

Interview with George and Vivian Hauswirth
Hancock, MI
3/5/1993
Living through the Depression

[NOTE: POOR AUDIO QUALITY, BACKGROUND NOISE, AND SEVERAL INSTANCES OF MULTIPLE PEOPLE TALKING AT ONCE]

[START OF INTERVIEW]

(Interviewer): Let's see it's March 5, and I'm talking with my grandparents who lived through the Depression. First off, when were you guys born?

(Vivian Hauswirth): 1910. December 2, 1910.

(George Hauswirth): I was born October 8, 1910.

(I): Okay, so you were pretty...

[muffled speaking and tape cuts out then returns]

(I): Okay, and when did the Depression first affect the U.P.?

(GH): 1930. '29 it hit Detroit and 1930 it hit here. I was working for the county and I got laid off in 1930.

(VH): Yeah, little by little it worsened.

(GH): It went from five days to four days to three days to two days to one day and that was it.

(I): And that was your only job then?

(GH): Yeah, the only job.

(I): And you said you were married in '32?

(GH): We got married in November 12, 1932.

(I): What ever made you want to get married during the Depression?

(VH): We never dined, that's all!

[laughter]

(GH): Two can live as cheap as one.

(VH): It was about five dollars for a shower right before we were married...

(GH): And that probably lasted a month.

(I): The five dollars lasted a month?

(VH): Yeah we got it straight just...

[Unintelligible]

(I): Where did you live?

(GH): We lived with my folks on Prospect St. in Hancock for the first ten months then we moved to Frankentstet [?].

(I): So what was that like back then?

(GH): Six dollars a month...

(I): For a house?

(GH): For a home, yeah.

(I): How many bedrooms?

(GH): Four rooms – three rooms and two bedrooms.

(I): What was it like at home before you moved out – what was it like? Because you had a lot of family right, and you had a lot of sisters and stuff too?

(GH): Well we were at each other's families, that's what we lived at base for.

(VH): Well not so much. Off and on yeah, but we lived with your parents for a year or eleven months we were there, we were eating with them, we were eating at home, but we had...

(I): So you kind of supported yourself even when you were there?

(VH): Yeah.

(I): Now, Gramps you had eleven kids or twelve kids plus you? All together?

(GH): Thirteen – a baker's dozen, yeah.

(I): And how many were in your family Grandma?

(VH): Ten.

(I): Ten? And you weren't the oldest, were you?

(VH): I was the oldest, yes.

(I): And you were the youngest?

(GH): I was the third oldest.

(I): Third oldest? Okay. What did your parents do?

(GH): No, fourth oldest, because the first one died.

(I): What did your parents do during the Depression?

(VH): My father was a miner.

(I): Did he keep his job at all?

(GH): No, he was off work, same as everyone. There was nobody working.

(I): Yeah?

(GH): Very, very few worked.

(VH): People struggled a while though _____.

(GH): Stores were the only ones working – there was no industry, the mines were all closed.

[Multiple speakers at once, unintelligible for a long moment]

(GH): During the Depression, it was after WPA, then they came out.

(VH): My father was working iron ore [?], and that closed, but ____ closed.

(GH): ____ closed, ____ closed, all of them closed. Then after WPA, then after they started getting money around, the government started buying the copper. Then the mines opened up.

(I): When was that?

(GH): That was 1936 – '35, '36.

(I): What's WPA?

(GH): That was Public Works Administration.

(I): What about CNH? Is that a mine?

(GH): CNH was, they started the mine because Roosevelt started buying the copper from all of the mines and storing it. That's the only way they could move it to make things neat. This is getting planned.

(I): What kind of work was there up here? You said you got laid off...

(GH): There was woods work and then there's CWA, and WPA, and PWA, and CCC – that was when I was a _____ manager.

(I): What is all that?

(GH): Pardon?

(I): CCC.

(GH): Conservation Corps. They were planting trees and plants.

(I): Did you work for them?

(GH): No, my brother did.

(I): What did you do?

(GH): What did I do? Nothing!

