

No Help Wanted

E.W. Bakke

April 19, 1934

Decided to have a go at the state employment office. Got there at eight, fellow I knew sitting on the steps. Big sign there: "No loitering in the doorway." Janitor or someone came down and asked him to move.

"Are you going upstairs?" he asked. "If you are, go, but don't sit here." The fellow jumped; not looking at the janitor, he began a loud bluster about his father paying taxes to support the place and he could sit on the steps if he wanted to. When the janitor left, he returned to the steps for a moment. Meanwhile a group of people had gathered to see what was going on.

Asked the janitor when the manager would be in. He said, "Nine o'clock." Decided to come back. When I got back, a line had formed clear out into the street. I took my place. Officials and clerks kept coming and had a good cheery word for us as they passed. But after they had gone, many sarcastic remarks followed them like, "Gives you a nice smile, but that's all."

The manager himself drove up before the office a little past nine—appeared sore that there was no parking space in front of the office. The fellows standing outside purposely raised their voices so he could hear and made remarks such as, "Not much use coming here, they never do anything but tell you to come back in sixty days"; "What'd they ever do for me?—Nothing.": "First it was April first, then it was the fifteenth, and now it will be God knows when."

I register, but they say not much chance today; maybe a week from today...

April 27, 1934

Up at seven, cup of coffee, and off to Sargent's. Like to be there when the gang comes to work, the lucky devils. Employment manager not in. Waited in his outer office... Three others waiting, two reporting for compensation. Other one laid off two weeks ago and said he called at office every day. He inquired what I was doing and when I said "looking for work" he laughed. "You never work here? No? What chance you think you got when 400 like me who belong here are out?" Employment manager showed up at 9:30. I had waited two hours. My time has no value. A pleasant fellow; told me in a kind but snappy way business was very bad. What about the future; would he take my name? Said he referred only to the present. Nothing more for me to say, so left. Two more had drifted into office. Suppose they got the same story. Must be a lot of men in New Haven that have heard it by now...

May 2

Started out at seven for New Haven Clock Shop. No one in employment office. Lady at information desk asked, "What do you want?" I told her. She wanted to know if I had worked there before and when I said, "No" she didn't even ask if I had any experience in clockmaking (which I have). And when I started to tell her so, she cut me off with "No use—sorry." Suppose she gets tired too.

From Clock Shop to E. Cowells and Co., who make auto equipment. If they want to have old men, well, I worked here in 1916 and 1917. Didn't get to see anyone here because just as you get to the hall there is a big sign, "No Help Wanted."

Having heard Seamless Rubber was working quite steady I went down there. Regular employment office furnished with one bench. Another chap, a foreigner, waiting also. In about ten minutes a fellow asked us our business and told us very politely they no jobs even for skilled men, let alone laborers. No use to tell him I wasn't always a laborer for I never had done the skilled jobs on rubber.

Saw a sign hanging out of one place in gilt letters. "No Help Wanted." In gilt, mind you, as if to make it more permanent.

Then to Bradley-Smith candy-makers, where I had also worked before. The first few days I hadn't the heart for more than a couple tries a morning. I'm getting hardened to the word "No" now, though, and can stick it most of the morning. Bradley-Smith has no employment office. The telephone switchboard operator is apparently instructed to switch off anyone looking for work, as she made quick work of my question. I notice no one seems to be instructed to find out if we know anything about the business or work. Firms might be passing up some good bets for their force. But apparently that isn't important now.

Walking away, met two friends out going the rounds too. They said it was useless and that they were only looking through force of habit. That's going to be me before long. Even if they hadn't said so, I'm thinking it is useless to run around like this; you appear ridiculous, and that gets your goat—or would if you kept it up too long. Wish I had some drag with someone on the inside of one of those gates. I expect it's that everyone knows they have to know someone that keeps me from having more company at the employment offices. This is what a former pal of mine who is up at Yale calls "competition in the labor market," I guess. Well, it's a funny competition and with guys you never see.

Account from Oracle Education Foundation's ThinkQuest Library

The Dust Bowl

Anne Marie Low

In addition to the Great Depression, during the 1930s residents of the Great Plains endured the worst drought recorded in the history of the United States. Crops failed and livestock died. Huge dust storms turned day into night covering the area in clouds of dirt, soot, and dust. Ann Marie Low lived in southeastern North Dakota. Born in 1912, Ann Marie kept diaries from 1927 to 1937. The diary describes the daily struggle with the dust storms that invaded North Dakota, and it conveys the hard work (usually without benefit of electricity) that was the lot of women on the farm. The last entry in her diary, dated June 4, 1937, when she was twenty-five years old, records her frustration at her lost youth and the bleak prospects for the future: "This is a round that will go on forever. At least it will go on until my youth is gone. Somehow, I've got to get out!!"

