

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
ON THE
DEPRESSION YEARS
IN
SANTA CLARA COUNTY

SJSU
PROFESSOR EAKINS
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ROCHELLE BUSH
1224 MARTIN AVENUE
SAN JOSE, CA 95126
408 292-7351

I have interviewed four people about their lives and perspectives of the depression years in Santa Clara County. I also have some newspaper articles and the memoirs of a friends father that I found interesting from those years. The four people that I interviewed are Jean Allen, Gloria Vargas, Emma Naucke, and Don Atlas. The memoirs are from Sid Greig.

Jean Allen was 14 years old in 1929. She had one brother, Hugh, four years older and a sister, Barbara, five years younger. Her mother was a widow. They lived in a small house on the 700 block of South Sixth Street. Jean went to Roosevelt Jr. High School and San Jose High School. Jean remembers her mother going to San Jose Normal School (now San Jose State University) to get a teaching credential.

Any time of the day or night she could walk around that neighborhood and school and feel completely safe. Walking was the mode of transportation used a lot. The way her mother was able to support herself and family was from savings that she had before the depression. Hugh had a paper route and worked at a service station. He was able to keep the money he made from these jobs, this helped his mother out since he never had her buy him anything. He was able to buy himself a Model A Ford in 1936. To save money on clothes, the grandmother, an excellent seamstress would sew them. The grandparents lived very close, raised chickens and had a nice big garden so they always had food. Jean and her family would go there often for meals. San Jose seemed a lot smaller then, neighborhoods were very friendly. Everybody knew everybody and families were very close.

For entertainment in San Jose, they would walk to the library or go to a creamery for a milkshake. If they had the money, they would also go to a movie. The radio was always a fun way to spend the evening, everybody from the neighborhood would go to one house and gather around the radio listening to Bing Crosby, Burns and Allen, or

Blue Monday just to name a few.

Don Edwards was the president of the student body of San Jose High School for the class of 1932. The Edwards family was wealthy, they owned a home in the east foothills of San Jose . Jean recalls going to a party at his house and remembers a big swimming pool. Although the Edwards family had money, they did not stick out, everybody seemed the same . Most everybody was poor but didn't know it or feel it because everybody was in the same boat. Kids got used to hand-me-down clothes and didn't mind wearing the same thing day after day. All that mattered was that the clothes were clean. The old story about putting cardboard in the shoes when there were holes worn through them is true. Another alternative, if the shoes didn't get too terribly worn, they could bring them to the shoe repair on First Street and get them fixed.

Most of the friends Jean had were those that were in high school with her, or people that were going to San Jose Normal School. Besides the parochial schools, San Jose High was the only high school in the area.

Jean married Robert Rice. Their wedding was very small and modest. They were married in suits. This was a practical thing to do since they would be able to wear them again. They went to Carmel for their honeymoon. As newlyweds, they first rented a house for fifteen dollars a month in Morgan Hill and in less than two years they bought a lot and had a carpenter build them a house which they paid for on terms. Robert was a school teacher and made one hundred dollars a month. Robert lived on a prune ranch before he was married, he never remembered being hungry because he always had animals, a garden and prunes. Holidays were always the same for Jean before the depression and during. They exchanged small gifts at Christmas and always had a tree and a big feast. Thanksgiving at the Rice home was also a big feast, all the relatives would come and contribute to the meal.

Gloria Vargas had a different perspective of the depression in the Santa Clara Valley. Her parents were divorced, and before the depression she lived with her father. Her father was wealthy, owning a string of dairies, and a department store, Vargas Brothers on Lafayette Street in Santa Clara. He was also on the board of directors for the Bank of Italy.

Gloria was 14 years old in 1929, she was attending Miss Harkers Boarding School in Palo Alto. The tuition was very expensive. When the depression hit she was pulled out of the school to save the expense. She lived with her father for the next two years in a big beautiful home on Aire Avenue in San Jose. She lived there with her step mother, step brother and father. When the stock market crashed, her father lost fifty thousand dollars which was a lot of money but it didn't devastate him financially. Gloria attended San Jose High School until she was sixteen years old. Like Jean, for entertainment Gloria would go to a Creamery or a movie or listen to the radio. Her mother married a famous aviator who lost his hearing. This impairment put him out of work. The only money he brought into the household was from an inheritance.

