



**Five Families in  
Dubuque:  
THE URBAN  
DEPRESSION  
1937-1938**

**Park  
Roer  
Watson  
Crumbaugh  
Beuscher**

*©Explorations in Iowa History Project  
Price Laboratory School  
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Cedar Falls, Iowa*

# THE URBAN DEPRESSION

## Park Family Interview

February 1938

### FIVE FAMILIES IN DUBUQUE: THE URBAN DEPRESSION

#### INTRODUCTION

The depression in Iowa didn't begin with the stock market failure of 1929. Early in the 1920s the signs of depression began with plunging farm prices, bank closings and business failures.

Although the depression affected most Iowans to some degree the industrial worker was often the hardest hit.

*Five Families in Dubuque: The Urban Depression* contains interviews with five industrial workers in Dubuque. These interviews provide insights into the feelings and opinions of unemployed workers who in desperation, looked to government relief programs to provide their basic needs.

One of these interviews has been transcribed on the following pages.

<b>Mr. Park</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Mrs. Park</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Claud, Jr.</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Mary</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Dorothy</b>	<b>4</b>

**Interviewing completed  
January 2, 1938**

When Claud Park was granted a pay raise a year ago at the Mississippi Milling Company, where he had been hired in August 1935 after 4 years of unemployment, the Parks thought the depression was ended for them. Now, however, with working hours reduced to 25 a week, the Park family fear they are "getting right back" where they were 5 or 6 ~years ago.

At 32 Claud is weatherbeaten in appearance and shows the effects of worry and anxiety. Though frank and spontaneous, he is slow of speech and draws out his words as he discusses the family's depression experiences. Claud was laid off during the general reduction in force at the Iowa Foundry in February 1931. From February 1931 to the fall of 1932 he worked irregularly for a barge line and at an insulating plant, averaging from \$5 to \$25 a week, depending on the amount of work available. The family began running in debt and it was necessary for Claud to borrow \$200 from his "folks." When this was exhausted, \$80 was borrowed on a \$1,000 insurance policy, which was later allowed to lapse. Claud regrets very much losing his only insurance policy.

By December 1932 the situation had become desperate. The temperature was below zero, and thzre was little fuel or food left. As the Parks owed a coal bill of \$40 and a grocery bill of \$25, they expected credit to be discontinued at any time. To add to the seriousness of their plight, Mrs. Park was pregnant. After talking things over one night they could see no alternative except to apply for relief; yet they both felt that they would be "disgraced." Mrs. Park bitterly opposed going on relief, but during the night Claud got "scared about the kids," and thought "we can't let the kids starve just because we are proud." The next morning, without telling his wife his intentions, he went to the courthouse to make

application for relief. When he arrived at the courthouse he couldn't go in. "I must have walked around the block over a dozen times--it was 10 below zero, but I didn't know it." Finally he got up sufficient courage to make his application.

The family was "investigated" and after about 2 weeks "a lady brought out a grocery and coal order." This was just in the "nick of time" as they were completely out of provisions. Mr. Park considered that they got along very nicely on the weekly grocery order. Part of the time they were also allowed milk from the milk fund and "this helped a lot." The Parks feel that they were well treated by the relief office and did not find the routine investigations obnoxious. "It's part of the system and when you ask for relief, of course you have to cooperate." "The questions didn't bother us so much as the idea of being on charity."

Claud Park "never felt right about accepting the relief slip." He says, "Later, when they let me do some work for it, I felt better." The relief office allowed only \$7.50 a month for rent and Claud did odd jobs for the landlord to make up the difference. In the fall of 1933 he was placed on a CWA road construction project at \$80 a month. He was delighted to be paid in cash and didn't feel that he was "getting something for nothing." At the close of CWA in the spring of 1934, he was placed by the public employment office on the lock and dam project, and his wages were cut to \$50 a month and later to \$48. He was intermittently employed on emergency work projects until August 31, 1936, when he got a job as a benchman finishing sashes at the Mississippi Milling Company. At present, the weekly pay check amounts to only \$11.75, and the family is again getting behind with bills. Because of the uncertainty of the working hours at the mill, it is impossible for Claud to "fill in" with odd jobs.

