself don't remember the bleak October day, 1929. Nor do I recall with anything like a camera eye the events that shaped the Thirties. Rather, a blur of images comes to mind. Faces, voices and, occasionally, a rueful remembrance or a delightful flash. Or the astonishing innocence of a time past. Yet a feeling persists. . . .

Even now, when on the highway, seeing in faint neon, VACANCY, outside a modest motel, I am reminded of my mother's enterprise, The Wells-Grand. I ask myself, with unreasonable anxiety, perhaps, "Will it survive? Will this place be here next year?"

Fear of losing things, of property, is one legacy of the Thirties, as a young colleague pointed out. An elderly civil servant in Washington buys a piece of land as often as she can afford. "If it comes again, I'll have something to live off." She remembers the rotten bananas, near the wharves of New Orleans: her daily fare.

That, thanks to technology, things today can make things, in abundance, is a point psychically difficult for Depression survivors to understand. And thus, in severe cases, they will fight, even kill, to protect their things (read: property). Many of the young fail to diagnose this illness because of their innocence concerning the Great Depression. Its occasional invocation, for scolding purposes, tells them little of its truth.

In the mid-Twenties, all fifty rooms of The Wells-Grand were occupied. There was often a waiting list. Our guests were men of varied skills and some sense of permanence. The only transients were the wayward couple who couldn't afford a more de luxe rendezvous. Mysteriously, there was always room at the inn, even for sinners. Ours were the winking Gospels.

On Saturdays, most of our guests paid their weekly rent. On those evenings, I walked at a certain pace to the deposit window of the neighborhood bank. All the guests, with the exception of a few retired boomers and an ancient coppersmith (made idle by the Volstead Act), had steady jobs. It was a euphoric time.

The weekly magazines, *Judge* and *Life* (pre-Luce), were exciting with George Jean Nathan and Pare Lorentz critiques and Jefferson Machamer girls. *Liberty* carried sports pieces by Westbrook Pegler—the most memorable, a tribute to Battling Siki, the childlike, noble savage destroyed by civilization. *Literary Digest* was still around and solvent, having not yet

forecast Alf Landon's triumph some years later. On the high school debating team, we resolved that the United States should or should not grant independence to the Philippines, should or should not join the World Court, should or should not recognize the Soviet Union. We took either side. It was a casual time.

Perhaps it was the best of times. Or was it the worst? Scott Nearing inveighed against dollar diplomacy. Bob La Follette and George Norris took to the hustings as well as the Senate floor in Horatio-like stands against the Big Money. Yet two faces appear and reappear in my mind's eye: Vice Presidents Charles G. Dawes and Charles Curtis; the first, of the responsible banker's jaw, clamped determinedly to an underslung pipe; the other, a genial ex-jockey, of the Throttlebottom look. There was an innocence, perhaps. But it was not quite Eden's.

As for the Crash itself, there is nothing I personally remember, other than the gradual, at first, hardly noticeable, diminishing in the roster of our guests. It was as though they were carted away, unprotesting and unseen, unlike Edward Albee's grandma. At the entrance, we posted a placard: VACANCY.

The presence of our remaining guests was felt more and more, daily, in the lobby. Hitherto, we had seen them only evenings and on weekends. The decks of cards were wearing out more quickly. The black and red squares of the checkerboard were becoming indistinguishable. Cribbage pegs were being more frequently lost. . . . Tempers were getting shorter. Sudden fights broke out for seemingly unaccountable reasons.

The suddenly-idle hands blamed themselves, rather than society. True, there were hunger marches and protestations to City Hall and Washington, but the millions experienced a private kind of shame when the pink slip came. No matter that others suffered the same fate, the inner voice whispered, "I'm a failure."

True, there was a sharing among many of the dispossessed, but, at close quarters, frustration became, at times, violence, and violence turned inward. Thus, sons and fathers fell away, one from the other. And the mother, seeking work, said nothing. Outside forces, except to the more articulate and political rebels, were in some vague way responsible, but not really. It was a personal guilt.

We were carrying the regulars on the books, but the fate of others was daily debated as my mother, my brother and I scanned the more and more indecipherable ledger. At times, the issue was joined, with a great deal of heat, as my brother and I sought to convince our mother that somehow we and our guests shall overcome. In reply, her finger pointed to the undeniably scrawl: the debts were mounting.

