

ORAL HISTORY T-0428
INTERVIEW WITH: ISAAC GURMAN
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DEPRESSION ERA PROJECT JULY 29, 1974

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REIDY: This is Jerry Reidy. As part of the oral history program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, I have with me today Mr. Isaac Gurman who will be talking about the Depression and his experience at that time. Will you please start now Mr. Gurman by giving us some information about this time?

GURMAN: In order not to have a rambling discourse on this, I will talk about the period of November 1932 to November 1933. At the beginning of the Depression there was a small cadre of social workers who were given the responsibility, and it was an awesome one, of getting programs started in order to alleviate the misery and the poverty and the oppression of millions of Americans at that time. I joined the Bureau For Men in 1932 and stayed with it until 1966 as its executive director. In November of 1932 the Bureau had a caseload of 8,000 of so-called non-family men. It operated two lodging houses for men with a capacity of around one thousand. It operated a farm of one hundred acres, which eventually became the area of the small arms plant. It had a work program of its own during which all able-bodied men had to work at least one day a month for the food or money that they got. We had about 140 employees. About 60 of them so-called case workers. All along, the period was a very exciting one and a very depressing one.

As I look back upon it, it seems to me almost impossible to visualize the chaos that prevailed throughout this country at that time and the meekness of the people who waited in line all day long to be called in order to receive their grocery order or their restaurant order for a week. I recall very few disturbances and we saw eight hundred to one thousand men a day. As I look back upon it, we were so involved with getting the structure of the various organizations put up, we were so ignorant of the basic causes why we had a Depression, there was such a wide gap between those of us who were involved in the social welfare area and those who had so-called leadership in the community, that when we spoke at all, it was regarding procedures. It seems to me as we go on in this whole field of human welfare, what arose at that particular time was the recognition that voluntary agencies alone could henceforth no longer carry the load of the ups and downs of our economic system. But we saw these people as individuals and what we were afraid of was the formula dedicatedness of all public programs. However, out of this terrible chaos the Wagner Act came, housing was first thought of for the poor. Social Security was envisioned, various health programs came into being. But it should be remembered by future historians of this period that there were millions of people who were caught in this tragic period of our country who were guinea pigged before these programs started. Now let me try to give you a picture: To begin with, there is a map at the St. Louis Bureau For Men indicating where every one of our clients lived. Naturally, it is a concentrated picture. Most of the areas that were involved at that time

have since been torn down. The old Mill Creek area. Chestnut Street, Lawton, where the St. Louis University is now involved, we had hundreds of men staying in dingy residences living under appalling conditions. We knew they were appalling. There was little we could do at the time. With the help of Monsignor Butler, who was head of the Catholic Charities, we founded Ozanam Shelter for men. We obtained army cots from the army, blankets from the army. There was a wonderful feeling among all people to be of help because most people were marginal at best economically. The difference between the so-called case worker and his client was one pay check and it was understood by all of us that that was the difference. The total picture of the welfare program at that particular time is best obtained through the pictures of that area, which I am certain can be found in the morgues of the Globe-Democrat and the Post-Dispatch. To see Hooverville and to remember it is just a picture that is unbelievable. The tin shacks, the huddling of people together, the dirt, what was used as food, is just unspeakable to think of, and yet, we lived through that because we felt that there was hope for the country. At the present time, I do not believe this country could survive without tremendous upheaval if that same condition prevailed again there would not, there could not be the same docility on the part of the citizens involved. Everyone speaks of the effect of the World Wars upon this country. There is no doubt that they have been tremendous. It is my own feeling that what this country experienced during the Depression and the generation that grew up beyond that has left a security consciousness that has removed the so-called "frontier spirit" from this nation and perhaps forever. Now that I am an old man, I find it almost unbelievable to be interviewed by a young man for a job who questions me regarding a pension program. When we were young, to begin with, we thought we would never get old and the idea of security was never built into the consciousness of this country. Perhaps it should have been, but the Depression has left a tremendous impact on that generation. That generation, who were, let us say, middle-aged at that time. Our older young people are now passing from the scene. But the lessons of the Depression, I think, should be a very careful part of our total history or else we will miss all the political implications that have arisen since that time. As a matter of fact, I think that what I can remember from that period, and I remember it most vividly, and I would suggest to the history department at the University of Missouri, or any individual scholar, that the files for the Bureau For Men are extremely rich in the correspondence, in the plans, in the meeting minutes of the meetings that we had at the time, our fumbling for an answer and it will show both our resourcefulness and our ignorance in handling these particular problems. The St. Louis Bureau For Men perhaps more than any other agency was intimately involved in this through the sheer numbers of its clientele. Aside from its local responsibility toward its clientele, it was also involved with the national transit program of some nine states. In those days, every train of empty box cars would carry from two hundred to five hundred men and boys and women going nowhere, but going from and leaving someplace. Everyone came to the city. The countryside was totally denuded of its young and our prisons and our reformatories began to fill up at an alarming rate with these naive young people who got themselves into a variety of difficulties and the underlying cause of it all was this horrible Depression and their inability to cope with it. It seems odd to me now in looking over what concerns the social scientists today, such as drugs, alcoholism, homosexuality, lesbianism. None of that entered our consciousness because it was not of the priority. There is no doubt that there was some drugs, there was much alcoholism, there was much homosexuality, and there was probably just as much lesbianism. But the country at that particular time could not afford to think of those as its major problem. Its major problem was to get money into the hands of people so they could buy the necessities in order to live.

I would suggest that anyone who is interested in this period examine the booklets and studies that were made at this time which there is one entitled, Missourians on the Move. It is a study of the intra-state transient men and boys applying to the Bureau For Men in April of 1934 and August of 1935. There is a booklet entitled, St. Louis Youths in the Labor Market and the Wage and Hours of Employed Youth. This was done by an organization known as the St. Louis Youth Commission which was actually a committee of the St. Louis Bureau For Men. There is a case work book which was put out for the help of our own personnel written by myself entitled, Non-Family Boys on Relief and one called Casework With Homeless Men and Boys^ also put out by myself at that particular time. St. Louis University asked me to set up a program at their school of social work, which was then new, to give courses to the staff of all agencies on how to deal with the tremendous case loads they all had and it was my honor to be the first man to teach such courses. Again, all I can do here is to tell you where to find these things. It is impossible for me to give you my emotional experience at this time, none of which has been dulled by the time that since passed. It shaped my whole life, it has colored my entire philosophy. I do not expect the young to be able to live it vicariously, but to understand it is to examine the studies, the minutes of the meetings, the procedures and what have you, which were formulated at the time and did not have the benefit of second thought and reexamination.