Glorias mother, step-father, brother, sister and herself moved to Gilroy. Her step-father owned some property there. They lived in a three room tiny place that was attached to a skating rink. There was no bathroom, just a wash basin and a toilet. They didn't mind it too much because they knew that they still owned their house on Martin Avenue. They felt like they were on an extended camping trip for a good reason. They were renting the Martin Avenue house out.

Leonore (Glorias mother) made games out of hard times. She would bring the children on a mushroom hunt, so that she would have mushrooms to can. She would bring them fishing for crawfish which was always fun, yet it was also their meal that night. She had her fine china with her

in Gilroy and made sure the table was set beautifully every night. She brought her beautiful furnishings and expensive oriental rugs. Even though the house was a little dump, it was exquisitely decorated inside. Leonore was getting \$120.00 a month child support from her ex-husband. This is the money they would live on, besides the extra money that she would get from her Martin Avenue rental. She always had a little money left over, and in those days it only took fifteen dollars down to buy a house. She bought ten houses, one at a time, and rented them out. She turned most of them into rooming houses getting the most rent possible out of them.

Gloria and her sister were not to work for anybody outside of the family but they did their fair share of scrubbing and cleaning the rentals. Glorias brother Jack, worked at a grocery store stocking shelves, collecting carts, carrying groceries to cars and the like. He only kept part of his money and gave the rest to his mother to help her out.

Gloria remembers the day in 1932 that her mother came home with a big orange shaped structure on the back of her trailer. It was an orange stand. Leonore set it up for selling hamburgers, coffee, orange juice, sodas and ice cream. She would buy a pound of hamburger for ten cents. In Gilroy, tomatoes and lettuce were very inexpensive and so were the hamburger buns. She could get eight to ten paper thin hamburgers out of a pound. Business was great, people coming over the Pacheco Pass would stop at their hamburger stand for a tasty treat and refreshments. Gloria and her sister Janet worked the stand, this was a way Leonore knew they were out of trouble.

Since Glorias step-father was an aviator, he had a lot of friends that were also aviators. There were times when the kids would hear a bi-plane going by and they would run outside with a dishtowel and flag it down. These men were called hot rodders of the air. Because of the

skating rink, it was easy to spot the house from the air. When the planes would land all the kids would come around to see who the aviator was, and look at his plane. During the summer, tomatoes, being inexpensive, made a wonderful spaghetti sauce. Leonore would put on a big spaghetti feed. Spaghetti was about fifteen cents for five pounds. A big loaf of french bread was inexpensive. Wine flowed freely even though it was during the prohibition. Leonore always had the ability to make a lot out of nothing.

Gloria was one of the best dressed girls in Gilroy High School. She still had a lot of her dresses from the boarding school days, and her mother had some lovely clothes that Gloria would re-design to fit her tastes and styles. She was probably viewed as a rich girl. The kids in Gilroy would also go to movies and the creamery for entertainment, also dances. The dances were called grange dances. A lot of athletic activities went on at Gilroy High too. The teachers never talked about the depression, they didn't have to, everybody was quite aware of it. One time, Gloria was brought to a dance in Morgan Hill, she was still the new girl in town and didn't know what to expect. She wore a gorgeous long gown with gloves past her elbows, she was dressed to the nines. She got to the dance and all the other girls were wearing their regular old school clothes. There was a depression going on! She felt a little out of place at first, but before long, the kids made her feel welcome.

Leonore always taught her children that the most important thing was to hang onto their property. If any extra money was earned, save it until they could buy another house or pay off the one they had. Put their money to work, earn something, get ahead." Hold your head up high, be able to look people straight in the eye, so they are not able to say anything against you for who you are, or what you've done ." Her family pride was very important to her.

Holidays for Gloria's family, like Jeans, were never bleak. All the family would get together and bring food so that they would have a large feast. Gifts weren't the important thing for Christmas, it was just a time to be together as a family and put all worries to the side for the evening.