In an attempt to make ends meet with the reduced income, the Parks now take 1 quart of milk for the children instead of 2, and buy meat only once a week. They have enough canned and dried vegetables from their garden on "the island"<sup>1</sup> to last through the winter. The biggest problem is warm clothing for the children. Claud Jr. and Mary both need shoes, overshoes, and winter underwear, but so far it has been impossible for the Parks to do more than buy

food and pay the rent, gas, and electric bills. In bad weather "the children will have to be kept home from school," and Mrs. Park "feels terrible" about that.

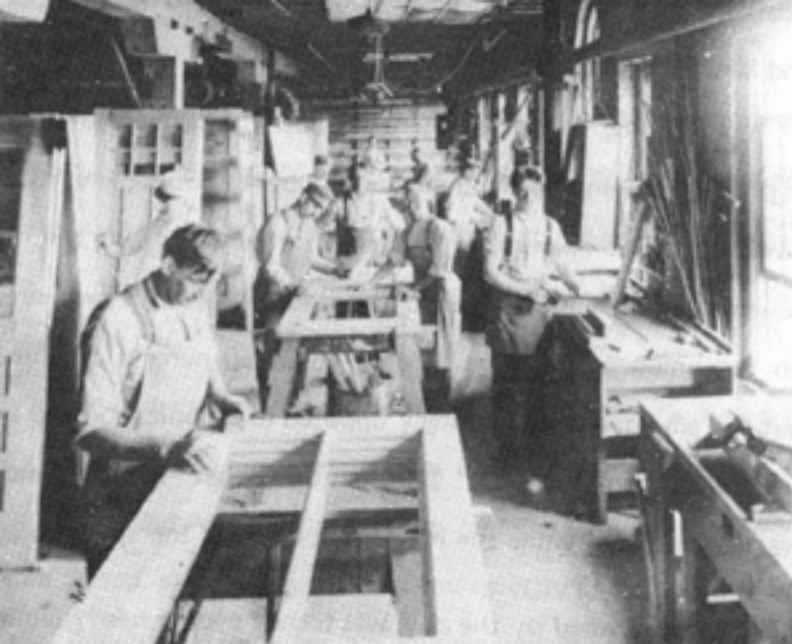
1The island, owned by the city, was turned over to needy families for gardens in the depression. Garden projects were sponsored by local civic organizations.

According to Claud, there is much gossip at the factory regarding the employer's policy in reducing hours. The reason given by the company was "reduction of orders," but the men believe that it is "an attempt to demoralize the workers and break up the union." The plant is only about 50 percent organized, but the employers are "strongly opposed to unionization and fear the influence of the CIO." The men think that "sufficient stock was accumulated while the mill was running at top speed to permit the recent drastic cuts in hours."

Claud Park is not a member of a union, but he favors unions if they have proper leadership. He feels that the union in Dubuque is too weak to accomplish much and that the quality of the local leadership is responsible for this situation. He also thinks that too much of the dues goes to national headquarters. Then, too, many of the workers are afraid to take a stand during a crisis. "But no wonder: the big manufacturers have the town tied in a knot."

Unemployment, Claud believes, is due largely to the introduction of labor saving machinery and the general speeding up in industry, combined with the low purchasing power of the workers. "When a guy can't afford even to buy what he produces, how can there be any prosperity? Look at me--it would take a week of my wages to buy one of those windows I work on by the thousand."

Claud feels that the Social Security program "is a step in the right direction, but needs reform in order to benefit the poor man." The Old-Age Pension system benefits primarily the man with a "good, steady" income. "If my security in old age depends on my present 25-hour week employment, I will probably starve."



# **THE URBAN DEPRESSION**

**Roer  
Family  
Interview**

**January 1938**

## **FIVE FAMILIES IN DUBUQUE: THE URBAN DEPRESSION**

### **I NTRODUCTION**

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<b>Mr. Roer</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Mrs. Roer</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Theresa</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Francis</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Anna</b>	<b>14 months</b>
<b>Mrs. Flannagan</b>	<b>60</b>

**Interviewing completed  
February 17, 1938**

Frank Roer, a bricklayer for 18 years, has been employed on emergency work projects most of the time since 1932. Gaunt and weatherbeaten, Mr. Roer looks fully 10 years older than his 40 years. His work clothes, patched many times, are practically in tatters and his coarse shoes are in need of repair. Each year since 1932 he had hoped that the next year would be better, but instead, the Roers' situation has grown steadily worse until now they are "just existing and that's all." The five Roers and Mrs. Roer's mother, who earns \$4 a week at a hotel laundry, occupy a very old, somewhat dilapidated, five-room brick house in the south end of town.

