

## Old Families

that conditions were different in this country than they had been years before. You remember the statement he made: he would never sign up with the CIO, he would go down and sell apples, or something.

Our philosophy was different. We recognized the difficulties. We recognized the seriousness of some things in the demands of labor. We all realized we had to deal with it in a different way than we were used to in the old days, when the industry was being run by the so-called steel barons, Gary, Schwab and so forth. Tom Girdler and a few others were a carry-over from that philosophy. I think they saw the light before they were through.

Sewell Avery was another. He was a colorful, brilliant, able man, before he began to go to pieces. He was in full command of his capacities up to the time he was carried out by the army.<sup>1</sup> A change came upon him after that. He felt the country was going to pieces under the New Deal. Bitter. I was sympathetic to him. But I didn't agree that everything was going to the dogs. I felt we'd pull out of it.

## Diana Morgan

---

*She was a "southern belle" in a small North Carolina town. "I was taught that no prince of royal blood was too good for me." (Laughs.) Her father had been a prosperous cotton merchant and owner of a general store. "It's the kind of town you became familiar with in Thornton Wilder's Our Town. You knew everybody. We were the only people in town who had a library."*

*Her father's recurring illness, together with the oncoming of hard times—the farmers and the townspeople unable to pay their bills—caused the loss of the store. He went into bankruptcy.*

THE BANKS FAILED about the time I was getting ready to go to college. My family thought of my going to Wellesley, Vassar, Smith—but we had

<sup>1</sup> Chairman of the board of the mail-order house Montgomery Ward in 1944. He became involved in a dispute with the Federal Government. He insisted his company was not involved in war work and thus ignored the rules of the War Labor Board. The plant was seized and Avery, refusing to leave, was carried out by two soldiers.

## HARD TIMES

so little money, we thought of a school in North Carolina. It wasn't so expensive.

It was in my junior year, and I came home for Christmas. . . . I found the telephone disconnected. And this was when I realized that the world was falling apart. Imagine us without a telephone! When I finished school, I couldn't avoid facing the fact that we didn't have a cook any more, we didn't have a cleaning woman any more. I'd see dust under the beds, which is something I'd never seen before. I knew the curtains weren't as clean as they used to be. Things were beginning to look a little shabby. . . .

The first thing I noticed about the Depression was that my great-grandfather's house was lost, about to be sold for taxes. Our own house was sold. It was considered the most attractive house in town, about a hundred and fifty years old. We even had a music library. Imagine my shock when it was sold for \$5,000 in back taxes. I was born in that house.

I never felt so old in my life as I felt the first two years out of college. 'Cause I hadn't found a new life for myself, and the other one was finished.

I remember how embarrassed I was when friends from out of town came to see me, because sometimes they'd say they want a drink of water, and we didn't have any ice. (Laughs.) We didn't have an electric refrigerator and couldn't afford to buy ice. There were those frantic arrangements of running out to the drugstore to get Coca-Cola with crushed ice, and there'd be this embarrassing delay, and I can remember how hot my face was.

All this time, I wasn't thinking much about what was going on in this country. . . . I was still leading some kind of social life. Though some of us had read books and discussed them, there wasn't much awareness. . . . Oh, we deplored the fact that so many of our young men friends couldn't find suitable things to do. . . .

One day a friend of my father stopped me on the street and said, "Would you like a job? A friend of mine is director of one of those New Deal programs. She'll tell you about it."

Oh, I was so excited, I didn't know what to do—the thought of having a job. I was very nervous, but very hopeful. Miss Ward came. She looked like a Helen Hokinson woman, very forbidding, formal. She must have been all of forty-five, but to me she looked like some ancient and very frightening person from another world.

## Old Families

She said to me, "It's not a job for a butterfly." She could just look at me and tell that I was just totally unsuitable. I said I was young and conscientious and if I were told what I was supposed to do, I would certainly try to the best of my ability. . . . She didn't give me any encouragement at all.

When she left, I cried for about an hour. I was really a wreck. I sobbed and sobbed and thought how unfair she was. So I was very much amazed to receive a telegram the next day summoning me to a meeting in Raleigh—for the directors of women's work.

There were dozens of women there, from all over the state, of all ages. It seemed to me very chaotic. Everyone was milling around, talking about weaving projects, canning, bookbinding. . . . Everyone there seemed very knowledgeable. I really didn't know what they were talking about. And nobody really told me what I was supposed to do. It just seemed that people were busy, and I somehow gathered that I was in.

So I went back home. I went to the county relief offices at the courthouse. There were people sitting on the floor of a long hallway, mostly black people, looking very depressed, sad. Some of them had children with them, some of them were very old. Just endless rows of them, sitting there, waiting. . . .

My first impression was: Oh, those poor devils, just sitting there, and nobody even saying, "We'll get to you as soon as we can." Though I didn't know a thing about social work, what was good and what wasn't good, my first impulse was that those people should be made to feel somebody was interested in them. Without asking anybody, I just went around and said, "Have you been waiting long? We'll get to you just as soon as we can."

