

Gabby Bitts
Honors: US History 2
10/16/15

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Zerby, Richard. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 3, 2015.

Overview by Gabby Bitts:

Richard Zerby was only a young child when the Greatest Depression of all time hit America. As he grew older, and of course, smarter, he began to realize the impact it had on his teenage years. Richard's family was very poor, just like any other family was from 1929-39. When Richard was about 15 years old he started trying to help out the family by getting a few small jobs. He delivered newspapers and helped his grandfather on his farm during the summer. One year he worked for his grandfather over the summer and made fifteen dollars for all the hard work he did in the span of two weeks. When he told his mother, his mother said she needed fifteen dollars for rent. He gave her the fifteen dollars for rent and was very proud to do so. The Great Depression may have been an awful time to live in, but it sure has impacted Richard's life not in all negative ways. It has formed him into the man he is today.

Question (Bitts): Did the Great Depression greatly affect your childhood? If so, in what ways?

Answer (Zerby): I don't think that most people felt that you were deprived of certain things. But most people were poor, honestly, there was just no work, and everybody was in the same boat. Most people were pretty poor. We were pretty lucky, really. I had two grandfathers that were not poor...they weren't rich...yeah they were. They were very helpful. And I had an aunt who was wonderful to help our family. They never had any children, and they always worked and I know they helped with the rent and food. I know they did. And my aunt was like a mother to me really. She was just a wonderful person. She was very nice to me. She was good. And she was the only one who had a radio! We used to go up there and listen to Amos and Andy and a couple of other things. We were too poor to have have one!

Question (Bitts): What was your Aunt's name?

Answer (Zerby): Verna Clark. V-e-r-n-a C-l-a-r-k

Question (Bitts): And what were your two grandfathers names?

Answer (Zerby): Charles F. Zerby, I guess that would be Franklin. And...his last name was Wilkinson. I wasn't as close to him, let me think of his name...Samuel. Samuel Wilkinson. He ran a farm mill. Then, my Grandfather Zerby was a retired butcher and a retired storekeeper. And he retired to a farm he had where he used to raise about twenty pigs, and a couple of steers. He'd keep them on the farm until he was ready to butcher them. That was when he was a Butcher.

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And he retired to that. I helped him too. He was a good grandfather. For all the hard work he did, he never left me do that.

Question (Bitts): At what time was your family impacted with the Depression?

Answer (Zerby): Well I don't think I realized it, the Depression started in 1929, but I was only 9 years old. And I don't think I realized it until I was in about seventh or eighth grade. So I would have been 14...that's when I realized it. I used to get an allowance...get ready... 10 cents a week. 10 cents a week, you couldn't get a girlfriend or nothing! And maybe that was good...maybe that was good. But then I realized it. But...I can give you a little history on the family. I had an uncle, whom we were very close to, who ran a hotel during the Depression. He was really a rich man. Everybody thought he was poor. He always used a used car. He never ran a new car. He only once drove a Cadillac, but then nobody could come in to buy beer. But they were building roads, putting in electric lines, and somebody was always staying in my uncle's. We were very close to them. He never helped us. Well, in a way he did. He did some things for us.

Question (Bitts): And what was your Uncle's name?

Answer (Zerby): Elmer, Elmer. E-l-m-e-r. Moyer. M-o-y-e-r. And he had a son who was my age. We were like brothers. I often stayed at his place, he often stayed at our place overnight, because we were like family. Our mothers were sisters. That was it.

Question (Bitts): How was your school impacted?

Answer (Zerby): Well, I think I had a good school. I think they did a decent job. We had a principle that taught math and book keeping, and the math courses. And we had a science teacher who taught chemistry...I don't know if we had biology. I think we just had chemistry. We had a language and a language arts teacher. And she was my fifth grade teacher, she was a good teacher. I think they did a pretty decent job. I don't know, we didn't have that much of a library. And we never learned how to use the resources for a library...the encyclopedia. And, you know, that wasn't much of a resource. Because when I went to college, I was amazed at a library with a librarian. I didn't know what that was until I got there.