April 25, 1934 Wednesday

Last weekend was the worst dust storm we ever had. We've been having quite a bit of blowing dirt every day since the drought started, not only here, but all over the Great Plains. Many days this spring the air is just full of dirt coming...for hundreds of miles. It sifts into everything. After we wash the dishes and put them away, so much dust sifts into the cupboards we must wash them again before the next meal. Clothes in the closets are covered with dust.

Last weekend no one was taking an automobile out for fear of ruining the motor. I rode Roany to Frank's place to return a gear. To find my way I had to ride right beside the fence post to the next.

Newspapers say the deaths of many babies and old people are attributed to breathing in so much dirt.

May 7, 1934 Monday

The dirt is still blowing. Last weekend Bud (her brother) and I helped with the cattle and had fun gathering weeds. Weeds give us greens for salad long before anything in the garden is ready...

Still no job. I'm trying to persuade Dad that I should apply for rural school #3 out here where we go to school. I don't see a chance of getting a job in high school when so many experienced teachers are out of work.

He argues that the pay is only \$60.00 a month out here, while even in a grade school in time I might get \$75.00. Extra expenses in town would probably eat up that extra \$15.00. Miss Eston, the practice teaching supervisor, told me her salary has been cut to \$75.00 after all the years she has been teaching in Jamestown. She wants to get married. School boards will not hire married women teachers in these hard times because they have husbands to support them. Her fiancé is the sole support of his widowed mother and can't support a wife, too. So she is just stuck in her job, hoping she won't get another salary cut because she can scarcely love on what she makes and dress the way she is expected to.

May 21, 1934, Monday

Ethel has been having stomach trouble. Dad has been taking her to doctors through suspecting her trouble is the fact that she often goes on a diet that may affect her health. The local doctor said he might be chronic appendicitis, so Mama took Ethel by train to Valley City last week to have a surgeon there remove her appendix.

Saturday Dad, Bud, and I planted an acre of potatoes. There was so much dirt in the air I couldn't see Bud only a few feet in front of me. Even the air in the house was just a haze. In the evening the wind died down, and Cap came to take me to the movie. We joked about how hard it is to get cleaned up enough to go anywhere.

The newspapers report that on May 10 there was such a strong wind that experts in Chicago estimated 12,000,000 tons of Plains soil was dumped on that city. By the next day the sun was obscured in Washington D.C., and ships 300 miles out at sea reported dust settling on their decks.

Sunday the dust wasn't so bad. Dad and I drove cattle to the Big pasture. Then I churned butter and baked ham, bread, and cookies for the men, as no telling when mama will be back.

May 30, 1934, Wednesday

Ethel got along fine, so mama left her at the hospital and came to Jamestown by train Friday. Dad took us both home.

The mess was incredible! Dirt had blown into the house all week and lay inches deep on everything. Every towel and curtain was just black. There wasn't a clean dish or cooking utensil. There was no food. Oh, there were eggs and milk and on loaf left of the breas I baked the weekend before. I looked in the cooler box down the well (our refrigerator) and found a little ham and eggs for the men's supper because that was all we could fix in a hurry. It turned out they had been living on ham and eggs for two days.

Mama was very tired. After she had fixed started for bread, I insisted she go to bed and I'd do all the dishes.

It took until 10 o'clock to wash all the dirty dishes. That's not wiping them—just washing them. The cupboards had to be washed to have a clean place to put them.

Saturday was a busy day. Before starting breakfast I had to sweep and wash all the dirt off the kitchen and dining room floors, wash the stove, pancake griddle, and dining room table and chairs. There was cooking, baking, and churning to be done for those hungry men. Dad is 6 feet 4 inches tall, with a big frame. Bud is 6 feet 3 inches and almost as big boned as Dad. We say feeding him is like filling a silo.

Mama couldn't make bread until I carried water to wash the bread mixer. I couldn't churn until the churn was washed and scalded. We just couldn't do anything until something was washed first. Every room had to have dirt almost shoveled out of it before we could wash floors and furniture.