I got the feeling the girls in the office looked very stern, and that they had a punitive attitude: that the women just had to wait, as long as they were there and that you had to find out and be sure they were entitled to it before they got anything.

I didn't know a thing about sewing, bookbinding, canning . . . the approved projects. I'd never boiled an egg or sewed a stitch. But I knew seamstresses, who used to make clothes for us when we were children. I went to see them and got them to help me. I sought help from everybody who knew how to do things.

In the meantime, I would work in the relief office and I began interviewing people . . . and found out how everybody, in order to be eli-

## HARD TIMES

gible for relief, had to have reached absolute bottom. You didn't have to have a lot of brains to realize that once they reached that stage and you put them on an allowance of a dollar a day for food—how could they ever pull out of it?

Caroline, who used to cook for us, came in. I was so shocked to see her in a position where she had to go to the agency and ask for food. I was embarrassed for her to see me when she was in that state. She was a wonderful woman, with a big heart. Here she was, elderly by now, and her health wasn't good at all. And she said, "Oh, the Lord's done sent you down from heaven to save me. I've fallen on hard times. How beautiful you are. You look like an angel to me." In the typical southern Negro way of surviving, she was flattering me. I was humiliated by her putting herself in that position, and by my having to see her go through this. (Weeps softly; continues with difficulty.)

For years, I never questioned the fact that Caroline's house was papered with newspapers. She was our laundress for a while, and I remember going to her house several times. Caroline was out in the yard, just a hard patch of dirt yard. With a big iron pot, with fire under it, stirring, boiling the white clothes. . . .

She was always gracious and would invite me in. She never apologized for the way anything looked. I thought to myself at the time: How odd that Caroline uses newspapers to paper walls. I didn't have any brains at eleven or twelve or whatever to think: what kind of country is this that lets people live in houses like this and necessitates their using the Sunday paper for wallpaper. I'm shocked that I can't say to you: "When I was twelve, I was horrified when I first went into this house." I was surprised, but I wasn't horrified.

The girls at the office—when the clients had all gone—it's funny you treat them this way, and you still call them clients—when they had all gone, the girls would be very friendly with me. They would ask what I wanted to know and would show me the files. I was quite impressed with their efficiency. But when they were dealing with clients, they were much more loose. I didn't see why they had to be this way. Perhaps they were afraid the people in town would think they were too easy with the welfare people.

Because even then, people were saying that these people are no good, they didn't really want to work. Oftentimes, there were telephone calls, saying so-and-so Joe Jones got a bag of food from Welfare, he got an automobile, or his wife's working or something like that. I spent my

## Old Families

time away from the job talking to my old friends, defending the program, saying: You don't know about the situation. They would tell me I was terribly sentimental and that I had lost my perspective. That was when I first heard the old expression: If you give them coal, they'd put it in the bathtub. They didn't even have bathtubs to put coal in. So how did anybody know that's what they'd do with coal if they had it?

We were threatened the whole time, because funds were constantly being questioned by the legislators. After I'd been there three months, the program *was* discontinued. By this time, I was absolutely hooked. I could almost weep thinking about it. I told Miss Ward, who had by now become my staunch friend, that this is what I want to do with myself: I want to do something to change things.

By this time, the girls in the office—Ella Mae was the one I liked best—were perfectly willing to let me interview people, because they had more than they could do. Something like 150 cases each. In two months, I was employed as a case worker.

As I recall, when a person came into the office and applied for help, you filled out a form, asked all those humiliating questions: Does anybody work? Do you own your own house? Do you have a car? You just established the fact they had nothing. Nothing to eat, and children. So you give them one food order. You couldn't give them shoes, or money for medicine—without visiting and corroborating the fact that they were destitute.

So, of course, you get out as fast as possible to see those people before the \$4 grocery order ran out. You know, the day after tomorrow, I used to drive out to make house calls. It was the first time I'd been off Main Street. I'd never been out in the rural area, and I was absolutely aghast at the conditions in the country.

I discovered, the first time in my life, in the county, there was a place called the Islands. The land was very low and if it rained, you practically had to take a boat to get over where Ezekiel Jones or whoever lived. I remember a time when I got stuck in this rented Ford, and broke down little trees, and lay them across the road to create traction, so you could get out. Now I regard that as one of my best experiences. If somebody said to you: What would you do, having been brought up the way you were, if you found yourself at seven o'clock at night, out in the wilderness, with your car stuck and the water up to your hubcaps or something like that? Wouldn't you worry? What would you do? I could get

## HARD TIMES

out of there: I could break down a tree or something. It helps make you free.

I would find maybe two rooms, a dilapidated wooden place, dirty, an almost paralyzed-looking mother, as if she didn't function at all. Father unshaven, drunk. Children of all ages around the house, and nothing to eat. You thought you could do just absolutely nothing. Maybe you'd write a food order. . . .

