

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Fred Klinke – Experiences of the Depression

By Fred Klinke

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Box 2 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Jane Klinke

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi January 2005

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This is oral history. I am Jane Klinke and today is April 5, 1975. I am going to interview Mr. Fred Klinke and the general topic will be the depression.

Jane Klinke: Mr. Klinke where were you born?

Fred Klinke: I was born in Chicago, Illinois. (March 14, 1914)

JK: And where did you live?

FK: At the age of six years my family moved out to the suburbs to a town called Hinsdale, Illinois.

JK: And where were your parents born?

FK: Mom was born in Chicago, Illinois; and Dad was born in Germany and came over to this country when he was eighteen years of age.

JK: What was your occupation during the depression?

FK: It was a time when most students realized that money was hard to get hold of. That things had to be done without, in other words, luxuries were really luxuries and a few people could not buy them. You might say that students had to get by with as little as their budget or household finances could purchase. In other words, you might use your lead pencil until it was two inches long instead of throwing it away when it's four or five inches long. You would be sure that you would not waste paper because buying paper cost money then as it does today, but on a relative bases it was sold at less price that we are used to paying today. Books were costly then, in a manner of speaking, and most students had to run around at registration time each year looking for used textbooks unless the textbooks were changed for the new semester. In many cases these books might be used four or five, six different years on a basis of hand-me-down or being sold to students as they came to the particular year that subject was taught. We had many activities in the school courses, of course, a different varieties we would have field trips, but these trips were not get on the bus and ride some place, they were usually planned for closer destinations to the school, in other words, walk there and walk back. As I remember, the price of gasoline wasn't too high but we also must remember money was short and it was hard to get a hold of.

JK: Were job hard for students to get at that time?

FK: Kids really had to be resourceful in trying to find jobs of any kind of enumeration. As an example, I found that earlier years of High School that I could go up to the Country Club, just a few miles from home, and get on the waiting list to caddy, in other words, carry the golf sack for the golfers. They had three classifications of caddies and you had to pass tests and know how to do different things and how to be of most service to the player that you were carrying the bag for, or caddying as we called it. And as I recall I had to start out as a C class caddy at twenty cents an hour. So the usual round of golf

would pay you about sixty or seventy cents. It was very, very seldom, that you would have two jobs a day and in many cases, depending on the day of the week you would go up to the golf course, register and wait for a job and many times you would go home without having any work to do that day. Of course, some students were able to find other means of making money; such as, cutting lawns, doing yard work, digging up shrubbery, beds and so forth of which I've had my share. But as diversions from this type of activity, I was fortunate in being able to do some work in a grocery store. I recall that one time once a week I would go in this grocery store and stack up potatoes in 7 1/2 pound, 15 pound bags, in order words, half peck or peck bags of potatoes. I recall vividly the times I spent in the back room where freight was bought in and stored and I was sacking up one hundred and two hundred pounds of potatoes so that the weekend business could be taken care of and not to go back and sack potatoes, in other words, they were sacked up ahead of time. I'm not too sure of the exact money I made at this time, but I think sometimes I made fifty cents or a dollar. And there was another instance where I could go in and sharpen knives. Get on the old sand stone grinder, had a seat on it something like a bicycle, and you pedaled it with pedals there by turning the big sand stone wheel and sharpen knives. This was a tedious task because you don't get paid for not doing a good job and this was a worthwhile project. And teaching the youngster when you're out working for somebody else, you've got to do the right kind of job or you don't get paid. Then as I grew older, I was able to work in the store on Saturday from eight in the morning until ten at night. And I recall, my senior year I was able to make four dollars for this day of work. And that was a long day at that because it included everything in the way of tasks to do such as cleaning chickens or turkeys; of course, they were not dressed, but were refrigerated. And when customers bought one of these chickens or turkey, a young fellow like me was hired for those types of odd jobs. Go in the back room and clean the bird, bring it out so they could take it home and get it ready for the oven. When I say clean the bird, out inside. Of course there was a job such as grinding hamburger or may be after a little more experiences you could cut round steak or pork chops things of that nature. Then in other times, you might be asked to prepare a display in the window for the weekend which could be canned goods, varieties of packaged cookies and other grocery items that people would be reminded to shop for on the next trip to the store. Other jobs that were available were, of course, paper boys and in certain seasons shoveling snow off sidewalks. But in most instances, you worked hard for your twenty-five, fifty cents, or a dollar that you might earn. This was a good training for young people because they really learned the value of money. And in so doing they would pass up some things that they were really not necessary that they could do without in order to stretch their dollar, or have it on hand when something really useful needed to be purchased.

JK: What was it like trying to get a job? Was there a lot of competition?

