

When a
Nickel
Was as
Big As a
Pie Plate

By
M.D. Morris



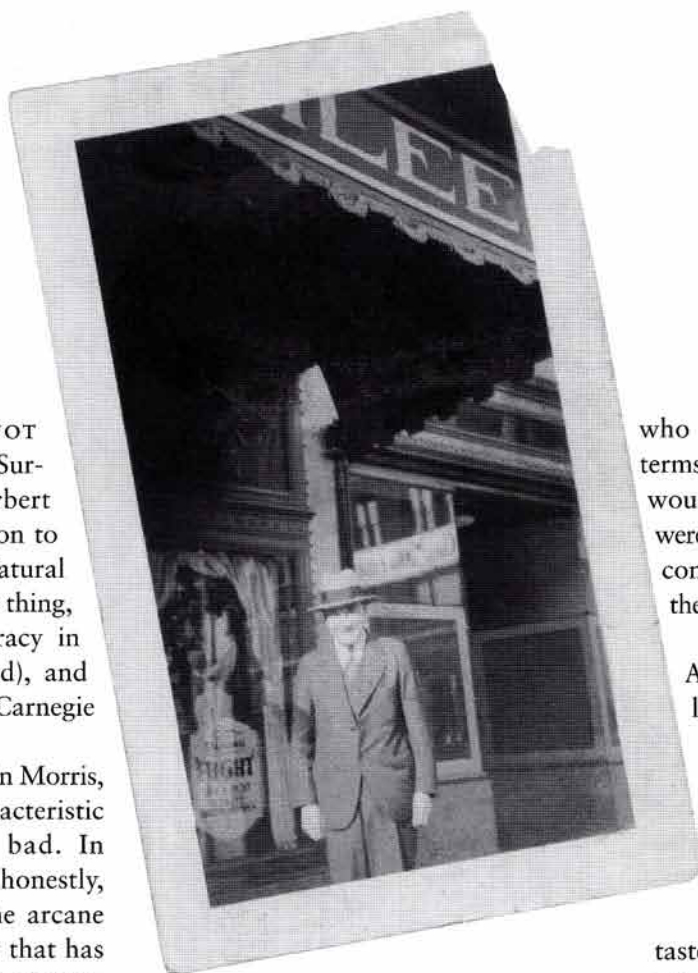
An unemployed man sells apples on the street during the Great Depression.

CHARLES DARWIN DID NOT ORIGINATE THE PHRASE, "Survival of the Fittest." Herbert Spencer coined that expression to describe Darwin's term "Natural Selection." Both say the same thing, and apply with equal accuracy in nature (as Darwin delineated), and in economics (as Andrew Carnegie later wrote).

My father, Abraham Lincoln Morris, "AL," personified that characteristic through good times and bad. In surviving he always dealt honestly, without ever resorting to the arcane book-cooking and chicanery that has so recently infected 21st century commerce. Adroitly he used both ingenuity and resourcefulness to keep our family afloat, and to eventually survive the Great Depression.

Shocked out of his comfortable upper middle class existence, my father was abruptly confronted by the same disaster that befell nearly everyone in this country, and later everywhere. Some people were unable to cope, only to fall by the wayside. Others were overwhelmed and just drifted. Many sought, but found, little help. A few kept their senses and made for themselves a way to ride out the Depression. Of those, this is the story of how one man among them managed survival.

By a quirk of circumstance, my father became the sole owner of a pair of millinery stores (boutiques in today's terms) in New York City in 1910. Quickly he consolidated them into one at a new address and named it Rosemor, to honor his new bride, Rose.



He was a rugged individualist with experience in neither that trade, nor retail, but he was determined to make a "go" of his windfall opportunity.

AL established Rosemor in Harlem, an area destined to become the Mecca of the black community. The store was a block away from 125th Street, the central artery of a mixed middle-income neighborhood of Italians, Irish, Jews, long-time Americans, and a healthy growing segment of African Americans.

Papa was an affable chap who easily made friends with his neighbors. He learned the fashions and fancies of the locals, including the passing females. A woman wore a hat during the week, a better one on weekends, and had a Sunday morning style-setter. AL also found the sources: The epicenter of the ladies hat manufactory was 38th Street between 7th and 9th Avenues. He soon sorted out the decent people who built a better bonnet,

who also offered better prices and terms. (Those good-will connections would resurface usefully later.) They were all sweat-shops in those days, a condition soon to be exacerbated by the oncoming Depression.