Question (Bitts): Did you ever notice at school, kids who could not come because they had to help parents at home or work instead of school?

Answer (Zerby): Not much if they did. I think they might have given the kids a little release time to help, like digging potatoes, they would take off a day or two. They wouldn't take off a week. But if they did, I'm sure the school automatically excused them, you know. But there was very

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little of that really. Unless there was some big harvest, like bringing in the corn or something like that. It wasn't more than a day or two.

Question (Bitts): What did you and your community do for entertainment during this time?

Answer (Zerby): Well, we had like the Daughters of America...that was a lodge. They used to do cake walks. And we used to, wait a minute...they had cake walks, and on Saturday evenings, sometimes they would hold a, they called it a Penny Supper. The parents would provide, and it was mostly through the churches. We had three churches in Herndon. It was to raise money. The parents would make something and you could get a spoon of this, for a penny. Or a nickel, depending on what it was. But it was to raise money, usually for something in the High School. Because we went to Washington DC on a trip when we were seniors. And we did something else too. We sold Chances. A booklet with Chances at Thanksgiving. And we gave away Turkeys...but we made money on it. So, that was usually our resource to raise money for the trip that we went on to Washington. We didn't take field trips. We just didn't take them.

Question (Bitts): Was it important for you to listen to a radio?

Answer (Zerby): Yeah! We listened to Amos and Andy and there was another good one...I can't think of what it was. We used to go up to my Aunt Verna's. She lived in an apartment in the same house that we were in. She was like a mother to us. And she had a radio, we didn't have one. She would turn on whatever we liked, but it was early evening when those programs were on. They were humorous, you know, funny.

Question (Bitts): What were some of your favorite radio programs?

Answer (Zerby): Well I remember...haha...well one of those were a gangster show. I can't think of it. And the Lone Ranger. And some scary thing. The Shadow! That was it! The Shadow!

We were given an instrument by the Herndon band if we wanted to learn to play. Really, we were given a free lesson. We had band practice every Friday night. Which was good for us when we were teens, really, it kept us out of trouble. And I remember rushing home to listen to that gangster show! Haha! And by that time, we had a radio!

Question (Bitts): How did the people in your community survive during the Depression?

Answer (Zerby): Well there was a lot of helping each other. And I say that seriously. And my mother had taught, after she stayed home to raise us...like all mothers. She stayed until we were about 15 years old. She had been a teacher, but then she got married and had children.

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But then she wanted to go back to teaching. She had a State Standard Certificate, and she needed to be four years certified. So we moved back to Bloomsburg for two years. I was in eighth and ninth grade at Bloomsburg. And my dad worked at WPA. That was a work project. He made fifteen dollars a week. For my mother to pay her tuition, which wasn't that much, my grandfather could have given her the money, but he signed a note for her so she could get it from the bank. And she had to pay it back. I never quite forgave him for that, seriously, it wasn't that much money. That time, when I went to college, it cost two hundred dollars a year. That was your books, not your housing and that, but for your books and tuition. So it probably didn't cost my mother that much.

Question (Bitts): How did you help during the Depression?

Answer (Zerby): Well, I delivered papers, and I don't know what I made but...probably a dollar and a half a week I think, it was a weekly paper. And a lot of times I used to just give that money to my mother because I knew she needed it. We were poor. Except I had that aunt I was telling you about. She was fabulous. Oh and I helped my grandfather during the summer. I remember one year I made fifteen dollars because I helped fill up the grain and through it up into a pile and make the hay. You did everything by hand. And I remember I was paid fifteen dollars. And my mother said to me, when I told her that, she said she needed fifteen dollars for rent. And I remember giving it to my mother because I knew she needed it for rent. That's poor.

Question (Bitts): How has your experience with the Depression impacted your life?