FK: There was a lot of competition for job. Especially, jobs for young people in high school. I can't speak for the girls because not having sister, I didn't know what the problem might be that they had but I can remember particularly one holiday season or you might say the fall season in the winter, I was delivering orders in the grocery store, as I recall, the pay was not very much but I was glad of any kind of money to help the

budget. This was hard work because you had to pack the boxes, load them on the truck, and arrange them like a postman running a route and, of course deliver them to the back door, many instances faced the barking dogs. Take the groceries in after being admitted and set them on a cupboard or a table as the woman so desired. This was a good experience and also makes you aware of how life really is in various households and what kind of groceries people were buying. Of course, you could see the difference depending on the family's economic status. As far as competition for job it might be well to point out that things were so different then in the way people cared about their work. You knew that if you did not perform a job, you're out of work. And those days, unemployment insurance was unheard of. You might have picked charity donations and some other matter, but there was no unemployment insurance and compensations for not working. And of course, if you didn't do a good job you might be told don't return the next day or on Monday whatever the case might be. So people were more aware that while they worked, they had better perform in the best way possible true when one went into the big city and saw lines and lines of people poorly dressed, down and out, standing in the line hoping for a job at some employment office or some factory or concern of some sort or perhaps they might be in what we call a bread line waiting for a handout of food from some agency set up to take care of people who were really destitute. This situation was not quite as acute or it appeared not to be so, in the small town because around the large cities such as Chicago, towns of fifteen to twenty thousand were considered suburbs. Therefore, not small town either. People as I said, had to stand in line at various factories, whatever, hoping that a job might open up. And this was so different in the situation that we have these times where jobs of many kinds are advertised in large cities but the unemployment payment seems to be more attractive to so many rather than doing a days' work for pay.

JK: You mentioned that you worked in a Grocery Store, what were the prices for food like?

FK: As a good example, at least I recall to a certain extent, first grade butter was twenty-five cents a pound, loaf of bread was a dime, package cereals were not as numerous as they are today, but of course, there were corn flakes and a few of the well-known brands such as that and the price was very nominal, perhaps in the neighborhood of fifteen or twenty cents. Meals were very low in cost. As I remember, hamburger of today, in other words, about half or more fat and the rest a little bit of meat grounded together. Chickens and turkeys, of course, were not too expensive even though they were sold a little different way that they are today. Many people were able to use them in their diet and perhaps had because steaks were still too high for most people to buy.

JK: what were prices like for shows and other entertainment?

FK: I can still remember as a youngster in Chicago going to a movie for five cents, like I say that I was about age six and shortly thereafter, I remember after we had moved to the suburbs, that if I was lucky enough to have an ice cream cone a week, that was a nickel a cost, I felt very happy to have such a treat. In other words, there was a lot of less money available and as a kid I really enjoyed that nickel ice cream cone on Sunday. This was a

true of many other things of that time and they too had gum ball machines in those days for a penny and that was a treat to have a penny to be able to go down to the corner store and put that penny in the gum ball machine and have a piece of gum.

JK: Was clothing expensive then?

FK: Relatively speaking, clothing was high but then clothing was of good quality, in other words, there was a lot more of woolen materials such as slacks or pants, jackets, suits. You did not have what you might call erzotes fabrics or clothes made out of nylon or polyester and such. We did do a lot of more patching in those days. If you wore a hole in your knee, your trousers, your mother knew how to put a patch in there and make it look right so that you could get more wear out of that pair of knickers or trousers or whatever the cause might be. It wasn't a situation of getting a new suit every year for Easter or for Christmas. You might be able to wear that suit for two years without growing out of it. Then another fact that was well remembered was the fact that the oldest child in the family passed his clothes down to the next one as he became big enough to wear that size. Sometimes it might be passed down more than just once, maybe two or three times, depending on the wear that that article of clothing had experienced. I can recall that shoes, though they may not have seemed expensive, were still quite an item for growing family just as they are today because kid's feet grew too big for shoes in those days like they can today. I do also remember that because if it wasn't your turn for a pair of shoes or if you had to wait a little bit, it was very likely practices to get heavy cardboard, cut it to the shape of the shoes, slip it in that shoe so that you might walk to school that day without having your sock and foot showing through a hole in the bottom of the sole of the shoes. This might seem strange to present day youngsters but when times are tough you realize you've got to do without new things and you've got to make things that you do last longer by various means such as patching holes. One other thought that comes to mind is darning socks. Oh, how mother had to get the darning needle thread out and bobbing or whatever they called it, and stick it in a sock darn up the hole in the sock whether it be in the heel or the toe just to make it last a little longer. People didn't just throw socks away just because they had a little hole in the heel or the toe, you'd get out the darning needle and thread and fix it up. In those days, dry cleaning clothes were a luxury. A lot of peoples had their own cleaning solutions. I remember that when we were kids, if we had something that was really needing attention for a little clean up, a person had some naps on hand to kind of take the spots out or something like that. Of course, when it came to pressing clothes, you did that at home. As youngsters, we had to learn how to press trousers, press our ties so that they'd be neat looking. Of course, laundries were available. I remember when dad was the only one who had his shirts laundered. Because mom was busy with taking care of all the washing and ironing of kids clothes. This was another experience I can vividly recall and that is going to the Chinese Laundry and picking up dad's shirts. I was always scared because those Chinese people didn't talk very good English and I couldn't understand them. The funny markings on the ticket on the package kept me wondering what they meant. Of course, I new it was Chinese, but that's as far I could figure anything out. This is something I'll never forget, going to Chinese Laundry and seeing those fellows and they're ironing things with hot irons that were set on stove to get hot and the steam coming up from the clothes as they ironed the