In 1914 Mr. Roer started to learn bricklaying, the trade followed by his father and elder brother. This trade required a 4 year apprenticeship, which Mr. Roer had just completed when he enlisted for service in September 1918. After 5 months in the army, Mr. Roer returned home and worked as a bricklayer for various contractors in Iowa and Illinois until 1932, when there was no more work to be had in the building trades.

Early in 1933 Mr. Roer applied for veteran's relief and received \$2.25 a week for 2 or 3 months until he was assigned to one of the county projects at \$16 or \$18 a month. "I hated like sin to be on relief, but there just wasn't any other way out." Finally, in December 1933, Mr. Roer was assigned to CWA, first receiving \$15 a week and later \$12.50. He was very thankful for this work, and the family managed fine, as prices were so much lower than they are now; "a quarter bought twice as much as it buys today." Mr. Roer continued on CWA at common labor until March 1934, when he was employed by a WPA contractor on



a school building in a neighboring town for 6 months. On this job he received \$1.20 an hour, but he had to pay for his board and room.

When he returned to Dubuque September 1, he had saved \$165, which kept the family going until around Thanksgiving time when Mr. Roer re-applied for relief, "and be danged if I didn't have to wait 5 weeks before they would give me anything." Now Mr. Roer feels he made a mistake in waiting until all of the money had been spent, as the family "almost starved to death" before relief was granted. Surplus commodities were greatly appreciated by the Roers; the canned beef which Mrs. Roer prepared with potatoes and onions was especially liked by all members of the family.

On WPA, Mr. Roer worked on the airport road and the swimming pool and at Eagle Point Park. For about a year of the time since he has been on WPA, he has worked at skilled labor and received from \$70 to \$72 a month. Since last summer, however, he has worked at common labor, receiving only \$48. At present, he works on the brush-clearing project 3 days a week. From this project he gets most of his fuel by paying \$2 a load for the hauling; during his free days he cuts it into pieces suitable for the heater,

He has noticed that when the men at the brush-clearing project gather around the fire with their lunch pails, meat is seldom seen. Usually the men have jelly on their bread; "when men do that kind of heavy outdoor work they need meat." Workers with big families, however, can't afford to buy meat with an income of only \$48 a month. The Roers use each week a bushel of potatoes, boiled for lunch and fried for supper. While Mr. Roer much prefers work relief to direct relief, he feels that his family is really no better off financially than families on direct relief who get rent, fuel, clothing, and medical care, in addition to groceries. The school children, Theresa and Francis, need clothing. Theresa's one uniform and Francis' one suit are cleaned and pressed at night in an effort to keep the children looking presentable, in spite of their poverty.

Mr. Roer cannot see much hope for relieving unemployment so long as the purchasing power of workers is kept so low and new machinery and the



speed-up system constantly reduce the number of workers required. "Higher wages and shorter hours would help some, but not enough. Wars won't help either, only to give some of the capitalists a chance to make more money." Mr. Roer holds only one thing against President Roosevelt: "the destruction of those pigs a few years ago when there were so many poor people in need of food." In Mr. Roer's opinion, all the economic theories in the world don't explain or excuse the destruction of food.

# THE URBAN DEPRESSION

Watson  
Family  
Interview

February 1938

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**Mr. Watson 28**  
**Mrs. Watson 30**  
**Johnnie 3**

**Interviewing completed**  
**February 16, 1938**

Guy Watson has been on either direct relief or work relief most of the time since his marriage 4 years ago, though he is at present employed in a local battery factory. His employment prior to the depression has been with construction contractors, and of a highly seasonal nature, averaging only 7 or 8 months out of the year.

Mr. Watson, 28 years old, is large and healthy-looking. He has a ruddy complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes. Boyish in his appearance and reactions, he blurts out his ideas impulsively without a great deal of thought. Mrs. Watson, 2 years older than her husband, is more mature in her thinking, and expresses her views with more clarity and humor than does Mr. Watson.

Having left school at 16 after completing the ninth grade, Mr. Watson worked for paving contractors until 1928, when he was employed at the Stevenson Company where he worked for 2 years, repairing phonographs. From 1929 to the beginning of CWA in November 1933 he worked irregularly on road construction, filling in with occasional odd jobs during the winter months.