Answer (Zerby): I am very conservative. I am not tight, I am conservative. And between us, I am not poor. Don't put that down. But I worked like the Devil. When I went to college, I worked part time, when I was a Sophomore and on, in the evenings. I don't recommend it, but I worked part time. And I don't drink, I don't smoke, and when I had extra money later on in my life, I had a broker...a Stockbroker. He was a real great guy. He used to call me every couple of weeks and he would say, "Do you have any money?". And by then I did. And when I did I'd buy stocks and bonds. And...don't write this down...but I am not poor. I don't waste; even food. My wife, on Friday nights, if there were any left overs during the week we had Friday Night Warm-Ups. And I was never home Friday nights....I'm kidding you! But we got through them, Friday night was warm-ups. I don't think we wasted...we didn't. My wife was conservative too. I had a good wife. I wouldn't be sad that I loved her. That's half the battle, it is. You have to kiss your wife a couple of times a day, you have to hug them, and every day or two, you have to tell them something nice they do. That's what it's all about! Never fight! Never fight! You don't always agree, but you know you can always still talk it out.

Question (Bitts): Could you describe how society changed from before the Depression to after?

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Answer (Zerby): Well during the Depression, most people weren't working. We had five factories in Herndon. My uncle, Uncle Ed and my Aunt Verna Clark, they both worked and never had any children and I think they kind of grandfathered us. I know they did. Then my aunt, this is true, I think she worked for ten cents an hour in a salt mill. That's not a lot of money. And I worked, when I went to college for the first year, in a salt mill for twenty five cents an hour. And that's not very much money either. That's only two bucks a day buddy! Then, once things improved, then the wages improved. But there just wasn't work. And I don't think most people made more than two or three dollars a day. When the war came along there was lots of work that payed a different wage, and that improved the amount of money families made.

Question (Bitts): What did your parents do for work?

Answer (Zerby): My mother was a school teacher, and she made eight hundred and forty dollars during the Depression a year. Not a month...a year. That was a minimum that they could pay them. It was evidently a state law. And then as things improved with the wages and the war industries, then the wages went up. When I started teaching I was making a thousand dollars a year. And I would've gotten married, but I didn't think I could support a wife on a thousand dollars a year. That's why she went back to school; so she could make more money. What was that question again? Oh yeah, well my father owned a store and they lost it during the Depression because they had to give out too much credit. But, my father, he worked, he could work, with heavy industry, like driving graters. He could run big equipment. Most of the time he was working. And towards the end, then he started working at the Westing House in Sunbury. It made televisions. And he would work for them all of the time they were there. But then they moved to New Jersey. By that time he was ready to retire. Then he worked as a janitor at the school. I don't know for how many years. But he worked there for a while. A lot of times they didn't have any work, until the WPA. You know the work project.

Question (Bitts): Was there a time where both of your parents were out of work at the same time?

Answer (Zerby): Yeah, when my mother was going to school at Bloomsburg. That would have been out of work and that's when my father worked for WPA, and they made fifteen dollars a week. He did. And our rent for our house was fifteen dollars. We had a decent house. But, you know, when you have three children and...I imagine...my aunt helped! My aunt helped and I don't think my grandfather did. He had a lot of property and he was having a lot of trouble with rents and that. So I think it was mostly my aunt. She was a great gal. She really helped our family.

Question (Bitts): What was the WPA?

Answer (Zerby): It was the Works Progress Administration. Roosevelt's Administration.

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Question (Bitts): And what did they do?

Answer (Zerby): Every town was given so much money. They cleaned the streets and did whatever work the towns needed. You know they kept it clean. I guess if they needed the sewage removed, they helped to do it. They were like helpers in towns we have today. Well, he wasn't in a police force, that's for sure, but they just helped with work that needed to be done in the towns. But it was done basically to help families.

Question (Bitts): So it was a lot of hard work for a little amount of money?

Answer (Zerby): Yeah but they were glad to do it because it was fifteen dollars more than they had.

Question (Bitts): So before the Depression, what did you guys have to eat? And then during the Depression what did you guys have to eat? So like what was the difference?