shirt and things of the nature. However, many instances mothers or sisters were doing about the same thing at home but there were no such thing as electric irons in those days. They got the iron hot on the stove, or whatever, and use it, it got cool but it back on and heat it up again. What a change from today.

JK: What was it like to get transportation from like your suburb to the big city, or whatever?

FK: When a person wanted to walk downtown in the town I lived in, many cases you set out on foot and walked to the business district, do your shopping, and carry your packages or parcels home again. New bicycles were indeed a luxury in those days for children and I recall that I was lucky at one time to have a neighbor down the street present to me a used Ranger bicycle. I mean used to the extent that he and his brother had both used this bicycle when they were kids in school. And when it was presented to me it needed new tires, fenders, and such. I know how pleased I was when to get this Ranger bicycle, so through the course of Christmas and birthday, I became the proud owner of two fenders, new seat, a horn on the bike, and a bicycle pump to fasten to the frame so if you needed air in your tire and you were away from a gas station you could pump up the frame and pump the tire up. What a treat that was to have a bike and not have to walk that mile to town and back when you had an errand to run. Of course, there were automobiles in that day.

JK: You were talking about automobiles.

FK: The model T and the model A were popular autos in that depression era. They were easy on gasoline. They got you around the town or out of town, whenever you might go, highways being that they were at that time. If you were lucky, you might ride on a two-lane eighteen foot cement highway. Many of the side roads were a mixture of gravel and dirt, or a mixture of crushed stone and gravel; which for the speeds and were prevalent at that time, they were adequate. Of course, it also had a tendency to prevent people from racing down the highway because of the type of pavement they were on. As I recall, it was luxury to get in the car and ride into the city, eighteen miles away, the big city I mean. And of course, this was not done in a half hour or so, it took an hour or more to go to a journey of that length. Traffic was much heavier in the big city. You had street cars, you had trucks, and you had cars. All these caused commotion to about the same extent we have today with traffic. For the most part, people used public transportation, and as I perhaps mentioned before; we used the passenger train service from our town into the city, a distance of eighteen miles away. You could usually town into the city, a distance, depending on the number of stops they made. I figure that I would take you forty-five minutes to an hour on the train to travel that distance, depending on the number of stops they made. I recall many times of mom's trip into the city to go shopping, which was a treat for her to get away from the chores at home for the day. She would catch the train the morning, nine-thirty or ten o'clock and be home in the evening around five to six o'clock and have packages under her arms, those she couldn't carry would be delivered on the regular delivery run made by the department store trucks running out of the city through the suburbs. She was very happy with this type of arrangement and also provided

a kind of entertainment for mom to enjoy. As I said before, getting away from the chores at home. Then there was the time when I needed a job during the week and so I ended up working in the city. This involved leaving in the morning anywhere from quarter to eight to eight-fifteen, depending on the time the job started and getting in the evening just anywhere from five-thirty to six-fifteen, six-thirty. You might say that it involves at least two hours of transportation time each day. And working six and a half days a week make Sunday seem like an awful sort of time to catch up your rest or do what you might have to do in the way of chores, etc, around the house to help out the family. Else we called it education was stressed at that time as it is today. This first real job we had at the bank in Chicago, of course, required that you take extra studies in order that you might become proficient in the work that you were doing I the bank. I recall very well the day that came each week where you would work all day and grab snack after work and walk up to Northwestern University Chicago campus for a three hour class, in the evening. This meant that you were at school from seven to ten then if you were lucky, you could walk brisk enough the three miles from the school campus to the railroad station, you would catch a train at quarter to eleven and arrive home some forty-five, fifty-five minutes later. What a day that was. Of course, this was all in the scheme of things and some of the fellows even went to school two nights a week, but living in the suburbs created a little bit of problem because you had to ride that late train at night when almost invariable took fifty-five minutes to an hour to get to your home. And of course, there were winter days and Chicago is a city of storms when it's time for snow. This made things all the worse. Hardly anybody in the position as I was, young fellows going to school and working had money for a cab so the best thing you could plan on was perhaps a street car which meant transferring in the city several times before you got to your railroad station where you could catch the train home. As I inferred here, the thing that you remembered most was you do not spend your money foolishly, in other words, in you could walk to school and save ten or fifteen cents care fare, you would do it. If you had to get to the station quicker time that you could by walking, you'd spend that ten or fifteen cents car fare to get to the station after school was over at ten o'clock at night. General speaking, transportation was comparatively costly as it is today. I recall gasoline was somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five cents a gallon but sometimes it varied a couple of cents each way. So using the automobiles that were prevalent at that time, you could get by pretty well with a lot dollars worth of gas, but then again people didn't use cars in those days like they do today. If you could walk and save wear and tear, you might just walk your errand and not use the car.