[Laughter]

(GH): The only thing that I did was look for jobs in storm windows, painting storm windows, taking storm windows up and off and down and anything to get a buck.

(I): Any kind of odd work?

(GH): Yeah.

(I): What was the wages?

(VH): They were small. [Chuckles]

(GH): They were – two dollars a day is the highest I ever made.

(I): During the Depression?

(GH): Yeah.

(VH): Well in 1920...

(GH): Well I'll tell you, two of us sawed trees down, sawed it into short stove lengths, split it and piled it, for a dollar and seventy-five cents a day.

(I): How many hours?

(GH): Eight.

(I): Eight hours?

(GH): And sometimes nine hours, _____ finish. Then we split the \$1.75.

(I): That one, which law, which I forget which law it was, but that came out where it was an eight hour day then right? That was like mandatory?

(GH): Eight hours _____ in 19 – when I worked for the county it was ten hours a day, and when I worked for Danny Arnz [?] it was ten hours a day. I forget the year but I worked ____ for...

(I): Was it during the Depression or...?

(GH): No it was after the Depression. When you worked the county it was ten hours.

(I): Were the railroads big up here?

(GH): Oh yeah. There was railroads – shipping was big too.

(I): Yeah I suppose with all the mining and trees and stuff.

(GH): Yeah there was the package freighters, and there was the ore carriers, and there was fuel, you know, diesel fuel carriers – they were Standard Oil.

(I): Standard Oil was up here? With Rockefeller? John D. Rockefeller owned that?

(GH): Yeah, John Rockefeller. Then what else...? Then, what year did I go to Milwaukee?

(VH): '37.

(GH): '37, and it wasn't over, the Depression wasn't over yet.

(VH): Nooooo, the Depression lasted a long time – '40s I think.

(GH): Then when I come back from there, I got a job from Sleeman counting coal [?] - \$75 a month.

(I): Was that big wages then?

[all speak over each other, unintelligible]

(I): That was in '37?

(GH): In '37.

(I): What about when you moved out on your own did you guys have any modern, well, for the time, modern conveniences, like a car, a washer, a stove or anything?

(VH): Nooooo, couldn't afford any of that, no.

(I): No? How did you get around?

(VH): Walked.

(GH): Hitch-hiked!

(VH): And hitch-hiked.

[Laughter]

(GH): When I was going with her I used to walk to Atlantic and back.

(I): From Hancock? How far is that about?

(GH): Five miles. It was five miles from home.

(I): How long did you date before you guys got married?

(GH): About a year and a half.

(VH): Year and five months we were in together.

(I): Okay, Gram, this one I guess will be more for you – what was your day like? As far as cleaning and doing the washing and laundry and stuff?

(VH): You don't want to know.

[GH is laughing]

(I): How did you manage?

(VH): We managed as well as you could [?] _____ magazine [?]

(I): Did you have running water at all or a well?

(VH): Yeah we had running water and that.

(I): Did you have all indoor plumbing?

(GH): No _____ outside toilet.

(VH): Yes, yes, with the outside toilets, yeah, except if you're living now in town or...

(GH): But if you're out in the country.

(VH): Yeah, you had an outside _____

[Both speaking, indistinguishable]

(I): But, so you would do all your laundry by hand?

(VH): Yeah, yeah.

(I): What about meals? Did you have anything, like today you can just go out and buy a chicken, did you have anything like that?

(VH): No, no. They didn't have _____.

(I): No? How would you go about planning a dinner? Would you have to go out get the chicken and kill it yourself?

(VH): No we would go buy fresh meat from the meat stores. Yeah.

(GH): It was cheap but you didn't have money even with the soup – and there was a lot of meat on there for five cents.

(VH): it was a lot of soup and there was a lot of meat on it, to make soups.

(GH): But she didn't have the nickel.

(VH): And hams, we used to get, when the government relief was there, then we'd get ham and stuff that made many meals. Yeah, soup _____

(I): So they did have some relief agencies?

(GH): Oh yeah, yeah. We were on the Houghton County relief first.

(VH): Yeah. Then you get your flour from _____.

