

The Life and Times of Walt Quanstrom

As told to Lisa Phipps

To me the depression of the 1930's was an interesting time, not so much then as it is now. But to give you a perspective of what we're talking about, let's say from 1930, which is just the start of the depression, until 1941 which would be World War II or Pearl Harbor, that eleven-year period is not all depression. It is the depression along with the recovery, and the recovery is part of the war.

I was born in a western suburb of Gary, Indiana called Ambridge, and I'm the first of five children. I had two other brothers and two other sisters. A brother two years younger than me, a sister five years younger, and another sister ten years younger, and then a brother fourteen years younger. So, there were four children in the home during a time that the depression was on and the depression of course was extremely devastating to many people. Fortunately we were not in that category, and yet we were poor.

I do not remember the market falling on October of 1929. I don't remember extra newspapers or announcements, but I know that right after that it was known as the Great Depression. At ten years of age, I wasn't, obviously, fully aware of what was going on, but I began to realize, in the next couple of years, between 1930 and 1933, that people were hurting. Other kids' dads were not working, my dad happened to work for the American Bridge Company in Gary. My best memory is that my dad worked every week during that period of time. However, one week I recall that he did not work his five days; he worked four days. And we thought we were destitute because we lost one day of work out of maybe a two or three year period. Now maybe he had other times off that I don't remember, but I

remember thinking, “my goodness the whole world is falling in on us, dad's not working today,” but it wasn't of course.

In thinking back now the Lord was with us and we really did better than the average I think. Now my wife's situation was a little more devastating. She saw many days where she ate potato soup and that was it, and tomorrow potato soup, and the next day potato soup.

I don't have any idea about the stock market value at that time, but I do remember that my father had some stock. I don't know for sure but they were probably U.S. Steel stock. That would be the normal assumption; he worked for American Bridge, which was a subsidiary for U.S. Steel. And I know he had some stock, I have no idea of how many shares, but I have the memory that the cemetery lot that he and my mother are buried at now, in Merrillville Indiana, he bought those lots with the stock. They took the stock off his hands and it was something like ten cents on the dollar. So, he got the lots for whatever the cost in that time and whatever the value of the stocks were at that time. I remember my dad lamenting that he had this stock and had this money invested and it wasn't worth much and he couldn't get anything for it. But he was able to buy these lots at ten cents or maybe twenty.

During that period there were fun times of course. The World's Fair in Chicago was held in '32 and '33. And I remember going to the Fair with my mother and her twin sister, my aunt. I remember the times there. For example they had an automobile racetrack with all the new-fangled cars, all the new issued cars in '32 or '33. I went to the fair two or three times during those two years. Chicago was only 30 miles away, so it wasn't a huge trip yet in those days it was a pretty good drive. But, that racetrack had all these new cars. They'd have a Ford and a Chevy and then a Plymouth and then a

Lincoln and then a Cadillac. So, when you stood in line and you got a free ride around that track, you just got the luck of the draw of whatever car was next in line. And the car we got was a Plymouth, and it had an air-streamed hooded roof that slanted so that it looked like a raindrop really. And I got in that Plymouth and I said "Some day, some day, I will work and save and get myself a new Plymouth." And here I am 82 years of age now and I still have never had a Plymouth. I've had Chevy's, I've had Buick's, I've had Oldsmobile's, and I've had others, but I've never had a Plymouth. They quit making them a few years ago, I was a little disappointed that I've never made my goal.

Readers might be interested in knowing about Meigs Field in Chicago. It sits out in Lake Michigan, right along the Lake Shore Drive, just immediately south of The Loop. Meigs Field was a landfill, filled in by the city of Chicago as an island connection with the World's Fair. You could go from the mainland over to that island; I think they had a walk area on the north end if I'm not mistaken. But, most people tried to go from the main part of the World's Fair over to Meigs Field by a high trolley like a chair lift at a ski resort, except you went level across. You went up an elevator and got in those little gondola cars and you could look down over the World's Fair and over the water, and you thought you'd really arrived when you got up in the air over that.