When I asked Gloria what really stuck out in her mind about the depression years, she told me nobody was supported by the government. If people were hungry they would work for food, money or shelter. She remembers tramps and hobos by the scores, her mother would always feed them, but never for free. They were required to do something around her house: rake the yard, wash the windows, whatever she felt was needed, then she would feed them. She would never turn them away. There were also fruit orchards, where people could pick a bucket of fruit for a nickel. This would really add up and put some needed money in the pockets of the less fortunate.

Gloria was married in 1937. She needed employment, but the only way that she would be hired is if she was a "Miss", so she lied and said she was. That was great until she got pregnant, she had to hide her pregnancy as long as possible, then quit. She was making \$37.50 every two weeks then, which was a big help for her and her husband.

Life was hard in those years but Gloria recalls her past with fond memories. Everybody was struggling, yet all her friends and acquaintances made do with what they had and had a great time doing it.

Emma Naucke was older than Jean and Gloria. In 1929 she was 20 years old and already a bride of two years. She lived in downtown San Jose on Spencer Street near San Fernando. Her husband's mother and family lived 2 blocks from them. They spent a lot of time over there, eating a lot of meals with them. Times were very hard for Emma and her husband. He worked at the San Jose Evening News from when he was eleven years old until his death. He was making \$52.50 a week before the

depression, and was cut back to \$37.50 a week during the depression. He also had his hours cut back. On this income they had to live very modestly. Emma could not work because like Gloria, she was a married woman and married women were not hired during those years. Even on his small salary they were able to save five to ten dollars a week which they used to pay off their home. They bought their house for \$4900.00, put \$1000.00 down and had payments of \$40.00 a month. Their interest rate was 4%. The house had two bedrooms with one bathroom.

Eating at Emmas in-laws saved them lots of money. For socializing, they would go to a friends house and play cards. There was usually cocoa and cookies served.

Emma remembers people losing their homes. Rent was \$15.00 a month for those that couldn't afford house payments, but still could keep a roof over their heads. A lot of people were going into debt and couldn't even buy clothes or shoes. She too vouches that when the soles of the shoes were worn, they put cardboard in them. Like all the people I spoke with her holidays were not scant. There was always plenty of food because so many people in the family would bring their share. Emma and her husband would go to Aptos to go clamming, they loved going to the beach, it was inexpensive, yet a lot of fun.

Emma recalls a lot of people coming to her door for hand outs. Like Lenore, she would never turn them away. She had very little to give, but she always managed to give them a quarter or some eggs. Everybody realized there was a depression going on, there were so many people out of work. People weren't judged on what they had or didn't have. Everybody did what they could to survive. Emma and her husband were no exception.

Don Atlas, the only man I spoke with had a very interesting view of the depression years. He lived on Atlas Avenue in San Jose with both his parents, and his younger brother. From 1930-1936 he attended Hester

Elementary School with 800 other students. All the kids would walk to school, very few had a bicycle. Don then went on to Hoover Jr. High, and then to San Jose High School. There was a well stocked library at San Jose High. The children had a feeling of responsibility to do well in school, if they didn't they felt it would be betraying their parents. There were no students that owned their own car, they would occasionally use their parents car. There was not a student arrested for any infractions in the time that Don attended school. For a student to commit a crime was a badge of dishonor, it would bring shame to the family. In Dons eyes, the students were more responsible, they needed to be successful.

A felony committed by anybody in San Jose was very unusual. It would always make headlines and stay there for weeks, sometimes months.

On a one block street, everybody knew each other. If somebody had a problem ,others would try to help them out . In the times of the depression, people needed each other for comfort, strength and guidance.

Besides going to the movie theater where admission was twenty-five cents for adults, and ten cents for children, San Jose had community sings. There was anywhere from a four to ten piece WPA (Works Project Administration) Orchestra, people from the community would come and listen and participate in singing. It was completely free and a lot of fun. As the people came through the door they were given a sheet of paper with the songs written on them so they were able to sing a long. Another place to go was a place called the Lyric Theater, this was on second street in downtown San Jose. Adults were only charged ten cents and children a nickel. The Lyric showed only silent movies , and the chairs were not even bolted down and hardly comfortable. It was definitely cheap entertainment.

