

RACE AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
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UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

Race and the Great Depression

Introduction

Samuel Proctor Massie Jr. (1919-2005) was an African American chemist who worked on the Manhattan Project, a research initiative that led to the creation of the first nuclear weapons during World War II. He also became the first African American to teach at the United States Naval Academy. A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, he was a gifted student and graduated from high school at the age of thirteen.

In this activity, you will read an excerpt from Massie's autobiography, in which he describes his experience in urban Arkansas during the Great Depression. Unemployment during the Great Depression was very high for all Americans (around 25-30%) but it was particularly high for African Americans (as high as 50%). The Massie family was fortunate because both Mr. and Mrs. Massie had jobs. Yet, the family was too poor to send Samuel to college. Read what Samuel did when he realized that.

To learn more about Samuel Proctor Massie Jr. see:

<https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/samuel-p-massie-jr>



Photograph of Samuel Proctor Massie, Jr., with parents Samuel Proctor Massie, Sr., and Earlee Jacko Massie (National Dunbar Alumni Association Historical Collection)

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Hardscrabble

Getting an education up through high school was easy. Getting more education was a hardscrabble. The Great Depression had hit during my high school years at Dunbar. Money was scarce in the Massie household even though both my parents had secure teaching positions. Dad was making forty dollars a month, and mother was earning thirty-five dollars. President Roosevelt had closed the banks, so their pay was issued in warrants that had to be cashed at a discount. As a result, there was no money left at the end of the month to pay for a college tuition.

My math teacher in high school would always write on the chalkboard, "There is no royal road to success." And I knew, too, that (as I have told all of my students over the years)—*the dictionary is the only place where success comes before work*. So I had to go to work. Working at Horton's grocery store for a year after high school gave me some important educational lessons that helped me throughout my life.

North Little Rock was rigidly segregated. Blacks and whites had virtually no contact with each other—but there were exceptions. The only white family in our ordinary Black neighborhood was the Hortons, who owned and ran a grocery store across the street from my house. Though they had a small apartment above the store, they lived mostly across town in the segregated white neighborhood. The only job I could get, being Black and so young, was working at Horton's.

Horton's was founded by a southern white man, Fred R. Land, who despised Blacks but seemed to like my family. Because my father was a school teacher, he called him "Fesser," not by his first name Sam or Mr. Massie, and he called mother, "Miss 'Fesser." Land was also the nighttime chief of police. He had a liquor distillery on his property, and in the evening you could smell the odor of mash. But nobody interfered because he was a police chief. Arlie Horton, a young white clerk who worked for Land, married Land's daughter Mary. Land sold the store to his son-in-law and that's how it came to be called Horton's. Because I was smart, honest, and didn't smoke, Horton hired me at two dollars a week. I clerked inside and delivered groceries—the basics—meat, flour, bread, sugar, vegetables, and fruits. Horton sold good meats, and I was able to buy groceries at a discount for my family out of my weekly salary—getting meat at five cents a pound, a sack of flour for ten cents, and bacon for ten cents a pound.

Horton often got drunk from his own liquor, and Mrs. Horton, out of her anger over her husband's "messing around," would occasionally fire me on a Saturday night. Then he'd come and hire me back on Monday morning. "Proc, don't let Mary bother you," he'd say. Because of my math ability the Hortons allowed me to open the store each morning, to handle the cash register, and do some bookkeeping. Working at Horton's gave me some managerial experience. But most of all, working at Horton's and serving their white customers gave me social understanding, relationships, and experiences with whites that served me well later in life.

After a year at Horton's, I was able to start college. The tuition at Dunbar Junior College was fifteen dollars a semester, which was all I could afford. Dunbar Junior College was run by the Little Rock school district and consisted of a collection of rooms at one end of the second floor at the Dunbar High School building. Some of my former high school teachers were my junior college instructors. Miss Weaver continued to prepare me rigorously in advanced mathematics, which was probably my strongest subject at the time. Some of the courses were more advanced versions of the high school subjects, but in college I had my first chance to study economics, psychology, and sociology. In fact, I almost decided to change my interest in chemistry to sociology.

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Samuel Proctor Massie, Jr., "Catalyst: The Autobiography of an American Chemist," page 16
(National Dunbar Alumni Association Historical Collection)

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Questions:

1. Why was Massie not able to go to college right after high school?
2. What was Massie's experience like working at a grocery store? What do we learn about this grocery store and its owner from Massie's story?
3. How would you characterize Massie's relationship with Mr. Horton?
4. What do we learn about racial relations in Arkansas during the Great Depression from this document?
5. What do we learn about the African American experience during the Great Depression from this document? Based on what you know about the Great Depression, was Massie's experience unique or typical?