(GH): ...then came the state, and then came the federal. First it was county then the state then the federal. [Speaking to bystander, presumably a small child] You're going to fall backwards.

(I): No he stands like that all the time – he's got good balance. So pretty much the meat was there but did you have to prepare everything else?

(VH): Yeah, yeah you had to prepare everything else. There was very few –

(GH): Make your own bread.

(VH): Mmhmm, make your own bread, yes.

(GH): And we planted our own potatoes in our own garden.

(VH): Yeah, we planted our own plants, yeah.

[SEVERAL MOMENTS OF INCOHERENT SPEAKING AS ALL SPEAK AT ONCE]

(I): Was there indoor refrigeration then or did you...?

(GH): No, all ice.

(VH): All ice.

(I): Oh ice. You had to buy it?

(GH): Iceboxes, there was no refrigeration.

(I): When did refrigerators come?

(GH): They didn't come until the '40s.

(I): Really?

(VH): Yeah, I think so.

(I): So was that a lot of salt preserving, I suppose?

(GH): Mhmm. And then...

[MORE INCOHERENT SPEAKING]

(I): How did other people get by up here? What other kind of stuff was... ?

[INCOHERENT SPEAKING]

(GH): There was no griping because everybody was in the same boat. Nobody had any money to spend.

(VH): [INCOHERENT]

(GH): Everybody would congregate on the beach, you know, especially in the summer and swim and have the kids down there because there was nothing else to do – no work, no nothing – so might as well make the best of it.

(I): So would you say it was a pretty tight knit community up here?

(GH): Oh yeah, everybody was close, real close, because everybody was in the same boat.

(I): Did you guys have a lot of family pot-luck type meals? Where you'd get a bunch of families together and...?

(GH): No, no, no. Very rarely, because there wasn't that much eat.

(VH): In the summer you'd make soups and stuff like that.

(GH): And then the next day you'd just add water to it and make more soup.

(I): What about in the winter? For heat especially in the winter?

[INCOHERENT SPEAKING]

(GH): Coal. If you'd run out of coal then you'd have to go either the Red Cross or Salvation Army or one of them, or the county to get your fuel – get a ton of coal or a half ton of coal or 500 lbs.

(I): About how much coal would it take for your house in the winter?

(GH): 15 ton.

(I): 15 ton? Wow that's a lot...

(VH): What did you say, 50 ton?

(GH): *Fifteen* ton!

(VH): Oh, yeah, yeah. Well that certainly depends on the kind of house you have, a cold place you've got to use more.

(I): There wasn't much for insulation back then?

(GH): No, there was no insulation, no. There was, well the air tires weren't on trucks yet.

(I): No?

(GH): There was solid tires on trucks yet.

(I): Really?

(GH): Yes. The '30s.

(I): When did you start driving?

(GH): When did I start driving? Probably when I was fourteen.

(I): Fourteen?

(GH): From my dad. He had a truck. [SOME INAUDIBLE SPEECH] ...closed cab. Everything was working. Talk about a pile a junk. [Chuckles]

(I): What sticks out most about the Depression, anything?

(GH): No work.

(VH): No work.

(GH): If we could have had a job we would have been in a lot better fix than we are right now, that's for sure. Everybody would have. At least eight years that we couldn't have nothing.

(I): Just odd jobs, whatever?

(GH): Yeah, no, I mean, when you did get a job it was so damn small. You couldn't save nothing on it – \$75 a month for three people. We had, Jay was born – Uncle Jay – in 194-

(VH): 1938 is when he was born.

(GH): Jay was born in 1938, and I was making \$100 a month, and I wouldn't have got that if somebody else didn't offer me a \$100/month job. So I told the boss, "Well I'm going to quit if you don't pay \$25 more," so then he chalked it up to \$100.

(I): So no work, pretty much. Was it really frustrating back then?

(GH): Well, because everybody was in the same boat it didn't bother you, it didn't bother you. Because everybody you talked to was in the same... [INCOHERENT HERE, BOTH TALKING]... Very few that was working. When you take guys like that....

