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Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_

Local events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_


Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_

→ Jacksonvill AL 1972 - Present

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(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

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# Alabama and the Great Depression through the Eyes of a Child

by

Thomas P. Lamb

Alabama History

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The time span of 1930 to 1940 would prove to be one of the most difficult times in American and Alabama History. The catastrophic events surrounding the Great Depression hit the southern states particularly hard. Richard Kirkendall gave some insight into what the American people faced, "The American economic system experienced a very big change in a very short period of time, a change from prosperity to depression and the crisis was a severe one."<sup>1</sup> My father, David Oscar Lamb, was born during this dark period of Alabama's greatest test of faith, courage and strength. His childhood memories, as they relate to the devastating impact the depression had on the southern working class, are the focus of this paper.

Those who lived through the Great Depression would like to forget about those hard times in their life. The impact was not only financial, but as Kirkenhall put it, "Many people suffered psychologically as well as economically. Some lost confidence in themselves; others lost confidence in the system and/or its leaders."<sup>2</sup> As historians, this period offers unique insights into the development of an emerging state. The Great Depression was a time of hardship, grief and despair for Alabamians. It was also a time for this young state to build character, preparing it for the future hardships of world war. James Agee clearly captured the feeling of the time when he wrote, "The world is not my home, I'm only passing through, my treasure and my hopes are, all, beyond the sky, I've many friends and kindred, that's gone, along before, and I can't feel, at home, in the world, any more."<sup>3</sup>

Most Alabamians did not feel at home in the country that they had grown to love and trust. The American middle class, who had felt relatively secure in the mid 1920s,

now faced economic disaster. One author wrote, "They had behaved as they had been taught they should if they wished to succeed. They had obtained an education, worked hard, saved some money, and invested some. But now they were experiencing failure rather than success."<sup>4</sup> The Alabama middle class was hit especially hard by the depression. My father and his family, who enjoyed a comfortable standard of living prior to the depression, were not out of reach from the hardships of the times. The depression and the changes it brought into the life of my young father were to permanently shape his life and millions like it.

I asked my father when his family first felt the impact of the depression and he said, "It was in 1935 when my pop's first store went out of business. I remember loading excess canned goods into his model "T" Ford truck. My pop was forced to consolidate his three stores into one."<sup>5</sup> Two months later, his father's last store went out of business and his family faced the reality of a depression. This was not uncommon for the day, rather, it was the rule. Birmingham, my father's hometown, witnessed the closing of numerous steel mills and mining companies. Factory job losses led to small business bankruptcy and the results trickled down to every individual in the city. Birmingham's economy was soon in shambles and its citizens in dire straits. One historian concluded that Birmingham was "the worst hit city in the United States."<sup>6</sup>

This conclusion led me to my next question. Why would experts select Birmingham from a nation of failing cities? My father was very straight forward with his reply and sure of its correctness, "Because Birmingham was an industrialized city and dependent upon the success of its steel mills and mining companies. When they failed,

Birmingham could not sustain itself.”<sup>7</sup> Alabama’s steel and mining industries hit their peak in 1927 and by 1935 their mere existence were questionable. Even as a child, my father could see the signs of decline, “I knew that the mills were in trouble. You see, the steel mills had big smoke stacks that constantly belled thick, black smoke and when the smoke stopped, so did the city. As a boy, those are the things I noticed.”<sup>8</sup>

The vivid and saddening description of my father’s memories of a city in decline led to my next question, “How did the depression affect you as a boy growing up in this hard hit city?” Having been afforded all the luxuries of a modern middle class family, I would have thought it to be much harder on the children than on the adults. To my surprise, my father answered, “I thought nothing of it really. I still played with other children and went to school every day. We always had food on the table and for the most part I was content with my lot in life.”<sup>9</sup> So even in a city plagued with record unemployment, poverty and an utterly failed economy, its children continued to live as they always had - day to day.