*"The WPA came along shortly after this. Roosevelt recognized that people cannot stay on relief forever. It degrades them, it takes away their manhood. I'm sure he'd be appalled that people today, who are on relief in Chicago, are allocated twenty-seven cents a meal. That's just about what it was in 1930. And it was inadequate then. . . ."*

This family . . . the Rural Rehabilitation program came along, the RRA. I had the joy of certifying certain families from the relief rolls to go to the land bought by the government. To have better houses, to have equipment. And I saw this family move to a different house. Saw that woman's face come alive—the one who'd been in that stupor—her children clean, her house scrubbed—I saw this family moved from a hopeless situation. . . . The man had been a sharecropper. Apparently, he had once been a very good worker. There he was with nothing, till . . . I could go on about that. . . .

I had twelve families in this program. And Ella Mae had twelve. It was a beautiful farm, maybe two, three hundred acres. With houses, not two-room shacks. Ella Mae and I were involved in the thrilling task of selecting the families. Ella Mae would say, "I think Jess Clark would be good." And Davis, the man in charge of the program, would say, "That old, lazy bum? He's not gonna be able to do nothin'. You're just romantic." So we became personally involved in seeing these people prove their own worth. . . .

Every month the program was threatened with lack of funds. We didn't know if Congress was gonna discontinue it. A lot of the public thought the money was being spent foolishly.

*With the program in danger of being killed from month to month, the state administrator suggested she accept other job offers. She attended the New York School of Social Work, under federal auspices; she married; there was an absence of six months from the county.*

## Old Families

The first thing I did when I got back, I got out of the car and rushed over to the courthouse—to know how did those people perform. Did they make it?

I talked about this one white family. There was a Negro family, nine of them living in one room. The man was not young; he was in his sixties. But he impressed me as being a strong person—who would really make it, if he had a chance. Every one of the people we had certified had done well and had begun to pay back the loans. Not one of them had been lazy and done a bad job. They were absolutely vindicated. The people were vindicated, not us.

*In 1934, she and her husband moved to Washington, D.C. They were there eleven years. "I'd been invited to a First Families of Virginia Ball at the George Mason Hotel. I'd been picketing it the week before, because they paid their workers some ridiculous wage, oh like seventy-five cents an hour. When I answered the invitation, I didn't just say Mrs. So-and-So regrets she's unable to accept . . . ; I wrote a letter and said I couldn't possibly go to a hotel where the wages were so unfair. My husband was very much surprised. He said, 'I never dreamed you would take that kind of stand.' Well, I never dreamed I wouldn't."*

I'd like to think that even if we hadn't lost our house, even if I hadn't the job with the Civil Works Administration, I might have waked up someday. But maybe I would just have worked on the Community Chest or the St. Luke's Fashion Show. I don't know. Maybe I'd never have understood how people feel if I weren't subjected to it.

Maybe you do have to experience things personally. . . . Do people in Lake Forest, or Grosse Point, or Scarsdale have to have their houses burned down and bombed before they recognize the state of the society? As long as it happens a few miles away—or in the city, if you live in the suburbs—you just read about it. . . .

POSTSCRIPT: *"I went to a women's board meeting of a great university. On the way, I had taken the wrong exit from the superhighway and had to go through an area, where I was appalled by the look of the people, living in absolute hopelessness.*

*"At the meeting, there were black and white women, well-off, intelligent women. Middle, upper, privileged people, the top one percent. I thought maybe when they refurbished the studio of a great sculptor—*

## HARD TIMES

*who used to be here and is now gone—they could somehow begin to think about three blocks away, what's going on here.*

*"I said to one of these women, 'Have you driven through this neighborhood recently?' She said, 'Diana, dear, with all the new housing projects and everything, it's much, much better.' I realized at once that nothing I could say would make them understand. . . ."*

## Mrs. Winston Roberts

---

*She came to Chicago from the South in 1906 as the bride of a wealthy young industrialist. His family was included in the city's most select social circle.*

*"It was a great shock to my genteel, poverty-stricken southern family. My friends were not at all impressed. My brother commented: I would, of course, have a diet of ham and bacon every day."*

*She immediately became part of Chicago's "best people." "I loved it. I ate it with a spoon. I had one of the first electrics. When you drove to Marshall Field's, the man at the door took your car and parked it someplace. Oh, life was very simple in those days." She was invited to Mrs. Potter Palmer's most exclusive soirées. ("It didn't mean anything. I was always happy. I wasn't aware of any of this snobbishness.")*

*She was spoiled by her indulgent husband. She slept late; her days were spent driving her friends about in her electric. The English nurse who cared for their four children suggested she see each of them for twenty minutes, an hour or so before dinner. "I talked to the children. When Winston came home, I was all dressed and ready. Then we had dinner and went out."*

*She occasionally saw a young man who told her about Jane Addams and Hull House and the surrounding poverty. "I thought he was odd. I thought other people were the funny ones. I thought: he's an awfully nice young man, but I'm not gonna ask him to tea again. I didn't think we had much in common. (Laughs.) Everything was handed to me. I didn't realize a lot of people didn't have it."*

*With the death of her husband, things changed. Though he was hard-working, his investments were haphazard. "They told me solemnly there was very little left."*