Don like Jean, remembers the Suntan Special that ran from mid April until October . For six bits (seventy-five cents) they could take the

train from San Jose to Santa Cruz and spend the entire day there, usually bringing along a picnic lunch. San Francisco was a major trip and not taken very often. Don like the other three previously mentioned fondly speaks of the soda fountains and creameries. He remembers the Alpine creamery on So. First. Street. School plays were held often for the community to see. San Jose was a pioneer for night softball games. There were three fields, Hoover, Roosevelt, and Graham. Each field would have three games a night . People would come in by the droves, they would be triple parked, there were so many people. There was no set admission, but there was a collection taken for whatever could be afforded.

Don can remember the family putting together puzzles, playing board games, playing dice and of course, the real focal point, already mentioned by others was the radio. They loved sitting around listening to the radio.

Don is Jewish and the Jewish people had a very close community. There were seventy five Jewish families, with one Synagogue . On Friday nights they would go to the synagogue, and after the service the congregation would socialize. The women would bring baked goods and they would have coffee and punch. They would often play cards, not for money, just for companionship. The people of the depression needed each other a lot, they sought strength and comfort from each other.

A lot of people lost their homes, and didn't know where their next meal was going to come from. Leopold Hart from Harts Department Store in San Jose was a heavy contributor to Jewish needs. There were other wealthy Jewish men that would also help the needy. Don agrees that having nice clothes was not an important factor. As long as the clothes were clean they were alright. Often his clothes were sewn for him by his grandmother or they would buy some at the Salvation Army, and of course , cardboard would be put into the shoes that had holes in them. His parents did not speak of the depression, they didn't have to . Times were hard;

it was obvious. Most high school kids Don knew , including himself, had a part-time job. This way they didn't have to rely on their parents for money for entertainment needs. Friday afternoons were always a high point for Don, knowing that Saturday he could go to a movie and to his grandmothers for lunch. Kids were not subject to embarrassment, most everybody was poor, and understood desperation. The wealthier kids never flaunted their material gains, they always maintained a low profile.

From the year 1935 through 1937 Don and his mother would stand, twice a month, in a line on 1st Street and Julian for at least two hours to get two bags of groceries given to them by the Federal Government. Don's father and uncle owned an auto wrecking yard. They were barely making ends meet. A person could buy a Model A wheel, a battery, or a door glass for 50 cents. A brand new no frills car cost between \$500.00 to \$700.00.

The people that had money were mainly doctors, attorneys and department store owners. A doctors office visit in those days was one to two dollars, the same for a home visit. There were not very many doctors in the Santa Clara Valley at that time so their patients were many. The doctors would make adjustments for the poor, sometimes not even charging them at all. Some people would use the barter system, trading their goods or services. Most of the small merchants survived, they had to struggle but they did make ends meet.

There were a lot of fruit canneries in San Jose in those days, people that couldn't get other jobs would work there. It was almost like working in a sweat shop. They didn't get paid much and they worked long hard hours, although they were working with a skeleton crew because money was so tight. The San Jose Civic Auditorium was built in 1935 by the government. It employed a lot of local people and it provided San Jose with a centerpiece. It was a place to go for other entertainment.

Don misses those days. Even though it was a struggle just to stay above water, there was a feeling of cohesiveness within the community.

The attitude was one for all, all for one. Don feels that attitude has been lost.

Sid Greig arrived in San Jose in August of 1922. He immediately went to work picking apricots on a farm off Winchester Avenue. He continued working at various farms during fruit seasons, and doing odd jobs in the off season. Finally in 1925 he was offered a job with the Express Company in Gilroy. He drove a horse and wagon and picked up and delivered express mail and packages. Sid worked for the Express Company from 1925 until he retired in 1955. By 1929 Sid was promoted to manager of the office. He had a driver working for him. Sid was one of the highest paid men in town, making \$147.00 a month. The height of his ambition was to retire at \$100.00 a month pension. He felt in order to do this he would need to buy some stock. He bought some stock in the Bank of Italy. He was buying 20 shares at \$25.00 a month when the stock market began to crash. There was no way out for him because unfortunately he was locked into a contract. Only part of the contract was completed, so not all of his shares were paid for. He was left with the option of stopping payments entirely and taking the entire loss or continuing to pay what the contract called for. He was only one of thousands of people in the same bind. In order to keep these people happy it was decided they would receive the stock they paid for at the contracted price. Sid's contracted price was \$50.00 a share, he already paid out \$400.00 so he received eight shares and the contract was cancelled. His stocks were only worth \$15.00 a share but he took the loss and sold them at that price. He got out of the market. The stock continued to plummet all the way down to \$3.00 a share. This was typical of other stocks in the market too. Ed Rea, the man who originally advised Sid and a lot of other friends and relatives to buy the Bank of Italy stock, committed suicide. Ironically, if everyone had held onto their shares of the Bank of Italy they would all be rich today as that company became the Bankamerica Corporation and has recently reached new highs on

the New York Stock Exchange.

