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Oral History of Rosemary DeRose

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Student Interviewer's Name: Victor DeRose
Interviewee name: Rosemary DeRose

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on November 4, 2015, and lasted approximately forty minutes. The interview was conducted over the phone. Only the interviewer and interviewee were on the phone or present at the time of the interview.

About Rosemary DeRose:

Rosemary DeRose was born on April 9, 1931, in the Columbus Hospital located in Chicago. She was the younger of two children born to Italian immigrants. Having been born just before the Depression started, she grew up knowing nothing else. Most of her childhood was spent in either the depression years or during WWII. Her family was not as affected as some people. Although her father lost his job, the family was able to keep their house. This is not to say that they did not suffer any hardships.

She remained in Illinois, where she worked and studied. She married Joseph DeRose in February of 1958. Rosemary and her husband would have five children. Her husband worked as a pharmaceutical representative for Merck. Rosemary was a stay-at-home mom while her children were young. Once the kids were grown, she went into real estate sales. Several years before the turn of the century, Rosemary and Joe moved to Florida, where they still reside. This interview covered a wide range of topics, most of which were related to the Great Depression and life during WWII. The interview was conducted over the phone on November 4, 2015.

Interviewer: Victor DeRose (VD)

Interviewee: Rosemary DeRose (RD)

VD: To start out with, when do you first remember hearing about, or recognizing what the Great Depression was?

RD: Probably when I was maybe eight years old. We had moved into a new house, and I remember people coming door to door. And it could be a man or it could be a woman and they were asking for money or food. As a little kid, you really don't understand why, but that was part of it. But these people who came door to door didn't look like bums or anything. They were well dressed, and they spoke well. And they did not look like any of the typical of vagrants you would see today. So my mother would give them money or bake a loaf of bread for them and they would go on. But that went on for several years. They would go into every neighborhood door to door. It seemed peculiar, but it was something you accept as a little kid. You think, "Oh that's something that goes on."

VD: OK, so these were people who were gathering money for themselves? Or were they with a charity or some group that was trying to raise money for a cause?

RD: Right. No. Now they were not necessarily from the community. Or maybe they were. However, I didn't recognize any of them. But they were looking for something to eat. Maybe they were looking for a sandwich or money or something they can take home. Sometimes they just wanted a meal. As far as I know, everyone was generous on our block because we all had a house and food. When you're a little kid, as long as you have food, you think everything is OK. But I know my father lost his job. I think I was probably...maybe a couple years older when he was laid off because there was no work. And uh...so my mother was making ties by hand. She was doing that at home because I was young. So she was making the ties at home, and my father would go back and forth downtown. He would go downtown every day and pick up a box of silk ties and bring them home. Then my mother would sew them. You had to sew them by hand and then press them and then put them back in the box. She would do that. Sometimes through the night she would be working. And every day my father would go downtown on the bus and street car and bring the box of ties that were sewn and bring back a new batch of cut ties that had to be sewn. So that was kind of mainly...I'm sure how we got through those few years of the depression.

VD: So your mother and father both worked together with the ties to support the family. Now you said they did this from home?

RD: Yes. But my father had to go downtown at least an hour and a half each way to get ties. And I remember my mother saying that the men couldn't afford to buy a suit, but they could afford to buy a tie. And I guess ties at that time only cost a quarter or fifty cents or something. And that was why ties were very popular. A man couldn't buy a whole wardrobe, but he could buy a tie to look good, as he looked for a job. Yeah, it was pretty important what they were doing. It keeps their spirits up. Even if their suits were old, they could put a new tie on, and they felt much better. The men all wore suits and ties and hats. All the men wore fedoras at that time.

VD: You mentioned several things about your home. Such as the homeless people who came looking for food and the fact that your parents worked from home. Did you have to move from your house as the depression got worse?

RD: No. My mother and father never had a credit card, never borrowed money, never had a mortgage, and they both were very hard workers. And they would work and save their money. And at the time, I think the streetcar cost four cents to go downtown, but my mother would walk so she could save the four cents. When they had enough money--they were just renting an apartment at the time—they bought a house. Now the houses were very cheap then. I don't even know how much their first house was, but that's the way they bought a house. The first house they bought was I think probably in....well my brother was born in twenty-seven...and I think he was probably five, and I was two. I don't remember really, but that was the first house they bought. And they always paid cash. When the relatives would get together, they would say, "oh well you may lose your house because you

can't make your payment cause you lost your job." But my father never let on that he owned the house full and clear while other people were losing their homes. He was not the bragger type, you know. He did things quietly and paid for what he wanted. If they went to the store and bought something, they would pay cash, and that's just the way they lived. They did not borrow money. It was a different way to live in those days.