(I): Was there any jobs at Tech available ever?

(GH): No. I tried for 15 years.

(I): Did you work at all during the Depression, Gram?

(VH): No, no. I worked hard at home.

(GH): Six years before we got any kids _____ easier

(I): But it wasn't an easy time...?

(GH): No, well, nobody missed it, you didn't notice it, because everybody was in the same fix. You'd go visiting there'd be a cup of coffee there or two...

[INCOHERENT, BOTH TALKING]

(VH): ...buy anything.

(GH): Couldn't afford to buy anything. A loaf of bread was five cents, and that's a big loaf of bread you buy from the bakery – five cents.

(VH): You could buy butter for twenty cents.

(GH): Pop was a nickel a bottle

(VH): You'd get pork chops for 15 cents a pound.

(GH): Yeah. Hamburger – 10 cents a pound, 12 cents a pound.

(VH): Yep. And sometimes five.

(GH): Sometimes five and ten cents a pound. [Talks to small child]

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

(I): So were those prices for the food, was that inflated because of the Depression or?

(GH): No, no they went down.

(I): That was pretty much...What was it before the Depression then? For stuff in like the late '20s?

(GH): Oh it was cheap. It was a lot cheaper than it is today.

(VH): The Depression didn't hit till '29

(GH): ...Inflation then, there was inflation then

(VH): The Depression _____ 1929.

(GH): Even before the Depression _____

(VH): In Detroit it was and in the cities –

(I): What did it do to Detroit, what effect?

[BOTH TALKING AT ONCE]

(I): And they had the motor factories then, the automotive factories...

(GH): Yeah all closed.

(VH): I worked in a factory in Detroit and then in 1929... [INCOHERENT AS BOTH DEBATE ABOUT DATES]

(I): Just for a year? What did you do?

(VH): I worked in a factory.

(I): What kind of work?

(GH): Tax reader.

(VH): I was a tax reader in –

(I): What is that?

(VH): You put those tax ... [incoherent because child is making noise] car parts.

(I): And what was the pay like for that?

(VH): I don't even remember. What I was paid was about \$45 for two weeks.

(I): So that's not...that'd be about \$90 a month.

(VH): Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(GH): Eight hours a day, six days a week, and we used to work, when I worked for the county – six days a week. Sixty hours, ten hour shifts, and small pay: \$2.30 – \$3.00 a day for truck drivers.

(I): Somebody else was making all the money.

(GH): Hmm?

(I): Somebody else was making all the money then.

(GH): No, nobody made any money. There was no money to be made, that's all.

(VH): Those that did have a job, yes...

(GH): In 1930, you could buy a model-T car for \$400.

(I): Is that cheap?

(GH): Cheap?! Would you buy a car, what kind of car do you get nowadays? And this is brand new! You could get a Chevy 4-door sedan for \$475, brand-spanking-new.

(I): In 1930?

(GH): Mmhmm. I'll never forget in '29 [talks to child for a moment] I went with my uncle to a garage looking at cars, and \$750 for a spanking brand-new Chevy 385.

(I): Too much?

(GH): No, no, he wanted a heavier car. He wanted a Buick.

(I): How much did he pay?

(GH): \$800 some dollars.

(I): Those were the crankshaft motors?

(GH): No, no.

(I): Electric start, really?

(GH): I guess that was the first year that they started, you know. Pretty sure.

(I): How big was it?

(GH): The car?

(I): Yeah. Four doors or..?

(GH): Yeah it was a four door. It was fancy like a Cougar is today – about the same size. But it had 33-inch wheels... [Chuckles]

(VH): Where's Laurie?

(I): She's at home. She's got a basketball game or something her sister's playing tonight. When did the Depression start to get easier up here?

(GH): Nineteen...

(VH): '29?

(GH): Not, nooo - start to get *better* he said!

(VH): Oh, to get better

(GH): In '48...

(I): Wow, really?

(VH): _____

(GH): What are you talking about? *Better!* Industry started. The mines started to open up and that.

(I): When did work come back up this way?

(GH): When the mines started opening up again then it started...