After the crash, Sid had to take a ten percent cut in pay. In 1930 he owned a Model A Ford sedan and needed a set of tires for it. He had to borrow \$60.00 on his life insurance to buy them. It took him four years to pay back the money. Sids parents lived in San Martin on five acres. His fathers health was failing and he couldn't keep up the payments, insurance and taxes. The payments were \$18.00 a month, so Sid had to move out of Gilroy and fix up one end of his parents garage to live in order for them not to lose the property.

He remembers a factory that made doors , window sashes, and wooden things for houses. The factory didn't go out of business but it did cut the employees, from two hundred to twenty. The banks foreclosed on a lot of the ranches, but allowed the people to continue living there. They would have a little garden, maybe some chickens, a cow, whatever they could to get by. They didn't have to make payments to the bank anymore because the bank owned their property. It was believed that at one time the banks owned twenty-five percent of the real estate in California. The young people were the ones mostly affected. There were scads of young people wandering around who couldn't get jobs. The Roosevelt Administration started CCC camps (Civilian Conservation Corps) that provided jobs for young men just out of high school or college that couldn't find work. The camps were set up in various areas. They were primarily in the ecology field, focusing on the conservation of our forests and natural resources. The CCC was like a military organization where the men slept in barracks, and there was discipline administered. The men were not paid but did get room and board. The one thing that stood out in Sids mind was that there was very little law breaking, conniving and things of that nature. Even though they were desperately hard up and sometimes didn't even have enough to eat, there was an orderliness about the people.

I will now site a few of the articles that I found in the San Jose Mercury Herald which I felt truly reflected hard times in Santa Clara County.

On November 1, 1932 there is an article asking for donations for the relief council. It says there is a lack of sufficient food for unemployed families. There are two donut shops, Holsum Donut Shop donating fifty dozen doughnuts and Popular Glazed Donut Company donating fifty loaves of bread. Several pies and cakes had been promised by other but not nearly enough to feed all the unemployed families.

On November 6, 1932, perhaps in answer to the above mentioned article, there is an article about the local relief council with headquarters at 63 No. First Street receiving six acres of cabbage as a donation. It states that local truckers generously donated their time to haul the produce from the farms to the council. The food then was distributed to the needy families free of charge. The article also reminded generous citizens that unemployed families would be in need of wood and coal oil stoves and coal oil lamps as in many of their homes gas and electricity was being shut off.

On November 7, 1932 in the San Jose Mercury Herald, a high school student Winifred Mina, writes an article titled "What's Man wth Family and No Job to do these days?" It portrays one sorrow after another. It speaks of poor men with families and no job, desperately seeking work. She talks about one man who worked so hard on his peach orchard only to find that peaches weren't selling. What is a man to do who needs food and shelter for his family? The only thing left to do is to make liquor out of the peaches, he is caught and thrown into jail. His wife and children are left without support. What is a man to do? She goes on to cite many similar cases of men looking desperately for work. She ends her article saying " But hard times go on the same. Men work hard and die poor, trying to realize small ambitions. They work happily, hopefully, to an unhappy

hopeless end. What's a man to do?"

November 23, 1932 an article states that teachers, pupils and PTA would join in providing food for Thanksgiving to the less fortunate ones. A spirit of eager cooperation prevailed with teachers and pupils alike donating their time and efforts to this annual gesture, spreading seasonal cheer to the destitute.

The articles and the people I have written about seem to echo the same thing; times are hard but there is a community feeling, a spirit, a camaraderie, held by all, to seek comfort and strength in others, to make the best of a bad situation. It is often said that in a crisis people are drawn together. It is apparent that during the depression that held true.

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