VD: For sure, now I know a lot of people were displaced due to homes that were repossessed by banks. Often such individuals would move in with family members. Did your family ever have people other than the immediate family living with them? Like other family members or friends.

RD: No. No. But I will tell you my father did do a good thing. He um...right during those years he was always interested in houses. He would look at houses, and we would move when he found a better one. But during the depression, he was friendly with a man who was in real estate. And this man in real estate told my father, "If you have any extra money you can buy people's mortgages so you can lend them money so they can buy a house." Because the banks weren't giving money to the people, he said you could get interest on your money. So my father bought a couple of mortgages, I don't know how much they were. Maybe only hundreds of dollars. I'm not sure. And at one point, one of the people that he had the mortgage on couldn't make his payment. And so this real estate guy told my father, "You know you can take the house away from this guy." And my father said, "No I'm not going to do that, I'll wait until he can make the payments up." So he was a little more lenient than the banks or other people. So in that way he did help that family. And I'm sure he felt that if he were in that position he wouldn't want someone to take his house away and have his family homeless. So in a way he did give a home to a family. I always thought that was pretty high-minded of him.

VD: Wow that was very kind of him. I know there were many acts of kindness done. And being able to help someone is always a great feeling. Now this might be a little bit off topic or even irrelevant because you were very young when the depression began, but did you have any memories from before the depression?

RD: No. As far as my life and my brother everything was fine with us. We...you know... we always had food and a house and what not. The only thing was seeing these people going door to door. And then uh you couldn't buy certain things. I remember I had as a little girl, I had dolls, and I had a little buggy. And one of the neighbors wanted to buy the buggy for her little girl. Because they could buy it in the store. So there were a lot of things in the store you could not get. There were factories for clothes, and then I guess when the war started then uh they were all transitioned to the wartime equipment. So a lot of things that you could buy before you couldn't get, and people were looking for them.

VD: Um so do you... (she cut me off)

RD: Yeah like today you can just go out and buy whatever you want. But back then there were a lot of things that you couldn't get. Probably for children like toys, clothing and various things.

VD: Did that carry over into food? I know that a lot of people ate very simply and didn't have fine foods, and may have had less access to fruits or imported foods or things like that. Do you remember what kind of meals you had? Did you guys have simple homemade foods or things of that nature?

RD: Yeah, my mother cooked very simple things anyways. I know we had a lot of bean soup and a lot of pasta and tomato sauce. And then of course when the war started we had less, they rationed all of that. And then you had to have stamps. You had to have red stamps to buy meat and blue stamps I think to buy sugar. And then you had to have another color stamp to buy gasoline. So it was very restricted.

VD: Um I see.

RD: And you would go to the store sometimes and wait in line for a couple of hours to get your share of the things needed for the coupons. And we didn't have a car at the time, and so my mother and I would carry all the groceries home. It was a lot different than shopping today.

VD: Ok, so you didn't have a car. I guess another question I have is this, what kind of transportation did your family have?

RD: We didn't have a car all the time. We took the bus. And they had the streetcar in Chicago and the bus and the L, and that's...that's what we took. Um, I think I was...I was much older when we had a car for the first family. So all the transportation was on foot. Like we would go to the movies like once a week, and we'd walk. I think it was probably about four miles...five miles to the movie theater.

VD: Oh wow. That was a long way!

RD: But when you do that regularly you don't think about it. You think it's normal, and everybody does that so you never complained about it. You never complained about walking to school. Like three miles to school. In the snow or in the heat...you never complained. I don't understand why. We just accepted it. And then we would walk back for lunch and then walk back again. That was like two round trips a day.

VD: That's crazy. So you said something about the movies. Is there any particular movie from that time period that was particularly memorable to you or anything?

RD: Yep. They were all musicals, and all had happy endings. And in reading about it later, that was the type of movie you know that people needed for that escape. To see people

happy and singing and laughing. With everyone losing their money and the banks closing. It was a great fear that your bank would close, and you wouldn't get your money. Because I guess, that happened with a lot of people. I think it may have happened to my parents too with some of their bank accounts. I don't recall how much or what but I think it did happen. They would go to the bank, and there would be a sign that said, "Sorry the bank is closed"... (trails off). So all the movies had very happy endings and mostly musicals.

VD: How much was it to go to a movie? Like how much did it cost?

RD: It cost me four cents when I was a kid and ten cents for adults.

VD: Ok.