During these trying times in Birmingham, people needed an escape from reality. This escape came in the form of sports for many children. Sports have always served Alabamians well as an outlet from the real world and in a world consumed by depression, sporting events were welcomed with open arms. Alabama has long been blessed with legendary teams and star athletes. The 1930s were no exception with the likes of Jesse Owens and Joe Lewis. A native of Alabama, Jesse Owens inspired millions by winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympic Games. The University of Alabama’s Crimson Tide football team also sparked the hope of many in Alabama when it marched to two national

and four conference championships. My father, a tremendous boxing fan, found his inspiration in a young black hero named Joe Lewis. Lewis, also a native of Alabama, captured the imagination of every young boy in the nation when he won the Heavyweight Championship of the World. The thought of Joe Lewis, being a black champion prior to desegregation and the civil rights movement, guided me to my next topic. How did my father and his family feel about a black man defeating the white heavyweight champion? The question irritated my father at first and he answered in a defensive tone, "How did we feel about Joe Lewis? He was our hero and that's all there is to say about that."<sup>10</sup>

Joe Lewis may have been a hero, but I wondered how the average black American was treated during the depression years. I asked my father if he knew any black families when he was a child. He told me that he knew many black families and that he had listened to the Joe Lewis championship fight at a black man's house. Was race an issue in those years? My father replied, "People in those days had enough to worry about and didn't bother themselves with what we now call the race issue."<sup>11</sup> The irritation in his voice ended the discussion on that topic, so I moved on.

A nation in need, a state in poverty, who would step forward and lead the country out of her misery? That leader would come in the form of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Frank Freidel said about Roosevelt, "Few national leaders have figured so largely and so controversially in the destinies of the South as did Franklin D. Roosevelt."<sup>12</sup> World War II ultimately broke the stranglehold the depression held on the country, but few will deny the impact President Roosevelt had on restoring hope to its desperate citizens. Reestablishing a nation's pride in the midst of a dark depression was no easy task.

President Roosevelt's ideas and programs were instrumental in ending the depression. The programs affected the whole nation and were not limited to one section of the country. The south, with its own distinctive culture and economy, required a different approach for recovery. Dr. Freidel shed light on the subject when he wrote, "only a drastic program of recovery and reform would be likely to bring the south its full share of national prosperity. Further, it would have to be a program especially tailored to fit the distinctive functioning southern economy."<sup>13</sup> President Roosevelt's programs fit the bill and brought jobs and a renewed pride back to Alabama.

Did my father feel the impact of these enormous federal programs? Glad to be off the race issue, my father outlined his memories on a few of the programs. "Of course we felt the impact of President Roosevelt's programs, they were everywhere. The WPA (Worker's Progress Administration) and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) come to mind."<sup>14</sup> The Worker's Progress Administration employed thousands, working primarily on public works programs such as road improvement and construction. The Civilian Conservation Corps, one of the more interesting programs of the time, involved the youth of the nation. It took as its members young men from the ages of fifteen to twenty-four and served as a quasi-military organization. The CCC conducted various types of labor, but focused more directly on forest protection, erosion control, irrigation, landscaping and recreational construction. As a child, my father remembered seeing men in military vehicles and uniforms riding all over town working on various projects. He thought they were actual soldiers at the time.<sup>15</sup> The CCC provided young men an opportunity to work and help their families recover from the ravages of the depression. Jobs were virtually



nonexistent at the time and the program provided income, structure and discipline for many of the nation's youth.

At the close of the thirties, the state and the nation were blessed with a more confident, self reliant people. Never again would Alabamians be caught off-guard and unprepared for hardships in their lives. Unknowingly, the depression helped them prepare for their next test in the form of world war. With war in the air, the mills and mines reopened. Stores and other business quickly followed suit and the recovery was well on its way as the nation prepared for the future. I asked my father if he could remember the end of the Great Depression. Yes, he said , "My mama got a raise."<sup>16</sup> History holds the dates, facts, and specific economic conditions, but for a boy in Birmingham, Alabama the experience simply ended with a raise.

