

The Great Depression: Begging

The following excerpt from *American Life Histories, 1936-1940* describes the Garrett family of Asheville, North Carolina. Like many depression-era families, the Garretts struggled day to day to get enough to eat and clothe themselves. Mr. Garrett, described as a "hard worker," had not been employed for nine weeks. The four children had not been to school in five weeks. How did the depression impact the lives of the Garrett family? How did Mrs. Garrett respond to the circumstances the depression had forced upon her family? How do you feel about her response?

View Mrs. Garrett's entire interview. Use your browser's Back Button to return to this point.

Four Garrett children, the oldest a girl of fifteen, huddled at the door of the principal's office in the public school. When asked why they had been absent from school for five weeks, the children could give no intelligible answer. The idea uppermost in their minds was that their mother had told them to ask for free lunches. They were scantily clad for a November day. Their clothes were clean, but they seemed to have on little underclothing and to possess neither coats nor sweaters. Their shoes were full of holes. The group was obviously undernourished, thin, pasty of complexion, anemic. One of the teachers said, "They look just like poor little rats."

The principal reached for the telephone. He called the State Aid worker assigned to the school. "Mrs. Holt look up the Garrett children; you know the address," he said. "Find out why they have been absent from school for five weeks, and why they wish to be put on the free lunch list. They are always asking for something."

A few minutes later the worker parked her car near a large, yellow house on a sparsely settled street inhabited . . . mostly by negroes. A muddy road led to it. On its door, a fly-specked, weather beaten, yellow card, hanging aslant, announced, "Quarantine, Measles." The small boy who stuck his head out at Mrs. Holt's knock was thickly broken out with a rash.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Garrett came out and stood with her visitor on the windy porch. She was a thin woman, about thirty-three years old, with a pasty complexion, and projecting teeth. Her hair was much too yellow - drug store gold. Although the morning was raw and cold she wore a thin, sleeveless summer dress and no wrap.

"Yes, I live here," she said, hugging herself to keep warm; "me and my husband and our six children live in three rooms, upstairs." . . .

She explained the children's absences. No, they had had measles long ago; it was the children under school age who had it now. "My husband had been out of work for nine weeks," she declared. "When we was asked to leave the cabin

whar we wuz livin;" pointing to a tiny, log house in a hollow across the street, "we tuk the children and went to my brother's at Emma looking for work." That was five weeks ago.

"No'm, we didn't find no work. But my husband and me tuck in washin'. He'd go out and get the clothes, and help me do them. Then he got back on WPA and we come back to Asheville." She explained that her husband had been on the WPA for some time. The project on which he was working "run out," as she put it. So he had been suspended until work could be found for him elsewhere.

"He has always been a hard worker," she maintained. He had worked in the mills. He had been a clerk in a grocery store at \$12 a week. He had been a truck driver for the city, and for various transfer companies. Before the depression, he had made \$20 a week.

"We lived real well then," she said. "But there wasn't as many of us."

But for the past few years he had worked mainly as an unskilled laborer on the WPA.

"He goes back to work tomorrow," she said. "After he gets his first pay check, we can get along. Buy we haven't had anything in the house to eat for a week now but two messes of flour and a peck of meal. The children has nothin' for breakfast but a biscuit or a slice of corn bread. They come home after school begging for food. But I can't give them but two meals a day. That's why I want to get free lunches." . . .

Several weeks later, Mrs. Garrett, head tied up in a white cloth, was found trying to divert a fretful two-year-old. The room was clean, but rather bare, with shabby linoleum on the floor. The bed was without sheets or pillow cases. But the mattress was covered by a unbleached coverslip. The blankets were clean, but mostly cotton. . . .

She was still feeding the older children on biscuits, corn bread and now "white beans," but not bread and beans at the same meal. Christmas had been a great help to the family. "Nine dollars a week for eight people," she maintained nevertheless, "doesn't go far, after rent and coal has been paid for."

But they had "gotten" a bag of coal from a dealer, whose trucks her husband loaded on his way from work. Still, "It was mostly dust," she complained. "When it was poured into the stove it flew all over the room, until we was all sneezing."

The Christmas basket from a civic organization had helped. But again she said, "How long could five dollars worth of groceries last for eight people?"

However, she had profited by various Christmas charities.

"I stood in line before Pender's Shoe Store two or three hours Christmas morning. You know he allus gives away shoes on Christmas. I got three good pair for the children. And I got two of the boys into the dinner given by the Y.M.C.A. While I was waiting for them I went by the doctor's office and asked the nurse for a sample bottle of cod-liver oil for the baby. She give me three bottles of it," she narrated.

It is easy to see where the Garrett children get their habit of always asking for something. As far as charitable organizations are concerned, their mother knows all the answers.

She enumerated her further needs. "You know," she said plaintively, "I ain't got but one sheet, no pillow cases, and only one towel, and I asked the Red Cross, and the welfare department both, for some. It looks like someone might give me a few towels; they are so cheap!"

Finally she admitted that she was seven months advanced in pregnancy, and as yet had no layette. "The Red Cross," she declared, "used to give lovely ones, all put up in a nice basket. "But," in a aggrieved tone, "they told me as how they didn't have any more."

Source:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/timeline/depwwii/depress/begginq.html>