

Life during the Great Depression

Life during the Great depression as told to Patchwork by Billy Henrie.

Interviewed by Daniel Skorski and Walton Hunsinger in the spring of 2001

The Great Depression was an exceedingly difficult time for many Americans. After the Stock Market crash of 1929, families were facing poverty and depression. In most places in the United States, both jobs and food supplies were limited.

Billy Henrie lived in Berwick during the beginning of the Depression. During the mid years of the Depression, she moved to Bloomsburg to attend medical school. When she moved to Bloomsburg, she married in the area. She has remained a part of the community ever since.

PATCHWORK: What was it like during the early 1930's in Bloomsburg?

HENRIE: Well, you know I was in Berwick then. I graduated from Berwick High school in 1931.

PATCHWORK: What was it like when you were living there?

HENRIE: Well, it was depressing. I remember that we had very little to eat, no electricity, no phone, and, of course, no television. It was a poor time. In 1931, I left Berwick and came to Bloomsburg. I went into training here in Bloomsburg, which was good for me, but not for my family. Many times my sister complained that while I was here getting a good meal, they were eating stewed tomatoes at home.

PATCHWORK: Where did you come up here for training?

HENRIE: I went to Bloomsburg Hospital. I came up here to be a nurse.

PATCHWORK: Was it depressing at the hospital?

HENRIE: Well, of course, things were a lot different then than they are now. We still had to scrub and use antiseptics and that sort of thing, but we didn't have any of the modern things. I spent a good amount of time in the operating room, which I enjoyed. We worked twelve-hour shifts, which either lasted from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., or 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

PATCHWORK: Are there any stories that you remember from Berwick during the depression that were life changing?

HENRIE: Well, one of the things that tickled me was when I was in fifth or sixth grade and we had no toothpaste. You wouldn't even think of it now. In school we were given a small sample of Colgate toothpaste. That was the best gift that I have ever been given, even to this day.

PATCHWORK: What was it like the first time you tried brushing your teeth?

HENRIE: Before we had toothpaste, we used a cloth and some soap to clean our teeth. I don't ever remember having a toothbrush. But that little tube of toothpaste... to think that they gave this to us it was such a big thing, because in those days you got nothing for nothing. I don't know why that sticks in my mind, but it does.

PATCHWORK: Was there a shortage on any school supplies?

HENRIE: In school we had a pencil, books and everything else that we needed. However, I never had anything extra to take home.

PATCHWORK: What did you eat during the depression?

HENRIE: Well, we didn't have a full course meal. If we had a dish of stewed tomatoes, that was it. An entire meal could consist of dried lima beans. Occasionally we would have bread and milk. We didn't have milk most of the time, though, because that was quite expensive. There was a little store across the street from us that had a case of penny candy. If we ever got a hold of a penny, we would spend half an hour, or even an hour, trying to find the perfect piece of penny candy. That was such a treat! My mother, who was an excellent baker, did all of the baking. Every once and a while, she would bake us some bread or a cake. I remember when Oleo (margarine) first came out. It came in pure white five-pound cakes. The yellow liquid, which would be settled inside the container, would have to be mixed in to make the margarine appear yellow. Otherwise it just looked like lard.

PATCHWORK: Did you live on a farm or did you live in town?

HENRIE: We lived in town.

PATCHWORK: Did you buy all of your food?

HENRIE: My mother had a big garden. She grew everything that we needed. She canned a lot of it. I don't know what connection she had to get her meat, but we very rarely bought meat from the store. She would can beef, corn, and even pork. Our cellar was always filled with canned stuff.

PATCHWORK: Did you lose any money in the Stock Market crash?

HENRIE: No, we didn't get involved in the crash. Even though my mother and father both worked, the wages were very poor. My mother worked in a silk mill. I don't remember much from before the crash. I was more interested in school.

PATCHWORK: Have you seen extreme changes since the time of the Depression?

HENRIE: We didn't have electric lights in our house until I was in high school.

PATCHWORK: What other changes happened in your nursing career?

HENRIE: After I came down here, things were a lot different. I always had enough to eat. In the first three months, I gained 15 pounds. That wasn't so good. I enjoyed training, but I never did finish, because I chose to get married in January. I would have graduated in June. In today's society, one could have finished. I wish I had, but when I went to the head doctor and asked him about staying in training, he said, "You know the rules."

PATCHWORK: So, because you got married, you could not finish training?

HENRIE: Yes, just because I got married. Today, a woman could be married, get pregnant, and still be able to go back.

PATCHWORK: What did your husband do at the time?

HENRIE: He worked in a print shop. A man by the name of Mr. Elwell owned the print shop up on Main Street. It was located in the block between Market Street and Center Street. My husband graduated from high school in 1930. He worked for Mr. Elwell then, and he just always stayed with him.

PATCHWORK: Did your husband work in the printing business for his entire life?

HENRIE: Yes. I think that he worked in the newspaper over at Catawissa while he was in school. From there, he went to work with Mr. Elwell. Mr. Elwell was very strong in the Episcopal Church, which is how Bill started to work for him.

PATCHWORK: Was Berwick more affected by the Depression than Bloomsburg?

HENRIE: When I came here, I was in an institution. I really didn't know much about the public life. When I started going with my husband, I went down to their house. His mother worked, because his father had died when he was fifteen. They seemed to have plenty. That is, they had plenty to eat. His grandmother took care of all of the cooking.

PATCHWORK: Did your husband fight in any wars?

HENRIE: He was drafted during World War II. He was thirty-five and we had two children. He went in the Navy, but rather than leaving the country, he went down to Corpus Christy, Texas. The only thing I know is that I got \$100 a month to keep the house going with two children. The children were small, so I couldn't work. My husband was in the service and he smoked. By the time he'd get his pay, he wouldn't have enough money to pay for cigarettes. So out of my \$100, I would have to send him enough money to buy cigarettes. It was hard during that time.