The Watsons were married in September 1933 and made their first application for relief in November. Mr. Watson was certified for common labor on CWA almost immediately. After his layoff from CWA in March 1934, he worked on a road construction job for a private contractor for 2 months. In June he reapplied for relief and was assigned to the lock and dam project where he continued until the late spring of 1935. In July 1935 he was hired in the packing room of the Mississippi Milling Company, but he had worked only a short time when the men went out on strike. Mr. Watson had joined the union and supported the strike. He resumed work at the mill in the fall of 1935, only to be laid off again in December.

The Watsons reapplied for relief about 3 months after Mr. Watson's layoff from the Mississippi Milling Company; he was immediately certified for WPA and was placed on the dam in July 1936 at \$48 a month. After working about 7 or 8 months on the dam he was transferred to the rock quarry. During the time that Mr. Watson had worked on projects, he had constantly sought work in private industry. His efforts were finally rewarded when the State employment office referred him to a battery company in September 1937.



Mr. Watson is enthusiastic about this job and considers it by far the best he has ever had. The boss has promised an increase in wages, and the future looks quite hopeful "unless the unions start trouble." The factory is unorganized, and Mr. Watson hopes that no attempt will be made to unionize it, as the company moved from "down east or somewheres to get away from labor trouble." Though he joined the union at the Mississippi Milling Company, he has little confidence in the union's ability to better working conditions in Dubuque, because the town is controlled by a "few big shots who have all the money and control the Chamber of Commerce."

Mr. Watson is unusually frank about his feelings in respect to relief. Though he disliked the idea of having to seek aid, he felt no embarrassment whatever about going to the relief office to make his first application. "We needed help; the money had been appropriated for needy, unemployed people, so I went after it." Mr. Watson was anxious to get off relief, as "I know the money will have to be repaid some day and my son will have to help pay for it."

Mr. Watson much preferred work relief to direct relief and never objected to any assignment, no matter how hard the work. Some men turned down the lock and dam project because some of the projects in town required lighter work, and it was not necessary to pay \$2.50 a month on transportation.

Mr. Watson is enthusiastic about all recovery legislation with the exception of relief to farmers. The administration, he believes, has favored farmers to the detriment of working men in industrial communities. In his opinion, Iowa farmers have always been prosperous and have had reasonably good crops; "for the last year or two they have been excellent. After all, " he says, "the farmers depend on the working man and as long as the working men are employed, the farmers get along all right."

# THE URBAN DEPRESSION

Crumbaugh  
Family  
Interview

January 1938

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### **At Home**

<b>Mr. Crumibaugh</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Mrs. Crumbaugh</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Marlene</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Antony</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Patience</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Philip</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Lynnet</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Rose</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Martha</b>	<b>4</b>

### **Away from home**

<b>Lucy</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Dora</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Harold</b>	<b>18</b>

### **Interviewing completed January 18, 1938**

Mr. Crumbaugh, with his shaggy snow-white hair, looks older than his 58 years; a network of little broken veins shows through the skin of his cheeks and nose; the pupil of one eye, its vision lost when Mr. Crumbaugh was only 7 years old, is slightly smaller than the other, and the eyelid droops. He is a broad and heavy-set man, who moves and talks with a heavy slowness.

In 1930 after he had been forced to sell the last 114 acres of his farm--a mortgage on 100 acres had been foreclosed in 1926--Mr. Crumbaugh came to Dubuque with his wife and the seven children then living at home. Two daughters were married and away from home, and Antony stayed behind to work for a while on a neighbor's farm.

When he came to town, Mr. Crumbaugh had about \$1,200, the amount realized from the sale of the farm beyond what was necessary to pay off the mortgage, he hoped that this fund would tide him over until he could find work in Dubuque. But he has had no private employment except a few odd jobs, none lasting so long as a week. When this sum and amounts secured by cashing in insurance policies had been exhausted, Mr. Crumbaugh applied for relief. Since 1933 the family has been at least partially dependent on direct relief grants, work

relief, and Mr. Crumbaugh's CWA and WPA employment. For more than 2 years he has been steadily employed on WPA projects.