In the early years long about 1933, John Dillenger escaped from the jail in Crown Point, Indiana. And when he escaped I remember extra papers coming out. And in those days, extra papers meant that they would print a special edition of the paper, the *Gary Post Tribune* for example. If something big happened there was no television, no radio really, just little crystal sets, but not big radios to get the news flashes, so they would have a

special edition. And some newsboy would walk down the middle of the street hollering, "Extra, extra here read all about it; extra." Then you'd run out and buy that paper for five cents. And actually the front page of the paper was all the extra news; *Dillenger Escaped*, for example or some tragedy in the world or the United States. All the extra news was really on the front page and if you opened it up all the rest of the paper was what you'd already gotten earlier that day; but it did tell you what was going on. I remember extra paper days coming out for John Dillenger.

Incidentally, at Crown Point prison I had dinner in one of the cells one time. My sister and her husband lived in Crown Point, and this was late 1980. My wife, Neita and I, went to Crown Point and we spent some time with my sister Marjorie and her husband Gene. They surprised us and took us to dinner, and the dinner was in the jailhouse. The tables were set up inside the jail room, and the bars were still there. It was kind of a nice atmosphere, kind of different. But when I think of Dillenger, I think about that special meal in the jailhouse I think of Dillenger. He robbed a bank in East Chicago, Indiana when East Chicago was about ten miles from Gary and there was a shoot out when he came out of that bank. I have been by that bank, because there was a Church of the Nazarene there, a storefront church, that I visited. And when I was about 14 years of age, we left that church and went across the street and looked at that bank building and saw where the bullets had hit the wall. Oh the things you remember.

I'm sure that in that area of Crown Point where Dillinger escaped, there must have been some retired people that would have known what he was potentially capable of doing. I was a kid, I didn't know, you kind of get glamorized about some nut like that, and you don't worry because you're too young. I'm sure that there were retired or elderly people in Crown Point that

were just devastated until they knew that he was out of that area, they were scared to death.

In the depression days, I remember when Roosevelt became president he closed the banks for about forty-five days so you couldn't draw money out, and you couldn't put money in. And as I recall a lot of money came out of hiding, and it did get circulated in the business world. So, I don't quite know to this day how all of that works out. But, I do remember when the bank closed, and my memory says that he did that to get people to spend some of their cash savings rather than their bank savings; and if that's true, then I'm sure it's worked.

During that time of the depression, there were what they called bum camps. I lived in Gary, and Gary at one time a century ago was under water; under Lake Michigan. So, the water table in Gary was high, but there was a lot of sand, a lot of it. You had trouble growing lawns, because the dirt layer was so thin and the sand was so pores underneath, it would just soak up all the rain immediately, so after a good rain, your lawn was dry in a matter of minutes. But, out behind us there was a great big open field. I had an area, a long city block wide, and it was bounded on the north by the Chicago South Shore South Bend Railroad, and on the south side by Fourth Avenue, and on the east side by Bridge Street, and on the west side by the Pennsylvania Railroad Tracks. And that would have been an area at least a long city block wide and maybe two long city blocks long. And that was open field. There were sand dunes in there, there were oak trees, there were swamps, there was water lying there and cattails would grow in that; and that was our playground. People wonder: did you have a good childhood-a good happy childhood? I had the best happy childhood in the world, because I had that big outdoor place to play in.

We lived in a company-my dad rented a flat, a two story flat. There was a five room-one; two, three-five room flat upstairs and a five room downstairs. We lived in the street level one, and my mother would go on the back steps up to the other folks upstairs, the Walkers, and she would hang a big white sheet on a line she had strung there, and if we were out in the playground-out in that swamp area-down in those trees, if we saw that sheet, that meant we should come home. We didn't have cells phones then.