Answer (Zerby): Well, we lived pretty well before because my one grandfather was a Miller and my other grandfather was a retired Butcher. He always raised about twenty pigs, and when he was retired, he had cows. We always had milk and we always had meat. My Grandpa Zerby...I think we lived rent free when we lived in one of his houses. We had a bath and a toilet before most people had them in their house. He was very helpful. During the Depression we always had meat and we always had potatoes. We used to get cooked corn meal mush for supper. More than I liked. I don't like hot mush. But I do like it when it's fried in the morning. Fried mush, I like that. And I guess we would've gotten plenty of soup. We had a garden and we had onions, carrots, and stringbeans. I don't think we grew corn, sweet corn. My grandfather grew that on the farm. And he had a big garden. My mother canned a lot of tomatoes and that. Most people did. Now you just buy it. You know, you don't fuss around with all of that work. But everybody canned as much as they could because you really didn't have the money to buy it; vegetables and that.

Question (Bitts): So you didn't ever really try to sell your produce or anything for more money?

Answer (Zerby): No. When we lived for two years with my grandfather on the farm, I think that's when we were the poorest. I remember salespeople, in our town we had two deliveries which were people would rent out a horse and a buggy. People would come in on the train and we had trains that stopped an hour and a half in both directions. Salesmen, or whatever they were selling, a stove or I don't know, dishes or cooking pans...I don't know what they sold. Anyway, they would rent a buggy for a week and they would go out into the country and sell their stuff. Then, they would stay at a farmer's place, you know for a night, he probably paid them a dollar

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or two to take care of the horse and food for them to eat. And then he would come back to Herndon and go home with his wife. I remember one, he used to help us, like if we had trouble with math or something he would help. Not all of them were nice but he was a nice one. And our food, I think we always had enough food. My grandfather, I think looked us. And my aunt, my aunt I think looked after us too.

Question (Bitts): Did those sales people have to stay in the barn?

Answer (Zerby): No, no, I guess he kicked the kids out and they slept on the floor.

Question (Bitts): So you just let them right in?

Answer (Zerby): Yeah, they were people you could trust. We never had any trouble with them. They were honest people.

Question (Bitts): If another Great Depression or another financial crisis would occur, how do you think society now would react to it?

Answer (Zerby): Well I think there would be a revolt. I think the government, I think Roosevelt was right in creating the WPA and the CC camps. They worked in the forest and helped in cleaning up the forests. They were for the teenage kids and they housed them and took care of them. I don't know what they got paid but they took the kids right off the street which was a great idea...I think. The band gave us instruments and we got free lessons and an instrument for free. That was through the federal government. They paid the band leader for working. I think we would have to have more...I think they would have to almost guarantee most people a minimum pay of income. I was just reading something today, we haven't given black people much of a fair shake. I'm not saying I'm sympathetic but I think we would have to provide the minimum that we establish for everybody. We are not a poor nation. Instead of fighting all of these wars and spending billions for nothing, so I think...I don't think people would put up with that. I think there would be a real revolt. Most people starve. Nobody should anyway. I know there are some people who exploited.

Question (Bitts): So with your experience with the Depression, how do you think you would react?

Answer (Zerby): Well I think we have to provide employment. And we have to provide assistance for those who need it. And I'm not talking socialism, I'm just saying we would have provide work in some way. And there are plenty of things that need assistance. And we have to pay them. Like WPA or some kind of work. A sign up for the communities and let the

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communities decide what they want. And I think we need to do that for adults and for kids. I think we have to keep them busy. And at least workable. Not put them in jail.

Question (Bitts): Do you think people now spend too much money that they don't have?

Answer (Zerby): Yes I do. I think people, I know some people who are going to college, and I blame colleges for this, they have it at seventy thousand dollars. I think that's terrible. If I were president, I think the first two years of college we should provide, to children or kids who are capable. You know kids who can meet certain qualifications. And then the last two, their parents need to provide it for them in some way. We could give them college loans and that.

Question (Bitts): Do you think that was the problem back then? People spent too much money that they didn't have?