His acceptance of the present situation has in it something of defeatism; he is not wholly satisfied with his present job or with his present earnings, but he "wouldn't know where to look" for other work. In fact, he has never applied for factory work in Dubuque; it has been his feeling that there were no jobs available. He is handicapped by his age and by his lack of any sort of experience as an industrial wage earner. Perhaps he is still more handicapped by his feeling of helplessness; he does not know how to look for a job, or where.

It was in 1909, the year of his marriage, that Mr. Crumbaugh purchased his first farm land -- 114 acres. Until the early twenties his farming was profitable, especially during the war years, and from time to time he made a number of new investments; in additional acreage; in livestock, farm equipment, and buildings; in stocks, bank accounts, and insurance policies. He estimated that the value of the farm, including livestock and equipment, was at one time \$50,000.

By 1920 Mr. Crumbaugh was carrying a mortgage for \$25,000, the first loan having been secured when he planned the building of the new house. From 1920 on, he had ever increasing difficulties. That year a tornado caused losses involving about a thousand dollars. One or two summers later all but three of the hogs died of cholera. Meanwhile, during the depression of the early twenties land values were steadily declining and prices of farm produce going lower and lower. Within this same period, the bank in which he had a savings account failed and paid out only 15 percent of the total deposits.

In 1930, burdened with debts and threatened with foreclosure, Mr. Crumbaugh sold his farm; he realized enough to pay off the mortgage and other debts, and he had remaining about \$1,200. From the spring of 1930 until the spring of 1933 the Crumbaughs lived on the amounts secured from the sale of the farm and from the cashing in of insurance policies, plus earnings from odd jobs. When the Crumbaughs applied for relief in 1933, they had exhausted available resources, and run up grocery and doctor bills. Two of the children were working: Antony had managed to go from one farm job to another, keeping

rather steadily employed, and sometimes contributing a little to the family; Marlene, who had gone to country school until she was 16 but had never attended school in Dubuque, was earning \$3 a week at housework. The younger children were still in school. Mr. and Mrs. Crumbaugh are both anxious to make it clear that they did not apply for relief until it was absolutely necessary to do so. But, having come to this necessity, they applied for assistance without any special reluctance--"there was nothing else to do."

Before the inauguration of the CWA program Mr. Crumbaugh had some work relief, for which he was paid only in grocery orders. Then for several months he worked on the CWA airport project, earning \$15 a week. The Crumbaughs consider this work the first "real help" they were given. On completion of the CWA project the family received direct relief until Mr. Crumbaugh was assigned to a WPA project in November or December 1935.

During the past 2 years he has worked on various WPA projects--in a county stone quarry, on park clearing projects, and "out in the sticks" clearing brush. Working 3 days a week, he earns \$48 a month. Out of his wag~s he must pay \$2.50 a month for transportation to and from work. Mr. Crumbaugh much prefers WPA work to direct relief; as he says, "I like working for what I got, but I would like to get more." Mrs. Crumbaugh believes that "there's nothing like private work," and that the family could manage much better if Mr. Crumbaugh had one of the factory jobs, some of which, she understands, pay as much as \$100 a month. The Crumbaughs would consider even \$80 a month a reasonably adequate income.

Harold, Mr. Crumbaugh's son, left school when he was 16. The following summer he was sent to a CCC camp. Both parents were glad for him to be in camp, for there was little chance of his finding private employment, and they feel that young people who have no work become discouraged even more easily than older men and may "get into mischief." At camp the boys had "good food" and

learned a great deal in various training courses. Though the work was strenuous, Harold is such a husky fellow that "it didn't phase him." And Harold's earnings at camp were a great help to the family. Harold left the camp only at the end of 13 months and because he was determined to join the navy.

Mr. Crumbaugh approves of the present administration because it has "at least tried to help the farmers." He believes that the AAA accomplished its purpose of increasing farm incomes, but does not approve of having lands "laid idle" or "taken out of production." Though he has heard many people "hollering about over-production," Mr. Crumbaugh thinks that if all employable men had jobs paying reasonably good wages, they would be able to buy everything that could be produced. As far as he can see times are no better than they were in 1930, when he first came to town. Certainly he has no greater hope now than then of finding a job in Dubuque.