RD: And then they put a tax on it, and it changed it to twelve cents and twenty-seven or twenty-nine cents for adults, and the street car cost four cents for kids and eight cents for adults, and that would get you all the way downtown. You'd take the bus, and then you get a transfer and then you'd take that transfer to take the street car. Then you would take the transfer to the L. So it was like three things you took for four cents.

VD: Ok, so what about food items? How much did...say a candy bar or a loaf of bread or something like that, how much did those things cost?

RD: I think bread was probably ten or fifteen cents a loaf for bread. You know I didn't pay for it myself, so I don't know all the prices, but everything was much, much lower. Like the house my father bought, he bought it in 1939. And the house cost...let me think now... I think it was seventeen thousand dollars. And this is a three bedroom, brick house with a basement. And all houses had one bathroom. There was no such thing as having two bathrooms. And there were no kitchen cabinets. You just had a kitchen, and you had a table and a sink. And where you put your food I don't remember. I think we probably had a pantry. Yeah, no it was thirteen thousand dollars. That was the cost of that first house. Thirteen thousand dollars. Beautiful house, it is still standing, and it was looking good the last time I saw it. And that was built in 1939.

VD: Very good. Ok, so you said there was only one bathroom. Was there ever any restrictions on utilities? Such as power or water? Or even things like shampoo or soap? Did you have to use those things sparingly during that time?

RD: No, not that I remember. But I know we were limited as far as where you could go with your coupons to get the food items, you know with the stamps. Because a lot of times they were out of it. So it would be gone. If you didn't get there early or wait hours in line, you might get to the front, and they would say, "Sorry it's all gone." And then you would make due with something else. But I don't ever recall being hungry. Or you know, I'm sure there were things a wanted and didn't get.

VD: For sure.

RD: Yeah you know kids are always wanting something. And I don't think we were any exceptions. It was very different.

VD: Well, I know it did differ depending on where people were geographically...um and also depending on their family's economic state. I mean some people were affected more and some less and whatnot. Now, what about you? When did you first begin to work outside of the home?

RD: I looked for a job as soon as I was of age. I think I was sixteen. And I don't think I could find a job. They would ask if I had experience. And no, you don't have experience cause you don't work before. But I think when I was...the summer after I graduated from high school that was the first year I actually had a job. And I worked downtown in Chicago. I worked in a bank. The First National Bank. We had to proofread checks. Each check had to be individually looked at, and you had to enter the amount in what was like an adding machine type of thing. It would add up the amount. And uh...I liked it. It was a tedious job when you think about it, but it was the only summer, so I liked it. Then I went to DePaul for a year. And when I got out of DePaul then I worked for lawyers. And I thought I'm not going to take a job unless they pay me fifty dollars a week. But guess what I started at?

VD: I don't know.

RD: Thirty-five dollars a week.

VD: Thirty-five dollars a week! And this was probably in the mid-forties right? Or late forties?

RD: Let's see. That was in 19...1949.

VD: Ok, so now did your...(she cut me off)

RD: That was forty hours a week of working. And going downtown almost two hours each way on the transportation.

VD: Oh wow that was a big commute.

RD: I did work in the...in...I did work another summer now that I think about it. I think the first summer I worked must have been when I was a junior in high school, between junior and senior year. Now I'm recalling that I did work at a downtown department store, Goldblatt's department store. And uh... the reason I remember is because there was no air-conditioning. And that summer we hit one hundred degrees. For like a record number of days. We were on the sixth floor. I worked in the furniture department, in the office of the furniture department. It was hot. But you didn't complain, that's what you had to do. You went to work, and that was it. I don't remember what it paid there. It was probably ten dollars a week or something. It was very minimum. That was before the full-time job.

VD: Ok, so now as far as your parents or other family members, like maybe your brother, during the war or towards the end of the depression, did any of them start working with the war effort? Such as war production or factories or anything like that? I know you said your parents worked with the ties, which was part of the clothing industry.

RD: Yeah I forgot to mention that I do remember families kind of being gone. And they would say, "Oh they had to leave; they lost their house." So that I remember. No, but as soon as the war started my brother was anxious to get into the service, into the Navy. So when he was seventeen he joined the Navy. And luckily, by the time he went overseas, the war was over. So he enjoyed the service. I think he stayed in for three or four years. So that was his contribution to the war effort I guess.

VD: Oh I see. So where did you father work once he got a job again? After working with the ties with your mother.

RD: He was a sheet metal worker. So he got his job back after the depression. I think he got his same job back. He worked for a company called Liquid Carbonic. They made soda fountain equipment.

VD: What was the name of the company again? (I could not understand the name)

RD: Liquid Carbonic. L I Q U I D. Carbonic. C A R B O N I C. (she spelled them out)

VD: Ok, Thank you.