If I looked up and saw that sheet, you were supposed to go home. Basically in those days we did it, we thought well it's time to go home; we have to go home now. But out beyond that across the Pennsylvania Railroad track, there was another field. We were not really allowed to go beyond that railroad track, but there was no reason to go. We had plenty of places to play and plenty of things to do in our own private yard. But on the other side of that, in the depression days, there was a bum camp. It was just destitute men. Single men, family men, I have no idea, just men. I never saw a woman in one of those camps; don't ever remember seeing a child, never remember seeing a lady, but men. They would dig in that sand-dig a hole four, five feet deep, and board it up because the sand would cave in. They'd board it up someway and then put sheet iron or cardboard or things they could across the top; and they lived in those huts down under ground. You're talking about how many holes? In a square city block, you're talking about sixty, seventy; eighty holes in that spot and that many men; maybe one or two, but primarily one in a hole. So, there were a lot of holes and a lot of men living in there. Yet, in those days, you could walk from one hole to the next and talk to the guy in there or see them sitting out by a fire cooking a little bit of food. You could go up and talk to them; they didn't bother you, you weren't concerned for your safety at all. Never occurred to me in those days of child

molestation or anything; it was just destitute men that were trying to make it somehow or another.

I used to go out and talk to them. In fact, some would come to my mother's back door and somehow-we always felt that on the highway-on Fourth Avenue that there was some kind of mark someplace, there was something hanging out on a tree or something, because they would leave Fourth Avenue and go-one, two, three, four, five-to the sixth house from the corner and ask my mother for something to eat. They didn't stop at the first five, because they were never turned away. They were not invited in the house, they sat out back-they'd come and ask for something-food and she said, "You go sit on the steeps there and I'll fix you up something." She always managed to give them something to eat. And that was a great treat; I'd sit there and visit with them; my brother and sister. My sister was there, we never thought my sister shouldn't be there because she was a girl and this was a bum off the street. He was just, to us, a guy that was down on his luck. We didn't have any-share any fear at all of him or what he might have done. Today we would go bananas wouldn't we? But those were interesting days of course.

I being the oldest, I got to be known as the shoe repairman in the family. In those days, you had those rubber shoes-rubber soles that you could glue on. You don't even know what I'm talking about do you?

You wouldn't know that. You could buy, I don't know-twenty cents a pair, of rubber soles that had a little bit of tendency to have stick-um on the bottom of them. You could buy different sizes. You could buy a smaller size for a lady's shoe; a smaller size for my sister's shoe, a larger size for my dad's shoe. They came with a little file-a little handheld file-and you roughed up the leather soles of your shoes. Make sure your shoes were dry, and you

roughed up that sole of your shoe real rough, make it as rough as you can, and particularly along the edges. Then you'd put some glue on that-that came with that kit-and you'd rub that glue on with your finger until you got an even spread of the glue, and let that dry. And then you'd take a little more glue, put it on and liven it up again. And then start at the toe of your shoe and push that sole back towards the heel and making sure that each of the edges were on tight. Because the secret of how long that sole would last, was how secure you made the toe and the sides of the shoe. Because if it came loose at the toe next thing you know you'd be flopping that thing up on the bottom of your foot. My brother was smatter than me, he was intelligent, he never knew how to put soles on good, they always came off when he did it, so he was so smart he didn't have to do it, so I got the job of putting soles on all the family's shoes.

I was a Boy Scout during that period of time and that was a great experience. We use to go to Lake Michigan, the shores of Lake Michigan, at Tremont. Between Michigan City and Gary, right on Lake Michigan. It's the National park there now, Tremont; and it was the National park then. We went to a Boy Scout camp there on weekends. It was an interesting experience; I enjoyed being a Boy Scout. I got to the rank of a Star Scout. Now I have two grandsons' that are Eagle Scouts, have been Eagles, they are now married.

But in those days, Ambridge was west of downtown Gary, it still is of course, it was west of downtown Gary, two miles. We went to church at Sixth and Madison, and my dad, and my brother Robert and I would walk-with my dad-the two miles to church on Sunday morning. We were always on time, we'd be in Sunday school, and then after church we would walk the two miles home. And then Sunday night, we walked the two miles to young

people, and then stayed for church after that, and walked the two miles home. Now during that period of time there was a streetcar that ran from Ambridge that two miles to within a block of the church, but that cost a dime a person. So we saved thirty cents by walking there and thirty cents by walking home sixty so we saved \$1.20 a Sunday by walking. But, if you left Ambridge-this is a crazy arrangement-if you left Ambridge and walked as far as Taft Street, which would be about a half a mile, you could get on the streetcar for a nickel. So my mother and sister would walk that half a mile to Taft Street and would take the streetcar for the nickel ride.