Answer (Zerby): No. Banks would not loan them money. My grandfather had a sign for my mother's six hundred dollar loan. My mother didn't have any security. But my grandfather did. And he had a sign for it. The first house I bought, I got through the bank, I didn't have any trouble getting it because my grandfather was a director of the bank. But he signed for it. Every month that I paid for it my interest and that, my grandfather had a sign for it. I think it's too easy to run up bills today. Somebody who I know, that makes a decent salary, thinks they ought to declare bankruptcy. I know what the problem is, she is unrealistic in her spending. If you don't make a lot of money, you have to be conservative. And I don't mean tight, but yet be real careful of how you look at your money, and if you have a little bit extra you outta invest it in, not banks...they don't give you any money. I think you ought to buy bonds. Some people advertise stock, but bonds you're always guaranteed something. You know, for stock you can make a fortune, but you can lose a fortune too.

Question (Bitts): Did your parents ever buy stocks?

Answer (Zerby): Yes, my mother, even though once she started teaching she started really earning...my father never saved money, but my mother could. And my mother, when she died, it was her house, it was her car, and my mother gave us at least one hundred thousand a piece. My mother knew how to handle money. But we had a good stockbroker, the same one that I had. He was an excellent person. And the person who replaced him was a jerk.

Question (Bitts): During the Depression did your parents have to take out their stocks so that they wouldn't lose money?

Answer (Zerby): They didn't have any then. She acquired hers afterwards. She probably taught about thirty years. But my mother was a good handler of money. We had a good stockbroker. That's what you need, somebody who is interested in you and conservative and realistic.

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Question (Bitts): Does the Depression continue to affect your life now?

Answer (Zerby): I suppose it influences you, you know. I tend to be conservative. I put my kids through college without owing any money. And I bought them a new car when they were able to earn something...but they had to pay me for the car. I am still conservative. Just the other day, you don't need to write this down, I got something from the skin doctor for one hundred dollars a tube. I said "I'm not paying no hundred dollars for a tube of I don't know what you call it, from Wiley's. They said "Oh that was a mistake! That should've only been ten dollars." Then that made me even angrier yet. You know, that's sloppiness on their part. So I sent the d*** thing back for the money. I said "I got enough, if you ever need anything, I got anything for you". And they gave me the money back for that, which, it's carelessness. That's a gross insult to me. I am just careful. We go out to eat at least once or twice a week to eat. I always check the bill. I don't trust them! No I don't trust them. I was cheated not so long ago on a hair cut. I gave the gal a twenty dollar bill, and I didn't discover it until I got home, she said I only gave her fifteen dollars. She made five dollars extra. Errrrr. She won't do that again. I guarantee it. So I'm conservative. Not tight! I'm really generous to my kids, I really am. I give my kids a lot of money...because I have a good income. I won't tell you what it is but, I have a good income.

Question (Bitts): Did the Depression stop you from living out anything you wanted to do?

Answer (Zerby): I don't think. When I retired, my wife and I traveled a great deal. We've been to Germany, Austria, Switzerland for two weeks. The UK for two weeks, and we've been on three cruises. We lived in FL for two winters. We went across the country three times, and it was the end of the semester and that's when they held the Rio Conferences, but I went and made a trip out of it. We would take about two weeks to get out to the conference. And that was a tax deduction. Don't write that down. Then we would go home a different way. I've been to almost all of the national parks. I spent a lot of time in New England. My advisor, he was like a dad to me. He had three colleges up in Vermont and we always went up to visit him. He would always let us come up. No I've enjoyed retirement. I live well, but I am conservative. I can live real cheap. Don't put that down.

Question (Bitts): So when you were younger, did you have a certain job that you wanted to do when you grew up?

Answer (Zerby): Oh, like a dumb kid, I probably wanted to be a policeman. I used to help the printer when I was in high school. All of the little towns had newspapers. We had one in Herndon. I used to help them fold the paper and write the labels on. I got about fifty cents for that. And I had to remind him that he owed me fifty cents. Hey, I mowed the neighbor's lawn, and it was at least two hours...at least two hours, and they used to give me a quarter. That's the truth! And he had some money, but boy was he tighter than me! When we lived on the farm for two weeks I was about fifteen...fifteen or sixteen...I used to help some of the neighbors combine

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and tie the wheat in shocks and we would shock it until it was dried for a week or two. Then we would load it into wagons and I used to help. I would get about two dollars a day for that. And that was pretty darn hard work. Nobody threw any money around I don't think.