RD: They supplied soda fountain equipment, and I think they also supplied the ingredients like seltzer water. And I remember my father bringing...he could bring home as much as he wanted of vanilla. And it was really great vanilla. It smelled great. It was pure vanilla. Today, the vanilla you get doesn't smell quite as good as the stuff he used to bring home. But he was a sheet metal worker and did a lot of soldering. He was able to repair anything. I had a keychain and a bracelet that he fixed. He came home one day and made a cup. Then when stainless steel came out, right in the middle of when he was working, he loved stainless steel. He said, "Oh this is the best thing ever." I'm not sure when stainless steel started, but it was probably in the mid-forties. And Liquid Carbonic I think went completely to stainless steel with all their equipment as far as the containers that held all these beverages or flavorings or whatever they sold.

VD: For sure. So now to transition slightly. Do you remember politics at all during that time period? I mean during your childhood and the Depression.

RD: Yes. I remember Roosevelt. There were a lot of his talks in those days. Fireside talks I think they called them. There was no TV then, or at least that we had, and everyone would sit and listen to the radio. We would stare at the radio (chuckles a little). And there were a

lot of talks...um, I remember Churchill being on the radio too, giving talks. And they would broadcast those too during the war.

VD: Ok. So did your family and most other people that you knew support Roosevelt? Do you remember anything like that?

RD: I think my parents did support him because he was supposed to...or was known...I guess he promised the working man better jobs, and I'm not sure when the union came in. But the union, I guess, came in around that time. Now the Union was good at first, and then I think it...um, the working men began to resent it because the players went up, up, up and they won't always answer the questions or make things better for the workers. The unions got so big and powerful that they kind of took over and went with their own ideas instead of just doing things for the working man which is what they were supposed to do from the beginning. Now I wasn't working for a union; I was just hearing things from my father. I remember that.

VD: So it sounds like, although your family was involved in and was affected by the Great Depression, it was not as bad for your guys as it was for some of your friends or other people in the neighborhood?

RD: Yeah. If you were just a normal working person and had a mortgage on your house, it was very chancy that you weren't going to keep the house. I mean, I don't know what the percentage was but if you could make a payment the banks weren't as nice as my father. If you didn't make a payment, you had to move. You were gone. Then they used to talk about the poor house. They would say. "Oh, they went to the poor house." I never knew what that meant. But evidently there was some place they could go to get food, and I don't know if they got a place to sleep or what. It was kind of scary as a kid; you didn't want to go to the poor house.

VD: I can imagine.

RD: There was no danger for us, but it was something you kind of wondered about.

VD: So in closing, what advice would you give young people today about the best way to make it through hard times or to avoid getting into such situations in the first place? Kind of like how your family was able to escape some the worst of the Depression. What advice do you have?

RD: Well the best advice I can give is what my mother and dad told me and the way they lived. It is this, no matter who much you make, always save a portion. Decide who much you can live without and put that in the bank. And don't touch it. Because it will add up and when you have an emergency, or you have something you really need, it will be there. But if you just spend your money week to week then you are going to fall into the trap that is going on today. You go for a car. You look for a car, and they say this costs two hundred

dollars a month. And they don't tell you the price of the car. They just tell you the price per month. And you look at your money, and you're making five hundred a month. And you say, "Oh that sounds good, only two hundred a month." Then you go to buy a TV. Oh, that will only cost fifty dollars a month. And you think that's not much. But this way of thinking is the beginning of a big trap. And if you can avoid all of that, you can't avoid a mortgage cause that would account for a lot more money. But for all the other things you should save your money. And you will be surprised to see how it will get you out of a lot of jams. And you won't end up in the poor house, like these other people.

VD: Yeah for sure. So saving money is always a good idea. Keeping a reserve for hard times can really save you.

RD: Yep.

VD: Well thank you for sharing with me about your life like this. Was there anything else that you wanted to share? Perhaps something you forgot but remembered now? Or are there any last things you wanted to mention about that time?

RD: No. I mean looking back, I am just very thankful that my parents were wise enough to do the saving, and I saved and I don't have that worry now. We know people that still have that problem today. So I'm just thankful that I have a house, and I can buy the food I need. And the money I have saved is earning interest for me now that I'm not working. So it turned out well for me. And hopefully, my children and grandchildren will follow through and do what they can to ensure that they have a good future. It is saving and doing without, that will get you more of what you want at the end and more of the important things. That's the best advice I can give.

VD: For sure. Well, thank you so much for your time and for telling me all about that. I really appreciated hearing about it.

RD: You're welcome Victor.