With the store as collateral, AL floated a low interest, long-term loan from the Chatham and Phoenix National Bank. He also had a willing asset in Rose herself, by coincidence a trained milliner who would, on occasion, handcraft an original hat for a preferred customer of good taste. Ready made hats sold off-the-rack for a hefty \$1.98 and \$2.98 each. Those helped my father build and run a thriving business that provided a comfortable home for the couple, and as we came along, for my older sister and me. It all might have gone on forever, but it was a microcosm of Wall Street and the national economy, and the flow rushed inexorably toward the falls.

F. Scott Fitzgerald best described the Roaring Twenties. His word pictures of the Jazz Age come alive to put you right into the scene. And while all that was going on, market players happily bought stocks on margin, and sold them on credit. Rosemor was no different. Bagfuls of hats came in from 38th Street on consignment and went out quickly one-by-one on credit. Lots of traffic, all those numbers on paper, but little hard coin in the till. Early in 1930 the shell imploded, bankruptcy closed Rosemor

Photo Above: AL Morris in front of the Fox Detroit Theater, 1930.

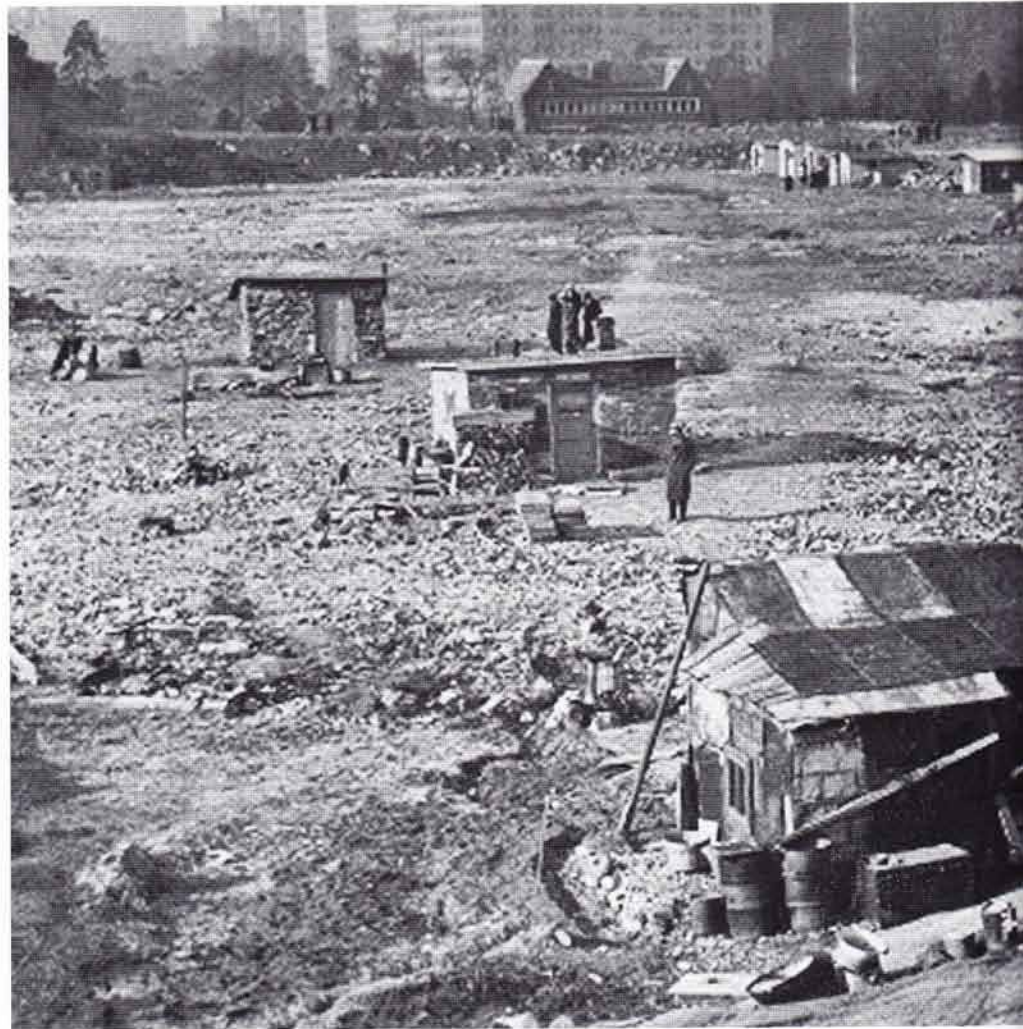
out, and left my father with only his family obligations and an indomitable will power.