We had no time to wash clothes, but it was necessary. I had to wash out the boiler, wash tubs, and the washing machine before we could use them. Then every towel, curtain, piece of bedding, and garment had to be taken outdoors to have as much dust as possible shaken out before washing. The cistern is dry, so I had to carry all the water we needed from the well.

That evening Cap came to take me to the movie, as usual...I'm sorry I snapped at Cap. It isn't his fault, or anyone's fault, but I was tired and cross. Life is what the newspapers call "the Dust Bowl" is becoming a gritty nightmare.

Account from Oracle Education Foundation's ThinkQuest Library

What If Our Check Does Not Come?

Ann Rivington

The income of American families decreased by more than half from 1929 to 1932. President Herbert Hoover, who blamed the Depression on international economic problems, advocated a policy of "rugged individualism" and opposed government intervention to restore economy.

But when Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933, he instituted government programs to combat the Depression as part of his New Deal. Among these were a national relief, or welfare, program that included both direct payments and public works projects. Ann Rivington, an unemployed music teacher pregnant with her first child, described the trauma and humiliation of applying for relief.

When I went to college I studied sociology. I was taught that hunger, squalor, dirt, and ignorance are the results of environment. Charity, therefore, is no solution. We must change the environment. In order to do this we have settlement houses, playgrounds, and social workers in the slums.

In the past year and a half I have again revised my opinion. I am no longer one of us. For all my education, my training in thrift, and cleanliness, I am become one of them. My condition is shared by a larger sector of the population. From my new place in society I regard the problems and misery of the poor with new eyes.

Two years ago I was living in comfort and apparent security. My husband had a good position in a well-known orchestra, and I was teaching a large and promising class of piano pupils. When the orchestra was disbanded, we started in a rapid downhill path. My husband was unable to secure another position. My class gradually dwindled away. We were forced to live on our savings.

In the early summer of 1933 I was eight months pregnant and we had just spent our last twelve dollars on one month's rent for an apartment. We found that such apartments really exist. They lack the most elementary comforts. They usually are infested with mice and bedbugs. Ours was. Quite often the ceilings leak.

What, then, did we do for food when our last money was spent on rent? In vain we tried to borrow more. So strong was the influence of our training that my husband kept looking feverishly for work when there was no work, and blaming himself because he was unable to find it. An application to the Emergency Home Relief Bureau was the lack of our desperation.

We were so completely uniformed about the workings of charitable organizations that we all thought all we need do was to make clear to the authorities our grave situation in order to receive immediate attention. My husband came home with an application blank in his pocket. We filled out the application with great care. The next morning my husband started early for the bureau. He returned at about two o'clock, very hungry and weak from the heat. But he was encouraged.

"Well. I got to talk to somebody this time," he said. "She asked me over again all the questions on that paper and more besides. Then she said to go home and wait. An investigator should be around tomorrow or day after. On account of your condition she marked the paper urgent."

The next day we waited, and all of the two days more. The fourth day, which was Saturday, my husband went back to the bureau. It was closed until Monday.

On Sunday morning the Italian grocer reminded me of our bill. "It's get too big," he said. We cut down to one meal a day, and toast.

Monday brought no investigator. Tuesday my husband was at the bureau again. This time he came home hungry.

"They said the investigator was here Friday and we were out. I got sore and told them somebody was lying."

"But you shouldn't. Now they won't help us."

"Now they will help us. So he'll be here tomorrow."

Last Wednesday afternoon the investigator arrived. So he questioned us closely for more than half an hour on our previous and present situation, our personal lives and relatives. This time we certainly expected the check. But we were told wait.

"I'm a special investigator. The regular one will be around Friday with the check."

My husband was in a torment of anxiety. "But we can't wait till Friday. We have to eat something."

The investigator looked tired. "I must make my report. And there are other cases ahead of yours."

By Monday morning we had nothing for breakfast but oatmeal, without sugar or milk. We decided we must go together to the bureau and find out what was wrong. Therefore, as soon as we had finished breakfast, we borrowed carfare from our kind neighbors and started out.

We reached the relief station a good fifteen minutes before nine, but the sidewalk was crowded with people. My husband explained to me that they were waiting to waylay the investigators on their way to work to pour complaints and problems in their ears.

At last the doors were opened. The line crept forward. Three guards stood at the entrance, and every person in the crowd had to tell his business before he was admitted. Many were turned away. For the insistent there was the inevitable answer.

"I got my orders," said the policeman within ready call.

By half past nine we made our way to the door.