PATCHWORK: So you stayed here when he went down to Texas?

HENRIE: Yes, we lived in this house.

PATCHWORK: How long was he there for?

HENRIE: He wasn't in the service for too long. He went in April. That fall, I got very sick and had a serious operation. He got an emergency discharge in December.

PATCHWORK: What was the transportation like?

HENRIE: We had no car at home. We walked everywhere. I don't even remember any taxies. I only lived three or four blocks from my school. It wasn't very hard walking to school. My church was also close. When I came down here, very few men even had cars. My husband didn't even have a car when we got married. There was a bus that ran between Berwick and Bloom, though. Since my family lived in Berwick, we traveled back and forth on the bus.

PATCHWORK: How long did it take the bus to get from Berwick to Bloomsburg?

HENRIE: Due the stops, it took about an hour. I know when my husband and I were going together, he always came up by bus.

PATCHWORK: Did you travel to cities out of the county at all?

HENRIE: Well, in my senior year of high school, my class went to Washington D.C. We had been given a choice. Either we could have a yearbook, or go on a trip. Because of finances, we couldn't have both. So, our class decided to go on the trip to Washington D.C. That was about the only trip that we ever made.

PATCHWORK: What was it like in Washington D.C. at that time?

HENRIE: Oh, I remember a lot of steps! It was probably in front of the capital. I don't really remember too much about it. I guess you could say it hasn't changed much. The traffic is the only big difference.

PATCHWORK: Were there horse and buggies around here?

HENRIE: I don't remember any horse and buggies. I do remember, however, that because of the lack of electricity, we did have a refrigerator. Instead, we had an icebox. We had to buy ice blocks. The ice was delivered to your house in a horse drawn cart. Milk was also delivered in this way.

PATCHWORK: What was it like having an icebox?

HENRIE: Well, we had an icebox even after we were married. We had electricity, but we couldn't afford an electric refrigerator. When we used to live up on Whitman Avenue, I had the icebox on the back porch. One day during fair week, my husband and I took my son, who was only a few months old, down to the fair. I had all of his formula in bottles in the icebox. When we returned, he was screaming and hungry. I went to get the formula, but it was all gone. I couldn't figure out what happened to it. As it turned out, the little girls across the street had taken it and made mud pies with it. So, I had no formula for my little boy.

PATCHWORK: Where are your children today?

HENRIE: My older son lives just outside of Detroit, Michigan, and my other son is living up near Rochester, New York. They are both retired. They were also both teachers. My older son taught business and finance at the University of Windsor and my younger son taught a high school social studies class.

PATCHWORK: What was it like when your children were growing up around here?

HENRIE: Well, they got into athletics and, of course, they didn't know any different. There were no drugs, so we didn't even have to worry about that. We also didn't have to worry about alcohol. I don't ever remember the kids having alcohol or drugs. They both played football. My older son also played basketball. They were also in midget football.

PATCHWORK: Were there any ice cream parlors or other interesting stores on Main Street?

HENRIE: There was a dance hall where Ritter's used to be. They had a soda fountain and a jukebox at that place. Hess's Bar was there, too, but it was known more for pool than for selling drinks. Of course, during prohibition we didn't have places to sell drinks.

PATCHWORK: What was it like in Bloomsburg during prohibition?

HENRIE: Well, we didn't miss the alcohol, but we didn't have it. There was no drinking. By the time I came down here, they said that you could buy 3.2 percent beer. You could not buy any hard stuff. However, there were speakeasies. If you knew the right people, it was possible to get alcohol.

PATCHWORK: Did people have breweries in their homes?

HENRIE: There was a lot of home brew. I remember my husband used to talk about the fellows that used to go up to Forks. They had a lot of cottages there. I remember my husband saying that six or ten fellows would get together for a vacation of a couple weeks. They took pure alcohol from one of the drug stores and they made drinks out of that. They were out of school by then.

PATCHWORK: Were there any life-altering changes in Bloomsburg?

HENRIE: Well, there were originally trolley tracks that ran through the town. They also had them up in Berwick. On the way to Berwick, they had a park called Columbia Park. We took the trolley there for picnics.

PATCHWORK: Was the trolley the main source of transportation around Bloomsburg?

HENRIE: Yes. Then after the trolley left, we had buses.

PATCHWORK: What was riding the trolley like?

HENRIE: It was a lot of fun. The windows were mostly open. I only went in the summer, and basically the only place that I went to was Columbia Park. We also came down to visit our cousins. It really was a lot of fun riding the trolley.

PATCHWORK: How much did clothes cost then?

HENRIE: Whatever the cost, it was a big deal. I remember my mother saw a coat that she just fell in love with. She just wanted that coat so badly. I think that the coat was \$25. She paid fifty cents a week for this coat until it was all paid off. That was really the only way you could get clothes then. You had to pay a little at a time.

PATCHWORK: Were there limited supplies of certain things?

HENRIE: Well, we didn't have big grocery stores like you have now. They were all little mom and pop stores. I remember one in particular where we bought meat when we could afford

it. We also went to a place in Berwick called the A C & F company store. That was a big industry. They had a company store where you could buy things and then charge it. They would just take it off of your wages.

PATCHWORK: What did they make?

HENRIE: They made some big type of train cars. Then many years after I left, they made things for the war.

PATCHWORK: Where did most of the people work? Was Magee open?

HENRIE: When I came here, Magee was open. They had some silk mills.

PATCHWORK: Are there any other stories that you remember?

HENRIE: I remember when we used to go sleigh riding. In Berwick, they closed off a street. That street was only for sleigh riding. It was actually only a few blocks from where I lived.