My brother used to get so mad, he and I are different, it never bothered me that Marjorie got to ride with mom, but it used to bug Robert to death that he had to walk and Marjorie got to ride, because she was a girl, she got to ride. Only because she was a girl, talk about why a chauvinist, why men today are chauvinistic. It's that-boy, you're raised that way from a kid, and all you ever heard as a kid: "You can't do that that's your sister. You don't do that to your sister. You walk. You take your sister there. You don't leave your sister to go home alone."

That's all you knew, was protection of your sister, and special consideration for her. It kind of hangs over all your life, you just can't shut that off like you close a door. When your dad gets on you because you didn't let your sister walk first or you didn't open the door for your mom; I mean-that's a sin. That holds over, you just can't do those things. But, we walked that all the time. My dad was a very devout Christian. He worked hard in the steel mill, worked all day long. During a revival, in those days we had two-week revivals-three Sundays My dad went to every service, both services on Sunday, and in those days the revival went, not with Saturday off, every night. My dad would walk every night to church and walk home every night

during a two-week revival. He'd come home from work and take a short nap so he could be ready and walk. My mother and us kids didn't go quite that often, we went Sundays all the time, and maybe Friday night for example at the end of the week when we didn't have to get up Saturday. My mother was protective of our sleep time, but my dad was a very devout man and he just never missed.

During that time of course, in '34 until '38 I was in high school. In high school there was an organization known as ROTC, Reserved Officers Training Corp. I went to ROTC, primarily because I had no clothes as a kid-as a teen. I went to Horace Mann High School, which was really, probably, the best economic status in Gary. There was Horace Mann, and Emerson, and New Wallace, and Roosevelt-they were not all bad, but probably the wealthier ones lived on the west side of Broadway. So, I was in a school that most kids had more than I had, not that we were hungry, but there were four kids to feed. So I joined ROTC for one simple reason, the ROTC furnished you a government uniform: a pair of pants and a shirt and a tie. And you wore that on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. That meant that on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I was in a government uniform and therefore it was accepted as a government uniform and I didn't have to compete with others for their expensive slacks or their expensive sweaters. Then I only had to compete on the clothes-people talk about how you dress kids and how they feel about themselves being important, boy I know how important that can make you feel or how unimportant it can make you feel. I understand that very well. So, I would wear street clothes then only on Tuesday and Thursday and those days I felt a little better than I would have, had I had to spread those over a five-day period. But once I got in ROTC, my whole

attitude towards ROTC changed from a uniform to a real-real interest in it. I could have been a career military person; I liked that.

As a matter of fact, they had in those days a CMTC, and CMTC is Citizens Military Training Corp. You could sign up as a teenager, I was fifteen-sixteen, I went three summers, and you could go to Indianapolis to Fort Benjamin Harrison, as a recruit and they would pay you absolutely nothing-no wages with it. You got a summer uniform and you got your three meals. What you were, you were a training army for the Army Reserve officers. I didn't realize that at the time until later. Army Reserve officers would come in-Lieutenants, Second Lieutenants, Lieutenants, and Captains-and they would take over this company and we were their guinea pigs. We furnished them their soldiers for training during that period of time, and each one of them would have a two-week stand. So, we would have one set of officers for the first half of the month and another set of officers for the second half of the month. Now I said they didn't pay you for that, but they did give you travel money to get there. They would give me ten dollars to get from Gary to Indianapolis and I would get ten dollars when I left there to get home. I could get there for two dollars and home for two dollars; so, I might make fifteen-sixteen dollars that month, simply because I went to Citizens Military Training Camp. But I did enjoy it; it was a nice summer.