Question (Bitts): Did you play any sports?

Answer (Zerby): Yeah, we played soccer. We did that, soccer and baseball. We didn't have football because we were too small of a team. And we didn't have a stadium. We used the ball park in Herndon. The coach and sometimes the principal, would probably take us around in their cars, and they didn't get paid for it either! They weren't getting over paid but that was an extra thing they did for nothing. And I did too when I first started teaching.

Question (Bitts): What was Christmas like for you and your family and your siblings during the Depression?

Answer (Zerby): We always got one thing. And I think sometimes, my parents really sacrificed some things. For example, my mother and her sister, we only lived about a block apart. If I got a sled, my cousin got a sled. If I got a BB Gun, he got a BB Gun. And one year, he got a cowboy outfit, and he came up...he was telling me this...this was his reaction. He was going to "impress" me. And he said "Holy h*** there's Richard standing with the same I have!" It was those leather things that went around your shoes that looked like cowboy boots, you know. And a vest, and a gun. And he said "Holy h*** there you are standing with the same thing I have on!" He was trying to impress me! We always got one thing, and I think sometimes, it was really a sacrifice for my parents, but they always gave us one thing. I don't think we got candy or oranges, but we got that in church. They always gave us an orange and they gave us a box of good candy, really...from church. And I know when our church stopped doing that, the old ladies in the church got really upset. They were really upset! And I remember our preacher said "Bless their hearts. They put a nickel in every Sunday." That's about what people did too.

Question (Bitts): During the Depression did your family go on any vacations?

Answer (Zerby): We usually went on one vacation, and that was to Hershey Park. That was the big day. We didn't go on any vacations but once a year, even during the Depression we went to Hershey Park. Well of course rides didn't cost much back then. But now you can't afford to go to Hershey Park. They are getting like Walt Disney...they are crazy, you know. But then, you know, rides were ten cents.

Question (Bitts): What kind of rides did you go on?

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Answer (Zerby): There was the Train, and the Merry-Go-Round, and the Ferris Wheel, and the Dodgings. Now we didn't get that much money. Maybe seventy five cents to go, which I'm sure was...by that time my father...during the real Depression, we didn't go then because we didn't have a car, and I don't think we had the money to do that. It was when things got better, after we got a car and that. But that was our main vacation; once a year.

Question (Bitts): So during the Depression you didn't have any way of transportation because you didn't have a car?

Answer (Zerby): No we used my grandfather's car. We didn't use it that often, but about every other week my parents went to Sunbury to shop. Like we did, and then we used his car. He had a Model-T. A Model-T Ford. My father had had a Buick before that. When the Depression hit, we didn't have the money to run it. Then we didn't use it during that time. There weren't, and you can write this, about every fourth or fifth house in Herndon had a car. And as a result, there was very little traffic on the road. You could walk across the road and never even look. There weren't that many cars around town. You know gas only cost twenty cents a gallon. It was just that not many people could afford a car. People just didn't have the money. And like I said, you helped each other, if you could, and I don't think most people realized...everybody was poor. So I don't think they felt bad because they knew their neighbors were poor too! You just realized that they were poor because everybody else was about as poor a they were. The only guy that...that mailman was pretty good because he got federal's pay, the plumber, they didn't charge much of anything for what they did. You could ride on a train to Sunbury, which was about ten miles for fifteen cents. And you could always go up or down, except when you wanted to go to the grocery store. Then you almost needed a car. And then they would go in my grandfather's car.

Question (Bitts): Did your family ever go to the Doctors or the Dentist during the Depression?

Answer (Zerby): We didn't go to the dentist, and we went to the doctor though. And the one doctor, we didn't go much to him but, and he was a good enough guy, he charged fifty cents. And he always gave you two kinds of pills. And those pills were wrapped in newspaper. It's true! I don't know if one was an Aspirin...or what it was! I don't think they were super good doctors. But no, not until after things improved in our family did we go to the dentist.