With more frequency, we visited our landlord. (We had signed a long-

HARD TIMES

term lease in happier days.) He was a turn-of-the-century man, who had no telephone and signed all his documents longhand. His was a bold and flowing penmanship. There was no mistaking the terms. His adjustments, in view of this strange turn of events, were eminently fair. A man of absolute certainties, who had voted the straight ticket from McKinley to Hoover, he seemed more at sea than I had imagined possible. I was astonished by his sudden fumbling, his bewilderment.

A highly respected Wall Street financier recalled: "The Street had general confusion. They didn't understand it any more than anybody else. They thought something would be announced." (My emphasis.) In 1930, Andrew Mellon, Secretary of Treasury, predicted, ". . . during the coming year the country will make steady progress." A speculator remembers, with awe, "Men like Pierpont Morgan and John Rockefeller lost immense amounts of money. Nobody was immune."

Carey McWilliams suggests a study of the Washington hearings dealing with the cause of the Depression: "They make the finest comic reading. The leading industrialists and bankers testified. They hadn't the foggiest notion. . . ."

As for our guests, who now half-occupied the hotel, many proffered relief checks as rent rather than the accustomed cash. It was no longer a high-spirited Saturday night moment.

There was less talk of the girls in the Orleans street cribs and a marked increase in daily drinking. There was, interestingly enough, an upswing in playing the horses: half dollar bets, six bits; a more desperate examination of *The Racing Form*, *Bert E. Collyer's Eye*, and a scratch sheet, passed from hand to hand. While lost blacks played the numbers, lost whites played the nags.

Of my three years at the University of Chicago Law School, little need be said. I remember hardly anything, other than the presence of one black in my class, an African prince, whose land was a British—or was it a French?—possession. Only one case do I remember: it concerned statutory rape. The fault lay not in the professors, who were good and learned men, but in my studied somnolence. Why, I don't know. Even to this day. Was it a feeling, without my being aware, at the time, of the irrelevance of standard procedure to the circumstances of the day? Or is this a rationalization, *ex post facto*, of a lazy student? It was a hard case all around.

Yet those years, '31 to '34, at the University, did lead to an education of sorts. On my way from The Wells-Grand to the campus, I traveled through the Black Belt. Was it to escape Torts and Real Property that I sought out the blues? I don't know.

I do know that in those gallimaufry shops I discovered treasures: "race records," they were called by men with dollar signs for eyes. The artists,

A Personal Memoir

Big Bill, Memphis Minnie, Tampa Red, Big Maceo, among those I remember, informed me there was more to the stuff of life—and Battling Siki and Senegal, for that matter—than even Westbrook Pegler imagined. Or my professors.

Survival. The marrow of the black man's blues, then and now, has been poverty. Though the articulated theme, the lyric, is often woman, fickle or constant, or the prowess of John the Conqueror, its felt truth is his "low-down" condition. "The Negro was born in depression," murmurs the elderly black. "If you can tell me the difference between the depression today and the Depression of 1932 for the black man, I'd like to know."

It accounts for the bite of his laughter, as he recalls those "hard times": "Why did these big wheels kill themselves? He couldn't stand bringing home beans to his woman, instead of steak and capon. It was a rarity to hear a Negro kill himself over money. There are so few who had any."

And yet, even during the Great Depression, when the white man was "lowdown," the black was below whatever that was. This hard fact was constantly sung around, about, under, and over in his blues.

I'm just like Job's turkey,
I can't do nothing but gobble,
I'm so poor, baby,
I have to lean against the fence to gabble.
Yeah, now, baby, I believe I'll change town,
Lord, I'm so low down, baby,
I declare I'm looking up at down.

The men in the mine, baby,
They all looking down at me. . . .

—Big Bill Broonzy

Here the images blur and time turns somersaults. It is the year of Repeal. A classmate and I appear at suddenly-legal taverns. A ritual, in the spirit of the day, comes into play: the house "pops" for every third beer.* It was so in all the taverns we visited. Today, it is a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance.

None I know was more rewarded by the triumph of the Wets than the coppersmith, old Heinicke. He had been the lobby elder, ill, hard of hearing, grown weary with life. Suddenly, his services were in desperate demand by any number of breweries. The shortage of skilled coppersmiths was in direct ratio to the unslaked thirst for beer.