You know, playing out in that sand is an elementary and junior high age, when you get in high school, you kind of want to do something else and you can't do it, you don't have any money, there's no place to go. It was kind of a nice change of pace for me. To me, I looked forward to it, as I said I went three summers.

During those high school years we had one bicycle, my dad was able to buy one bicycle. My brother Robert got it one day, I got it the next, and he

got it the one-we alternated days. If we had something special we had to bargain with the each other if we wanted his day, he'd make it difficult for me, and I'd have to bargain hard with him. We shared that bicycle during high school. As a matter of fact, one year we had a black and white checked jacket. My folks were able to buy one jacket and we were two years apart, so we were pretty much the same size, and whoever went to the most important function got to wear the new jacket, and whoever went to the lesser important function got to wear the old jacket. The neighbor lady said to my mother one time, and my mother never told her any different, she said, "I don't know how you folks manage, you just do such a good job, you buy both of those boys brand new jackets and they look so nice." Well, actually it was that she never did see us together. If we had been together, we wouldn't have had to nice jackets.

The depression really ended with the build up for World War II. I graduated from high school in '38 and in the summer of '38 I made my last trip to CMTC camp in July and I had no job and couldn't find one. Then, in September a man from our church got me a job as busboy in a restaurant. The restaurant was called J.R. Thompson. It's not in existence any more, but it was a chain outfit that came out of Chicago. It started in Chicago, and they had a restaurant in Gary. Originally it was strictly a man's restaurant, no ladies. There were no tables, there were chairs like a school desk, where you had a seat and an arm, and you brought the arm up. They were bigger sized, as I recall, than most school desks because this was for men and larger people. And you pulled that up and then you set your tray on that desk-that you might think of as a writing desk if you were in school; you set your tray-and ate your meal from that. And then you'd hold your tray and put that arm

down, I think the arms went down and then I guess you carried your tray to a drop off point.

Now when I went to Thompson's restaurant in 1938, there were women in the restaurant, I remember the men's time from when I was a boy, but when I got that job in '38 there were ladies there and there were tables and chairs. I got a job as a busboy. I went to work at nine o'clock at night, worked until seven o'clock in the morning-a ten-hour shift-six days a week, six nights a week, and I made eight dollars a week.

I thought about that the other day. Neita and I went to Bob Evans and we had a reasonable dinner, but I looked on the ticket and I paid a dollar thirty-nine cents for a glass of ice tea and they never even came and offered to fill it again. So, I paid a dollar thirty-nine cents for one glass of ice tea and here I was working sixty hours a week for eight dollars. There was a dishwasher-on the night shift-there was a counterman, a cashier, a chef that worked until two in the morning, the dishwasher, and the busboy, and then in the basement there was a baker and a helper. Now those bakers they baked from scratch, because there was no ready mix. So they baked donuts and brought them up like ten o'clock at night, and people would flock in to get a donut and coffee that was hot. And they made rolls for breakfast and they made pies for the day customers.

So, I was a busboy for a while and then I was night counterman. Now when I'm night counterman, that means I have all those people-the two in the basement, the cashier, and the cook, and another busboy, and the dishwasher working for me, and I got twelve dollars a week. So, I really moved up. Now back when I was a busboy, I was going with my wife Neita-we were kids, we were eighteen-and she would go to church on Sunday night, and I went to work-I went, and then I left early and went-church was from seven-thirty

to nine in those days, nine p.m. So, I'd leave and go to the restaurant. And Neita lived down towards Glenn Park area, south, and she rode a streetcar. So, she'd get on the street car, and I knew about the time she'd get on the streetcar, and that sidewalk in front of the restaurant always needed sweeping on Sunday night at about nine-ten p.m. Because, I would be out there sweeping that sidewalk and she knew to get on the right hand side of the streetcar, and she'd be at a window, and she'd wave at me and I'd wave from pushing that broom.