At first, things slowly went downhill as our unreplenished resources dwindled. Rather than waste his time seeking no longer extant employment, Pop put his handicraft skills to use. He did odd jobs of long postponed repairs at the pharmacy, the tailor shop, and the Chinese laundry, all former neighbors of Rosemor. With those finished, he did some for our apartment building until maintenance money dried up everywhere locally.

When my mother volunteered again, Pop ginned a workable plan with her. She had a wealthy younger brother who took a huge hit in the crash, yet managed to emerge among the affluent. His penury plus Papa's pride precluded any financial aid from that source, but he was amenable to allow this sensible deal: maternal grandmother rusticated in a costly nursing home at uncle's expense. By moving her in with us, uncle was guaranteed "24-7 mother-care," and monthly we accrued somewhat less than the home's check would have been. Stoically my mother accepted that burden, doing more than her share to keep us going, but our family life was never again the same.

To get by, some families threw rent parties. They'd offer some sort of stew, washed down with prohibition beer or bootleg booze, play Victrola records and invite anyone in who'd ante-up a dollar each at the door. At evening's end they might have the rent left after expenses, cleanup, and pilferage. We preserved our pride by neither giving nor going.

The far less fortunate were dispossessed for rent default. They sought refuge and common cause by moving to a "grew like mushrooms" community of shanties cobbled-up from packing cases, big boxes, and tin sheets. The inhabitants called that unfortunate, unsanitary, unhealthy, unsavory village in Central Park Hooverville in "honor"



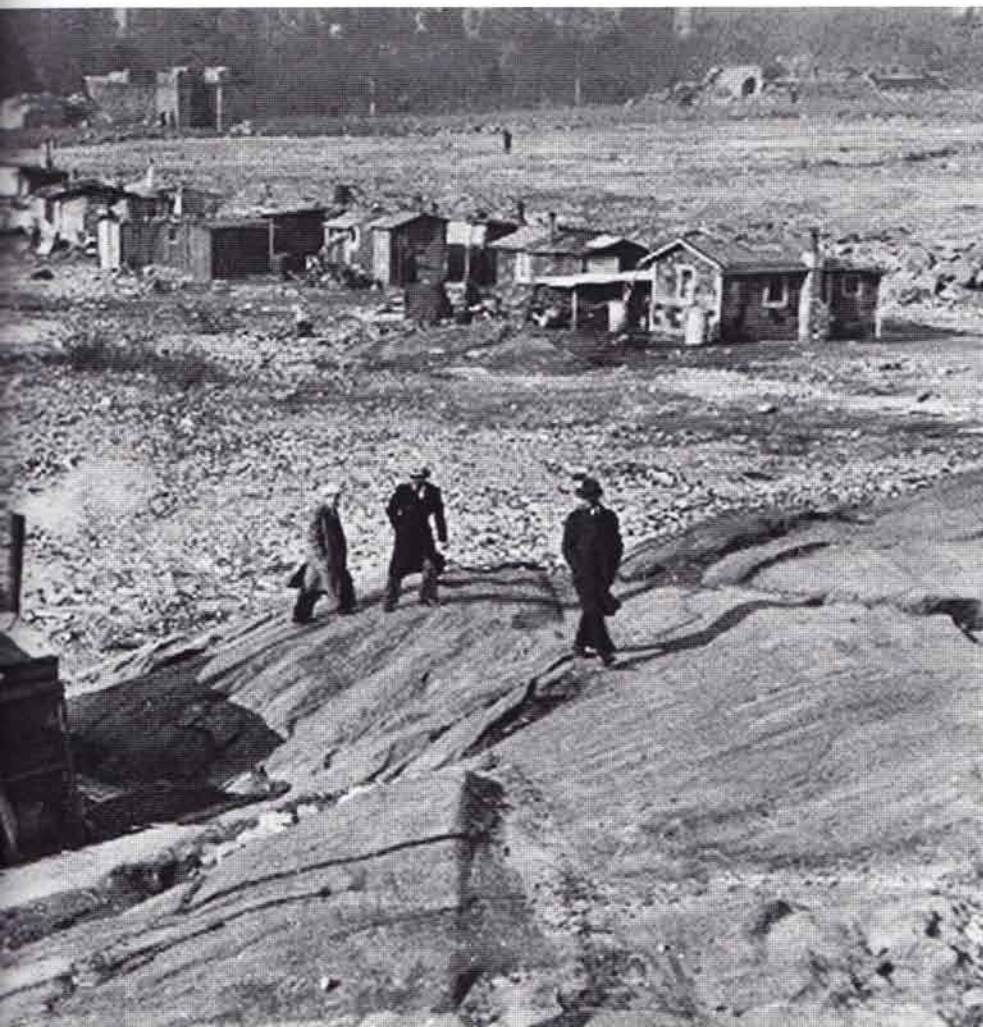
"Hooverville" shantytown in Central Park, New York City.

of the President they earnestly believed had put them there.