As a result of the six-day week he was putting in, the unexpected harvest of money and, most significantly, the delight in his skills, he was transformed, Faustlike, into a younger man. His newly purchased, super-

* It was "on the house."

heterodyne radio set, in a baroque cabinet that occupied half his room, was heard loud and clear in all fifty quarters. Ascribe it to his exhilaration as much as to his deafness.

As for the others, political argument, often bitter, often hilarious, replaced desuetude. Aside from F.D.R.'s fireside chats, on Sundays a new voice dominated the lobby. It was Father Charles E. Coughlin, coming through the box radio, high on a wooden pedestal. There were those who muttered, "Turn the Roman off." But it was Matthew McGraw, our gaunt, bespectacled, fiery-eyed night clerk (his resemblance to Father Coughlin was remarkable) who insisted the voice be heard.

Matt was something of an intellectual. Before the Crash, he had been a master carpenter. He was constantly quoting from books, weeklies and monthly radical journals. He inveighed against the moneyed interests, against the privileged, against monopoly. He quoted Debs, Darrow, Paine. . . . Somewhere between October, 1929, and November, 1934 (when the Union for Social Justice was formed), something had happened to Matthew McGraw. A forgotten man, his cup of wormwood had flowed over.

A printer remembers his father swinging from Bob La Follette, Wisconsin's progressive Senator, to Father Coughlin. The hurt, frustrated man, hearing of the powerful, alien East, sought an answer. So did the gentle, soft-spoken salesman, who hardly questioned anything. "He has the right idea," his daughter remembers him saying of the priest from Royal Oak. The salesman had voted for Roosevelt.

As for my mother, most of her tight-fisted savings were lost with the collapse of Samuel Insull's empire. My errands to the bank were for nothing, it seemed. It was a particularly bitter blow for her. She had previously out-jostled a neighborhood banker, R. L. Chisholm insisted on the soundness of his institution—named, by some ironic God, The Reliance State Bank. Despite his oath on his mother's grave and his expressed admiration for my mother's thrift, she withdrew her several thousand. His bank closed the following day. Yet, the utilities magnate took her, a fact for which she forgave neither him nor herself.*

It was 1936. Having long abandoned any thoughts of following the law, I joined the Illinois Writers' Project. I was a member of the radio division. We wrote scripts inspired by paintings at the Art Institute. They were broadcast over WGN, the Chicago Tribune's station. Colonel McCormick, the publisher, was quite proud of these contributions to the city's culture. Though the front page of his paper invariably featured a cartoon of a

* Subsequently, during Insull's trial in Chicago, "Little Orphan Annie," the comic strip, was featuring the ordeal of Daddy Warbucks, the indomitable redhead's benefactor. He, too, was being crucified by alien forces.

loony, subversive professor in cap and gown, or a WPA boondoggler leaning on his shovel, he saw no inconsistency in programming the Great Artists series, with credits: ". . . under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, Harry Hopkins, Director." I am told he listened to them regularly, with a great deal of pleasure.

By chance, I became a gangster in radio soap operas, among them, "Ma Perkins," "Betty and Bob" and "First Nighter." The jobs were fairly frequent, but tenure was lacking. Cause of dismissal: Electrocution, life imprisonment, or being shot to death.

As the fervor of unionism spread, with an assist by the Wagner Act, the American Federation of Radio Artists was formed. There was hardly any dissent among the performers. There were, of course, obstinate executives, who played Canute, but the waves rolled over them. The climate, in this instance, was salubrious.

Not so, with other professional unions. The Newspaper Guild, for example. Perhaps my most vivid single memory—certainly my most traumatic—of the Thirties, with which I bring these impressions to a close, concerns this battle in Chicago. The Hearst morning newspaper, the *Herald-Examiner*, was suffering a long and critical strike. Outside the building, journalists picketed. The Hearst delivery trucks were manned by a hard lot; some I remembered as alumni of my high school; some with syndicate friendships. They were employed in a dual capacity: as delivery men and as terrorists. Whenever the situation presented itself, they'd slug a journalist-picket.

I see a tableau: a pale, bloodied reporter lying on the pavement as colleagues and passersby stare in horror. In the middle of the street stands a squat heavyweight, an auto jack in his grasp. His arms and legs are spread-eagled. He appears to be challenging all comers. Yet, I see, quite unblurred, the terror in his eyes.

The rest is history, which I leave to those whose less-flawed memories and reflections comprise this book.