One time when I was head counterman-the way the restaurant ran was kind of interesting, everybody helped himself. You walked in the restaurant and there was a little machine there and you pulled a ticket, like a ticket to ride on a Ferris wheel or something or a lottery ticket or something like that. You pulled that ticket out, and it would go "bing" so that always alerted you that a new customer came in, "bing" and you'd pull that ticket. You'd walk up to the counter, and the counterman stood behind the counter, and you stood in one spot. And he'd put a tray up on that counter. And if you wanted eggs for example, you'd holler the order into the chef, "two over easy" or if you wanted one of the specials-the roast beef dinner-you'd holler that to the chef. And he'd set it up on the window, and you'd pick it up and set it on the counter. And then you had fruit; if they wanted some fruit you'd dip that up yourself, like they do in cafeteria style. But, the customer didn't move, he stood still and you set it on his tray. And he'd give you that ticket-you'd get him coffee or milk or whatever-and he'd give you that ticket, so you'd punch on your register and put that ticket in and punch how much his meal was. Then, he took his tray and his food, and that ticket of course to a table and ate and he'd leave that tray and the dishes on the table, that's where the busboy came in. But then he'd take that ticket to the cashier and paid the

cashier the amount of that ticket. So, that's kind of an unusual way of doing it,

One time-this will tell you about the economy and how inflation-one week the manager said to me, that Saturday night's we were doing pretty good, we were pretty busy, Saturday night and I really had to hurry to keep it going. He said, "I'll tell you what, if you take in sixty dollars tonight, in a ten hour shift, I'll give you a second helpers pay, I'll give you your regular pay, but I'll give you a helper's pay for working that much harder." In order to make sixty dollars though when someone wanted pie then you always said did you want ice cream with it, you know. Or if you got fruit do you want a sweet roll with it, do you want two donuts, you want two donuts don't you, and you try to sell that. And, I can remember like it was last night, when they checked out the register in the morning, he said, "You made it," sixty dollars and fifteen cents. I worked hard for ten hours pushing for sales that night to get it over sixty dollars, that's all they took in all night long. You go with four people and you can't get out of the restaurant for sixty dollars now. Kind of an interesting story to me at least.

I went through kindergarten, elementary school, junior high, senior high, with a friend, his name was Robert Steer, probably academically the brightest guy I've ever known. He was really a capable young fellow, he got straight 'A's in everything. I didn't, but he did, he was a capable guy. Well, he and I graduated the same time from high school. So, I was working in this Thompson's restaurant and I was tired of the night shift, and I was tired of that working and I walked out that morning and I said, "I'm going to quit." By that store, there was a drug store, a shoe store, and then this restaurant; it was the third store opening from Sixth and Broadway. And then next to that-Thompson's restaurant-was a candy store, and the next one then-that one or

the one next to it, I'm not sure now second or third one down the street, was Tiddle's Butcher Shop. I went to school with that Tiddle girl by the way. But, Robert Steer was coming down Broadway to go to work that morning in that butcher shop. I don't know what he was doing, sweeping the floors or something there, as I said a very capable young guy. And I came out and we visited a bit on the corner, and I was airing my frustrations about working at that Thompson restaurant and I said, "I am really disgusted with this job, I'm going to quit this job and I'm going to see if I can't find something better than this." And the guy I kind of idolized said to me, "If you quit that job, will you tell me first because I'm making less money than you are and I'm going to apply for that job." So all of a sudden I didn't quit that job, I realized that if he wanted it I wasn't going to let it go, so I didn't quit that job.

I worked there after I graduated, so that would have been September of 1938. I worked a year but I worked about until the spring of '40. I worked there quit awhile. Then in the spring of '40, U.S. Steel started opening up jobs and hiring, so I left the restaurant and got a job at U.S. Steel. I was there-my guess is pretty good, '40-and I worked in the steel mill in Gary until the fall of '41, and in the fall of '41 I went over to Whiting, Indiana and made application at Standard Oil of Indiana and I got a job there. I stayed with Standard Oil, which then became Amoco, which is now British Petroleum, BP. And I stayed with them for forty years, and had a lifetime career with Standard or Amoco.

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