

## SURVIVING THE DEPRESSION.

By James Collins.

One day I asked my father, Maurice "When did you come to America?"

"I arrived in 1929."

"That was a year depression started. What did you do for a living? How did you survive?"

"When I left Ireland in 1929, everything was fine. During the 10-day crossing, the depression hit. When we got off the boat at the dock on 86th street, people were already throwing themselves off roofs. Mick White and I traveled over together. We each had 15 pounds English money, which we had to show to immigration to prove we would not be dependent on welfare. Once we cleared immigration, we had to go to the western union office immediately and each send 10 pounds back to Ireland so that the next pair could come over. There being little money in Ireland. The townspeople had collections so that the emigrants could enter the country and then they had to send most of the money back to help the next pair come over. I was a bricklayer by trade and a stonemason, so I went to see construction people about getting a job. They wanted \$150 initiation fee, but we had no money so that route was closed ."

"If you couldn't work at what you had training for, what kind of job did you get?"

"I took the jobs that Americans wouldn't take. For most of those years, I cleaned wooden floors with steel wool on my hands and knees. In those days, we did not have fancy machines. You put on gloves and scrubbed with the steel wool 18 hours a day six days a week. At night, I would spend time picking the steel wire out of my hands and soaking my hands in brine to harden them. For the first few weeks my hands were always bled."

"Dad, how much did they pay you for that kind of work?"

"\$16 a month, not four dollars a week but \$16 a month and when it was a five-week month, you made less money every hour. The problem was the owner paid the money in cash to the manager, who paid it to the foreman, who paid it to the supervisor and they handed me \$12. You could ask no questions. If you did question the amount, they fired you, and they hired somebody off the street to do your job. I know you and your sense of justice. You would never put up with it and you would probably have beaten somebody to their knees because you are an American, and you expect fair treatment. We were immigrants and very vulnerable. We clenched our fists, gritted our teeth and put up with it. It was because of these this injustice that I became a union organizer in the 30s."

"Mom told a story that you were almost killed while running a picket line the streets of New York. Could you tell me about that?"

"That was the work of Murder Incorporated. Many New York companies hired murder Incorporated to intimidate the unions and prevent them from coming in and organizing their companies. We had a

picket line in front of the building belonging to a big company and I was in charge of the pickets. A union head came up to me and told me to go to an address in Midtown to organize a new picket line at a new location. I handed the spare picket signs over to my replacement, got in the subway and went to my new location. Later that evening I learned that the guy who took over from me had attacked by goons and beaten to death with baseball bats. Forming a union in New York in the 30s was a treacherous endeavor. Now you can understand why I am such a supporter of the unions. Times have changed and because of the unions, many of the evils have disappeared. However, do not kid yourself; many of the middle class have an acceptable lifestyle because of the blood spilt in forming the unions in the 30s. "

My father, who was only able to get educated to the eighth grade level, held multiple jobs and got limited amounts of sleep each day to raise enough money so that all his children got college-educated. As a result, my brother and I got into executive management and our sister is a teacher and avid union support. At times, the family conversations get to be very interesting and a little bit challenging but because of my father and his experience. We all understand the other's positions.

THE END