JK: What did you do for summer recreation?

FK: When you speak of recreation, the thought comes to mind that I would be talking about the family get together. Cousins playing with cousins various games that might be thought of for the moment. Some of the things, of course, that come to mind are games such as playing with croquet, pitching horseshoes, perhaps playing baseball. Of course, I'm not talking about playing baseball diamond, I mean, it might be in the yard, or out on the street, or maybe in the vacant lot of field. But for the most part when I think about recreation in those days you do not think of expensive type of activities. Such as skiing but that was usually of the cross-country nature. Of course, there was tobogganing on

hills that were set up for tobogganing. We did have a public Ice Rink in our town which was maintained by the city. Actually there was two rinks one was a Hockey rink and the other was for general skating. And as long as the weather man cooperated, you had pretty good ice sating there in the winter. We enjoyed very much the sledding on the hills. Of course, not having too much traffic we could usually find a street with a good hill on it where you might be safe in doing sledding. It was true then as it is now that there was some bobsledding, but that was something that was very treacherous because the fact that they did have traffic to contend with. Of course, like many other things somebody mistaken a bobsled might have a mistake and dump the whole bunch off the street. I was not one who was too much in favor of bobsledding. I didn't like the thoughts of getting spilled on the pavement perhaps ending up under the wheels of some car that might come along. We had a close experience at one time in our family and I will never forget that. So we were cautious about any activity that involved bobsledding. We also had hay ride parties in those days, of course, not being farming community it was something of a rarity to see a hay ride party go by. Of course, in the winter time there was a horse drawn sled but then too that was something rare since the farm community was outside the village or town that I lived in. But in speaking of family recreation, it was swimming pools that we might go to to enjoy swimming. And of course, we might become involved in kicking a football back and forth. Maybe a couple guys on each side just good enough to pass time or perhaps you might play catch either with a soft ball or used mittens and a hard ball. For the most part, as I recall, or recreation was of the type that would not necessitate an expenditure of money. This, of course, seemed to have excess to spend on luxury items such as motor boat and things of that sort which would be quite expensive to maintain and operate. I don't say that there was no motor boating because I was fortunate in being able to spend a month each summer with a cousin and aunt, and uncle at a summer cottage on a lake in northern Illinois, and he did have a motor, but we would try to give motor boat rides to help pay for the expenses of operating a motor boat and this was very easy to do on weekends since weekends would bring the folks from the big city up for a weekend of fun and fishing and swimming etc. We were prepared to offer motor boat rides across the lake to the lotus beds which were quite an attraction at this one lake. We had a boat that would carry four or five passengers and at thirty-five cents a head or some such figure, forty cents, we were able to make enough money to operate the boat. For other occasions that we might want to use the boat, of course, we would use the boat to go fishing, this was another fun thing, and it wasn't expensive either. We could dig our town worms and provide our bait and go out and have a good time. The thing that was most remembered about this particular period is that everybody counted their pennies they got the most mileage they could out f their dollar. In my way of thinking, this is a good training for anybody and especially so for youngsters who are growing up and going to be out in the business world.

JK: Then what would you say were some of the things that you learned from living in the depression?

FK: Perhaps, you might gain from this recording that living in the depression as a teenager and then going into the age of twenty and twenty-one, that a person experience difficulties and the problems and the joys of this period were most helpful in shaping

their lives and also in teaching them lessons about economics, money matters and so forth. As a young teenage, you realize that money was not plentiful, that you had to watch your pennies, and get the most mileage out of your dollar that you could get. You learned to take care of your clothing. You learned how to appreciate the simple things in life, taught to enjoy your relations and your associations with your friends and neighbors. You did not go off the deep end for things that you could do without. You knew that you had to stretch your dollar, but still you were able to participate in many activities which did not mean an expense of great magnitude, but that you might have fun with little or no expense. I would say that this experience has been most helpful and I think it taught people that they should budget their means and try to live a good life along with that. I do not regret having the experience of this depression, as you might call it, but I would hate to say that everybody should do, for fear that depressions might continue as such and not turn into good times. But history will show that results might be obtained with better planning by government and business and people themselves, in order to prevent such economic situations that we term a depression.

JK: This concludes the interview. Thank you.