People walked the streets abjectively, seldom smiling. They had a shabby look about them that made even a sunny day seem gloomy. Hungry men stood in breadlines or at soup kitchens provided by the Salvation Army, private charities or church groups. In Harlem, religious leader Father Divine helped his following, and anyone else in need, to nourishing meals for under 10¢. Men carried posters stating, "Not charity, but jobs," but from where were the jobs to come? Signs like "Will work for food," begot a more positive response.

Papa devised a unilateral "understanding," a sort of self-styled quid-pro-quo with the Horn and Hardart cafeteria entity. Whenever he could

accumulate \$1.25, he'd treat me to Sunday dinner after a day in a park or museum. We'd go to our same "convenient place," at 6th Avenue near 42nd Street, where nickels were the only tender. We'd always order the same supper. When others who could afford to be in there would buy their kids franks and beans, Pop and I would each savor a cut of roast beef with sides of stewed corn and string beans, downed with water, for 12 nickels (60¢) apiece into the slot. For the last nickel we'd split a Hershey bar while we rode the "L" (elevated railroad) home. The days he had no loose change, he'd "let the Automat help out." One slotted nickel gave two bread slices. Hot water was free, and when it was enhanced by a great glob of ketchup



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and a pinch of salt it would yield a thin but tasty tomato soup. In the summer, he would add sugar and water to the ice and lemon glass, prepared for the iced tea slot faucet. That would make a refreshing lemonade for a hot day.

A nickel went a long way in those days when the composite likeness of Cheyenne warrior Two Moons was pressed on the “heads” side, and the American buffalo was on the “tails.” When we had one, a nickel would beget a ride on any form of public transportation (except the 5th Avenue double-decker bus with the open top in summer; that was always a dime). It did include all ferries. A nickel could buy a shoe shine, an ice cream cone, a cigar, a Coke, a candy bar, the *Satur-*

day Evening Post, or any other weekly magazine, a Neidick’s sidewalk-stand orange drink, and it really did suffice as a tip for a two bit lunch. Newspapers were 3¢ each, tabloids (the *News*, *Mirror*, and *Graphic*) were 2¢.

Many men sold good red juicy apples from street corner boxes under preprinted signs, “Unemployed, Buy Apples 5¢.” My father eschewed doing that because he felt he’d be taking a spot from someone who needed it, while he could find himself something else. In the early 1930s, if there were any jobs available, the prevailing rate was 40¢/hour, except for farm and road workers who never got more than 10¢/hour.

Consistently Papa believed it better to “search for an opportunity” than to

spend time protesting or pleading. When all odd job possibilities vanished, he fell back on a stint he had done as a bookkeeper. He went back to his 38th Street hat factory connections. Those that remained had difficulty keeping up with records, books, taxes, new government regulations, and the like. There he knew both the business and the skill, so for a while he managed an adequate living keeping books until he worked himself out of work.

Although it appears as if AL had insulated himself and family from the Depression decade dangers, all four of us were always painfully aware of the events: engulfing us in New York City; impinging upon us in the whole of the nation; and occurring in the rest of the world, all of whose aftershocks trickled down upon us.

The 1932 elections overwhelmingly established two huge changes. First, the 18th Constitutional Amendment prohibiting alcoholic beverages (the Volsted Act) was repealed. Legalized “booze” thus became taxable under the aegis of each state’s Alcoholic Beverage Control authority. It put an end to rum-running, bootlegging, speak easies, related forms of racketeering, and gangland violence. All that mob money slowly made its way into government coffers, toward recovery programs; and the FBI was relieved to find the time for more urgent issues. The second major change was the landslide election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who immediately set about turning around socio-economic conditions.

In an uphill undertaking that required the full decade to World War II, FDR tried to take the potentially explosive unemployed youth off city streets and put them into camps working to conserve our natural environment, (CCC); to employ idle artists and performers to uplift the national spirit, and decorate the deteriorating national scene, (WPA); to stop the eroding infrastructure, (PWA); and to slow the economic decline, (NRA); among other curative emergency programs, after

grams, after the bank holiday. Large construction projects jobs like Boulder (Hoover) Dam helped to alleviate other effects of devastating disasters like the Dust Bowl. No one was exempt from personal tragedy.