"Room two," the guard said, handing us each a slip of paper.

The place was filled with long brown benches crowded with our drab companions in hunger. Others were standing along the walls. The air was stifling and rank with the smell of poverty. We sat down at the rear of the bench. Gradually we were able to slide to the end of our bench, then back along the next bench.

I watched the people around us. There they sat waiting, my fellow indigents. Bodies were gaunt or flabby, faces — some stoical, some sullen — all careworn like my husband's. What had they done, or left undone, to inherit hunger? What was this relief we asking for? Certainly it was not charity. It was dispensed too grudgingly, too harshly, to be that.

When our turn came to talk to one of the women behind the desks, we were told that the checks had been held up for lack of funds and that we should go home and wait for an investigator some time this week. We were not going to be put off in this manner. My husband told her, "We have to have something more than promises. There's no food in the house, and my wife can't live on air."

"Well, that's all I can tell you," said the woman.

"If that's all you can tell me, who knows more than you? We're not leaving without a better answer. I want the supervisor." At last the supervisor was called. "The checks will be out tomorrow night. You'll get yours Thursday."

Sure enough early Thursday afternoon the regular investigator arrived. He gave us a check for \$8.50 to cover two weeks' food. We had already spent \$2.00 at the grocer's. And this amount, of course, was counted off the check. But Pete was not satisfied.

"Gotta take off more. I poor too."

I shook my head. "Wait," I said. "We'll pay you, but not this time." I looked around the little shop hungrily. I was tortured by a great longing for fresh fruit.

"How much are the grapes?" I asked. "No grapes," said Pete. "No grapes for you."

"But why not Pete?"

"Grapes are luxury. You get beans, potatoes, and onions. Poor people no eat grapes."

I was bewildered. But Pete meant what he said. He showed me a bulletin he had received from the relief bureau listing the things allowed on the food checks of the jobless. I cannot remember all the regulations, but I do remember that only dried fruit was listed. The quantities of eggs, butter, and milk were strictly limited. No meat except salt pork, unsliced bacon, pig's liver, and other entrails. Rice, beans, potatoes, bread, and onions were the main items to be sold. I saw no mention of fresh vegetables. I was highly indignant.

"Listen Pete, my stomach isn't leather even if I have no money." I picked up a nice juicy cantaloupe and two bunches of carrots.

"These are onions and potatoes." I said and marched out the door trailing carrot tops....

Gradually the more and more deficient diet began to toll us. We did not lose much weight — the very poor usually eat plenty of starch — but we began to suffer from debility, colds, minor infections....

Meanwhile we are still living on the relief. We keep wondering and questioning. What if our check does not come next week? What when the relief bureau stops paying rents for the summer? Will we be evicted? Will our family be broken up, our little girl taken away from us? After a time these questions reach our beyond our burning personal needs. What is the cause of our suffering? Wither it is leading us, and the increasing millions like us? What is wrong with the system, the civilization that brings with it such wholesale misery? My own voice is one of many that are asking, more and more insistently.

Account from Oracle Education Foundation's ThinkQuest Library

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: A Child's Letter to the First Lady

C.V.B

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am writing you a little letter this morning. Are you glad it [is] spring? I am, for so many poor people can raise some more to eat. You know what I am writing this letter for? Mother said Mrs. Roosevelt is just a godmother to the world, and I thought maybe you had some old clothes. You know, Mother is a good sewer, and all the little girls are getting Easter dresses. And I thought that you had some. You know Papa could wear Mr. Roosevelt's shirts and clothes I know.

My Papa likes Mr. Roosevelt, and Mother said Mr. Roosevelt carries his worries with a smile - you know he is always happy. You know we are not living on relief - we live on a little far. Papa did have a job and got laid [off] five years ago, so we saved and go two horses and two cows and a hog so we can . . . [have] everything to eat. Sometimes we don't have anything but we live. But you know it [is] so hard to get cloth. So I thought maybe you had some. You know what you thought was no good Mother can make over for me. I am eleven years old. I wish I could see you. I know I would like you both . . .

We have no car or no phone or radio. Papa, he would like to have a radio but he said there [are] other things he needs more. Papa is worried about his seeds oats. And one horse is not very good. But everyone has to worry. I am sending this letter with the pennies I get to take to Sunday school. Mother gives me one [each week], so it took three weeks - 'cause Mother would think I better not ask for things from the First Lady. But Mother said you were an angel for doing so much for the poor. And I thought that [it] would be alright.

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