(I): Nothing even before the Second World War?

(GH): Well that's what brought it up.

(I): Okay.

(GH): The Second World War. The Second World War was, you couldn't – there was not a guy walking the street – everybody was working.

(I): I suppose they needed all their men...

(GH): Sure. I got a deferment because of that. I was working for the army and they let me go from shop – I was a machinist – they wouldn't let me go, because they'd be short. So that was compulsory so I got a deferment, that's why I didn't go.

(I): How old were you in 1941?

(GH): '41? 1910 to '41 was what, 31 years?

(I): So you were right in that age bracket then where you're still sent out, okay. How would you say the Depression affected you after it was all over and the area kind of picked back up?

(GH): Well it took us a long time to even realize that you were making anything.

(VH): It was a gloominess for all of us. It was a gloominess _____

(GH): When I was work release, I quit the work release to go to work – I got a job for a saw mill cleaning brush out the canal for the government. I quit the release and went and worked there so I could hold my head up in the day – I had a job. Not a forced job.

(VH): Jobs were hard to find.

(GH): And less pay. I got less pay. I was getting \$3.00 a day on work relief and I was getting \$2.50 a day working hard. When you work for the government pay you didn't have to work. You'd get home right after dinner. [Laughs]

(I): But it was just more of a pride...?

(GH): That's all, it was for pride.

(I): And when was this?

(GH): That was in '40, was it, or...? No. I worked for Sleeman in '40 right? When did I start work for Sleeman? '37.

(VH): '37, yes.

(GH): Yeah, and this was just before Sleeman – '36. Yeah I remember. From there then I had a job for the government down at the entry. I went there for a month straight, every day – every day – and stayed there all day, and the superintendent asked me, "Do you want a job?" I said, "What does it look like? I wouldn't be hanging around here all day if I didn't want a job." [Laughs] I used to help my uncle, he was a blacksmith, I used to work all day helping him.

(I): Did they pay daily or weekly?

(GH): Two weeks – every two weeks. Some places only paid once a month. Mine was paid every two weeks. Then it was, what year was it when they started paying every week?

(VH): I don't know, I don't remember.

(GH): Yeah they were forced to pay every week.

(I): Yeah. Did the government?

(GH): Yeah, because it was too long to spend without money. Wages weren't high, you know...

(I): Yeah. Nowadays how do you think, when looking back, what do you see as far as what you learned through the Depression.

(GH): Well now you get money and you don't have to work. There's the whole thing.

(I): What do you mean?

(GH): They get \$20 an hour now, and if you're sick you go home you get paid, them days you didn't. If you left work, if you worked 2 hours and went home that's all you got paid for was the 2 hours. So, this way's a lot better. Now they got hospitalization, they got a free doctor, they got everything – them days you didn't have nothing. Everything was on your own, and you didn't make anything. The doctors would come over to the house and if they knew they wouldn't get no money they'd say, "Good-bye, see you next time." [Laughs]

(I): What about as far as lessons learned, looking back 60 years?

(GH): Oh, it taught you how to handle money.

[INCOHERENT SPEAKING, BOTH TALKING ABOUT MONEY AT ONCE]

(VH): How to economize.

(GH): Nowadays to a kid money is nothing. I tell you, we know the value of a dollar.

(I): Yeah.

(GH): That was a good, good teaching. That's from the experience side of it.

(I): Is there any closing...

(GH): And we didn't even miss a car – we didn't get a car until our third –

(VH): -10 years we were married before we got a car, we got married in '32.

(GH): The first car we got is when we worked at the _____. That was the first one.

(I): Was there any stories that really stick out about the Depression? That you remember really well, as far as the way things were?

(GH): Well when I lived in Atlantic, that was -

(VH): Yeah.

(GH): Walked from Atlantic to Hancock to work.

(VH): Right, right. He got a job, so he'd have to walk from Atlantic, where we were living, up to Hancock.

(GH): And then walk back at the end of the day.

(VH): Yeah.

(I): This was in...?

(GH): 1937.

[Unintelligible as both debate years]

(I): Was that your first...?