Though Papa remained focused on guiding our survival, he always sought a nugget of humor to ease the sting from any unfavorable situation. I recall returning one dinner time, soaked in sweat, cheerfully proclaiming, "I missed a streetcar, so I chased it to our corner; but I saved a nickel!" Pop's rapid reply was, "You should have chased a taxi cab and saved 85¢."

Cinema and cigarettes became the two titanic elements that bucked the times and the trends. Alone or in groups, idle men having little to do with their hands, smoked heavily. It was easy to "bum a butt," or buy a pack for a dime and drag a few minutes of pleasure out of it. For those who still had them, tobacco stocks went up as did the shares of movie makers.

With no work, deeply depressed conditions, and much free time, it took great effort to resist the urge to seek physical and emotional refuge in a movie house. A 15¢ matinee ticket allowed escape from the woes of the world, staying warm (or cool), and getting lost in fantasy. And most theaters permitted smoking. Movies thus became my father's next green field.

Through an old friend's grapevine, Pop learned of an opening for a position as maintenance manager at the Fox Detroit theater. He had no movie-house or maintenance experience, but he was a natural leader who knew how to deal firmly, but gently, with people working under him, and deal positively with those above. Solely by correspondence, and on the recommendation of his connection, he convinced the general manager. Immediately he was on a Greyhound bus to Detroit. There he led a force that kept that town's largest cinema clean and ready for dreamers before every next day's opening. On the job, learning came easy. Soon he was

innovating systems and methods to do the job better and faster. Responsible work went well, and the steady paycheck came home every week for nine months; until he came home for Christmas.

Lost in a grandmother-mother-daughter matriarchy, I was in an endless struggle for breathing space. Papa's return, even for that short vacation was Mount Ararat for me: My pal and role model was back, the world was right! During his brief holiday, the wholeness of the family, my emotional need, combined with his desire for quality of life made him decide to stay home. With no other options in hand, Papa resigned from Fox Detroit by mail. He chose again to accept the challenge of unemployment; then got down to "work out my own salvation."

The fertile field at that place and time was still the administrative sector of the motion picture industry. Pop and I would walk around midtown pondering a strategy. Evenings in Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen, men would build a charcoal fire inside an empty 50 gallon oil drum, set off the ground on three bricks. In it they'd roast big potatoes to sell for 10¢ each. Hand held in newspaper, one would make a hefty meal. As we strolled and ate, Pop's next venture became obvious to him.

Movie distributors rented their productions on reels, in cans, to local movie houses. Depending upon the cast or the flic, rental cost for selected pictures was a pre-set percentage of the house daily gross income. Left to their own devices, most exhibitors were reasonably honest, but to be absolutely precise about the daily count on all price levels, the distributor assigned a live, field auditor to verify the ticket numbers, or even check with a hand held counter. My father had no problem snagging a checking job with Metro Goldwin Mayer's distribution finance facility because by then he had actual movie-house experience to add to his longtime bookkeeping skills, augmented by his happy ability to get along with occasionally unfriendly people.

Pop had found the niche that became his safe harbor. A paying, useful job with changing venues, most times reasonable contact people, and consistent work protocol. With that job he saw our family safely through the Depression. He had planned to leave it after hard times past, but then World War II exploded. By then he was too old for service, or to retrain into manufacturing; he stayed with checking until the war's end. He had taken root. As years rolled on he had a job. AL didn't always work every day, but he did make "one buck more than I'd need." By then, older sister and I, each established on our own, were no longer his responsibility. He just wanted to loaf in Central Park.

As we both grew older, occasionally some sight or sound would pluck a chord and trigger talk about the Depression days. Once I asked my father how he managed to maintain his focus and his humor to keep going through those tough times. After a significant pause, he told me there were three driving forces in his emotional makeup: First was his Byelorussian ethnicity that enured him to hardship and privation; Then in his early teens, near his home in Michigan's upper peninsula, he lived for a time with the Menomonee Indians, where he said he learned more about life in those few months than all the rest of his days; Finally, he was determined to enjoy the good life, "...that surely shall come after this storm is over."

Abraham Lincoln Morris, personification of resourcefulness and ingenuity, died at age 80, contented in knowing he managed by his own devices to keep his family fed, clothed, and housed adequately to survive the Great Depression. ■■

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