## *Interview Questions*

1. What did your father do for a living?
2. Do you remember when your family first felt the impact of the depression?
3. What, as a boy, made you realize there was a depression in Alabama?
4. Do you remember when Joe Lewis won the heavy weight championship of the world?
5. How did your friends and family react to a black man defeating a white champion?
6. Did you know any black families? How were they treated?
7. Do you remember any of President Roosevelt's "New Deal" organizations?
8. Do you feel that the Great Depression hit the middle class harder than it did the poor?
9. Some experts say that Birmingham, Alabama was the hardest hit by the depression. Do you agree?
10. At what point in your life did the depression end for your family?

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## ***TIME LINE***

### **1920-1924**

- women given the right to vote
- a time of economic prosperity
- “friends and neighbors” politics
- Democratic Party in control

### **1925-1929**

- creation of state docks in Mobile
- Klu Klux Klan comes into political power
- prohibition

### **1930-1934**

- the Great Depression
- Roosevelt’s “New Deal” liberalism dominates politics
- the Scottsboro boys incident
- Hugo Black is elected to the Supreme Court
- Will and John Bankhead represent Alabama’s power in the federal government
- 200 Alabama schools close

### **1935-1939**

- League of Women Voters collapses
- Crimson Tide wins two national championships
- Tennessee Valley Authority created
- federal programs aid the south in the form of AAA, WPA, PWA, CCC and NRA
- Joe Lewis wins the heavy weight championship of the world

### **1940-1944**

- end of the Great Depression
- major economic improvement
- World War II
- women enter the work force
- Alabama’s General Holland M. Smith commanded the Marine Corp Fleet in the Pacific

### **1945-1949**

- end of World War II
- liberalism dominates state politics
- Jim Folsom elected governor
- GI Bill passes
- unions come of age
- birth of Dixiecrat Party
- revival of the League of Women Voters
- Chuck Yeager breaks the sound barrier

### **1950-1954**

- Cold War begins
- Truman elected president
- Korean War
- Civil Rights becomes an issue
- liberalism starts to decline
- organized labor reaches peak of power
- China emerges as a power
- Folsom elected to another term as governor
- major league sports integrated
- Soviet Union develops nuclear weapons

### **1955-1959**

- Atomic age
- racial tensions rise in the form of violence
- Rosa Parks arrested
- Martin Luther King, Jr. leads Civil Rights movement

### **1960-1964**

- Bay of Pigs brings Cold War to its peak
- NASA comes to Huntsville
- Baker v. Carr
- unions decline
- race issue dominates politics
- John F. Kennedy assassinated

## **1965-1969**

- Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated
- Voting Rights Act
- University of Kentucky signs black player
- Vietnam War
- Lurleen Wallace elected governor
- Wallace family dominates politics in Alabama

## **1970-1974**

- Watergate scandal
- Vietnam War closes
- George Wallace assassination attempt
- MOWA established to protect historic rights to tribal lands
- Hank Aaron breaks Babe Ruth's long-standing home run record
- Bear Bryant dominates college football

## **1975-1979**

- Jimmy Carter elected president
- steel industry declines in Birmingham
- UAB Medical Center develops
- "the machine" enters politics

## ***TIME LINE - David O. Lamb***

### **1930-1939**

- born in Birmingham, Alabama
- the Great Depression
- Crimson Tide wins two national championships
- steel mills close in Birmingham
- federal aid programs come to Alabama
- Joe Lewis wins heavy weight title of the world
- death of his father

### **1940-1944**

- end of the Great Depression
- family sees financial gain (raise)
- World War II
- mother working in a department store (women in the work force)

### **1945-1949**

- end of World War II
- family moves to Georgia
- GI Bill passes (joins Marine Corps)
- Chuck Yeager breaks sound barrier (father's hero)

### **1950-1959**

- votes for Truman
- Korean War
- marries Myra F. Vaughan
- uses GI Bill to attend University of Georgia
- received degree and commission into the United States Army Infantry

### **1960-1969**

- Bay of Pigs incident
- Civil Rights Movement
- first and second tour in Vietnam

### **1970-1979**

- returns from Vietnam
- Watergate scandal
- family moves to Jacksonville, Alabama and retires

## ***END NOTES***

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2. Ibid., 10-11.
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8. Ibid.
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11. Ibid.
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