(GH): And I worked for him for how many years? 13? '41 when I bought the business. '41 I bought the business when the war started.

(VH): Yeah, '41.

(GH): I was working at the shop, and then bought the business. Crazy fool I bought that. I should have just stayed there.

(I): You had your own business?

(GH): Mmhmm, yeah.

(VH): Not for the money they paid there. It wasn't worth it. _____

[Unintelligible, talking about child]

(I): Right, so, in '37 working with Sleeman, that was your first full job since 1929?

(GH): First steady job since 1929, yeah.

(I): So you had about 8 years...

(GH): I had a steady job at the county but then when the Depression hit – I would have still been there – if the Depression didn't hit. [INCOHERENT]

[SIDE A CUTS OUT]

[START OF SIDE B]

(GH): [Audio fades in]... driving in the winter and driving the ____ truck in the summer. I'll tell you how bad it was, we were working, I was working for the county, and one of us in this work relief program, they work for the county for so many days then the county would pay them or give the family so much.

(I): Yeah.

(GH): Well, we used to eat – truck drivers and a bunch would congregate together you know – and there was a guy, he'd take a walk all the time away from everybody. The boss was wondering what the Sam hill is he always moving away, so he went there with his lunch pail and sat down with the guy and he wasn't going to open his pail. So he said, "Ain't you going to eat?" He started to cry, he said, "What are you crying about?" He says, "My family _____"

(I): He was embarrassed?

(GH): Mmhmm. That's all he had is boiled potatoes in his pail.

(I): When was this?

(GH): 1930 wasn't it? Yeah, 1930.

(VH): Mmhmm. We were married.

(GH): No, no, not then, we weren't married then. I was working for the county then. The work *relief* we're talking about. _____ Doyle – Frank Doyle was the center foreman and he went to eat with the guy and he _____. He seen that he got something to eat. You bet your boots. He come to the office and right away they wrote him out a check for... Next time he came to work he had a decent pay. People won't believe it nowadays, the ones that were born after that, they won't believe that, our kids won't believe it. _____ – Depression, Depression – he wouldn't care. He hasn't asked me what the Depression was like yet.

(I): I don't think there will ever be one as bad like that.

(GH): It's going to be worse!

(I): No they have too much in federal insurance on money and everything nowadays.

(GH): What, where are you going to get the money?

(I): It's all insured they keep it in gold now.

(GH): Gold don't matter. In fact the gold was only a standard itself and if you only got so much gold that's all you can write is that amount. So when that's gone, where you going to borrow from? This one, borrow from that one? We're borrowing from Japan, we're borrowing from Germany today. Did you know that?

(I): Mmhmm.

(GH): Yeah. German market is higher than the United States now. What does that _____ the United States? They're going down. Their technology has dropped. We used to feed the world before, the United States, not no more. Nowadays you go up to ____ and very rarely do you see them below the retail. Very rarely – there's other countries that sell them cheaper. _____ that's all money going down the drain. Last night I was at the plant and they put the radio on and there was this guy talking about that it's not very far, the Depression, and it's going to be lots worse than what we had in the '30s, because the technology is bound to fail us, we're at the end of the technology, in other words. Japan is way ahead of us in technology. Germany is way ahead of us. Now we're buying everything from Japan and from Germany. Before we used to sell it, now we got to buy it, so that's cost.

(I): Well that's about all the questions I had did you have anything you guys wanted to add or...?

(GH): Oh boy. Well I'll tell ya, in them days there was a lot of rabbit hunters, a lot of partridge hunters, and a lot of deer hunters didn't they? Out of season. [Laughs]

(I): [laughs] A little poaching?

(GH): Yeah I could say there was a lot of poaching.

(I): I suppose it wasn't that frowned upon, though.

(GH): No, no. They'd never know, in Eagleton, and they needed it so.

(I): It's not like it was going to waste.

(GH): They just turned their head, that's all. Then there'd be another one, "This one is land baiting!" – he is! Surprise! I don't know I'll have to check in and ask the guy, no _____

[INTERVIEW ENDS ABRUPTLY]