# **THE URBAN DEPRESSION**

**Beuscher  
Family  
Interview**

**January 1938**

## **FIVE FAMILIES IN DUBUQUE: THE URBAN DEPRESSION**

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### **At Home**

<b>Mr. Beuscher</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Mrs. Beuscher</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Paul</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Katherine</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Jeannette</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Bob</b>	<b>21</b>

### **Married and away from home**

<b>Charles</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Celia</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Butch</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Eileen</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Helen</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Caroline</b>	<b>32</b>

### **Interviewing completed December 13,1937**

Mr. Beuscher, 62 years old, had been working for 29 years for the Dubuque railroad shops when they closed in 1931. He was recalled to work at the shops after he had been unemployed for 4 years. Tall, gangling, weather-beaten, he stoops forward when he talks so that he may follow the conversation with greater ease, for he is more than a little deaf.

Mrs. Beuscher is 2 years younger than her husband, She is the mother of 11 children, but has found time to make dresses and coats and suits, not only for her own family, but also for customers outside the home.

As they "look back on it," Mr. and Mrs. Beuscher scarcely know how they did manage to get along during the time that he had no regular work. The irregular income from Mrs. Beuscher's sewing continued, though she was forced to lower prices until earnings averaged no more than \$3 or \$4 a week. For a year after Mr. Beuscher lost his job in 1931, the family's only cash income was the four hundred seventy-odd dollars obtained from the insurance policies and Mrs. Beuscher's irregular earnings, as contrasted with the predepression regular income of about \$130 a month, Mr. Beuscher's full-time earnings.

Mr. and Mrs. Beuscher agreed that application for relief was a virtual necessity. Mr. Beuscher remembers going down to the courthouse for the first time as the hardest thing he ever had to do in his life; his hand was "on the door-knob five times" before he turned it. The investigation, which the Beuschers recognized as necessary and inevitable, was so prolonged that Mrs. Beuscher "really didn't think" that the family would ever get relief. But finally, after about 2 months, a grocery order of \$4.50 was granted. Mrs. Beuscher had long before learned to "manage" excellently on little, and though the order was meager, the family "got along" and "always had enough to eat." Mrs. Beuscher believes that investigators "did the best they could"; she resents only their insistence on the disconnection of the telephone, on which she depended for keeping in touch with her customers.

Soon Mr. Beuscher was assigned as a laborer to county relief work, for which he was paid, always in grocery orders, \$7.20 a week; this increased amount gave the family a little more leeway. Yet they were still without much cash. The family's garden, for which the city furnished some of the seeds and the plot of ground on the city island, added fresh vegetables to the

list of staples which alone could be purchased on the grocery orders; there were even some vegetables to be sold from house to house, and Mrs. Beuscher canned a little almost every day, just as the vegetables were ready for use. One summer she put up 500 quarts of vegetables.

Although the Beuschers never felt comfortable about receiving relief, it came to be more or less an accepted thing. "You know, you went down to City Hall, and had to wait in line, and you saw all your friends; it was funny in a way, though it was pitiful, too . . . People went down to the relief office, and talked about going, just the way they might have gone anywhere else."

The family received food orders for only a few months, as Mr. Beuscher was soon assigned to the CWA Eagle Point Park project as a laborer, earning 40 cents an hour. Later he worked on the lock and dam project at 50 cents an hour.



Mr. Beuscher cannot understand why there was so great a difference between the wage rates of laborers on work projects and those of skilled carpenters. Although he was glad to be assigned to projects, there was little essential difference in his feelings about direct relief and about "work relief"; he worked hard for his pay, but still felt that he was being "given something." He has heard many times that persons on relief do not want work and will not accept jobs in private industry, but he knows from project employees whose reactions were similar to his that such is not the case, except perhaps in a very few instances.

Although Mr. and Mrs. Beuscher "don't say the depression is over yet," times have been better for them since the late fall of 1935, when Mr. Beuscher was called back to his old work at the shops at the old rate of pay. Mr. Beuscher considers this "regular work," and, as such, far superior to relief work, especially as he now "feels more independent." Still, it is not as it was in the old days when 1,500 men were employed rebuilding damaged and outworn cars. Of the 130 men taken back at the shop, only 25 remain at work, which now consists of wrecking instead of reclamation, and no one of the 25 men knows how long his work will last.

Mr. Beuscher has only one suggested solution for the problem of unemployment: persons of "wealth" should be persuaded to invest their money in industries that might increase or create new employment. He believes also that there should be a better "distribution" of the money paid for commodities. But Mr. Beuscher does not hold "radical" ideas. At one time there was quite a group of Socialists in Dubuque; now the movement has "died out."

