ORAL HISTORY T-0124
INTERVIEW WITH LEAH TRATTNER AND SYLVIA EHRLICH
INTERVIEWED BY STEVE WEBB
DEPRESSION ERA PROJECT
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The interview was taped on July 5, 1972 with Mrs. Sophie Trattner and her daughter Mrs. Sylvia Ehrlich, concerning the Hooverville settlement in St. Louis during the Depression. Mrs. Trattner is in her eighties and presently lives at 7247 Amherst Drive in University City, Missouri. Mrs. Ehrlich is the wife of Dr. Walter Ehrlich, presently a professor of history at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Mrs. Trattner and her husband owned a dry goods store prior to and during the depression years. It was located at the corner of Bates and Virginia avenues in south St. Louis.

WEBB Were there a lot of ethnic people, for example, would you have found a lot of people from the eastern portions of Europe?

EHRLICH: No. There were a few but not many, that's how men got into trouble. Did my husband tell you about Sam, this character?

WEBB No.

TRATTNER: He didn't tell you about Sam?

WEBB That was a fellow who worked for you?

TRATTNER: Yes. We had that store like I said and one time this fellow come in raggedy clothes and he smelled from medicine. He just smelled terrible. My husband approached him and, oh, he had overalls in just pieces, torn to pieces.

EHRLICH: He could barely stand.

TRATTNER: And, he couldn't talk English very good, see, cause he was a Polish man, from Poland. And, he asked my husband right away whether he talks Polish. My husband could talk Polish, he says yes, so he talked to him Polish. I understood a little bit because my husband did come from Poland. I came from Russia, so I couldn't talk Polish as good. Anyway, he says, "I'm here", I forgot what he said how many years, and he's just going from city to city. He hasn't anybody here. And, he says, "I was very sick and they took me to the city hospital, and I just come out from the hospital and I'm hungry and I haven't got five cents to my name". "And I just kept on going from one place to another looking for anybody to wash the window, or something." You know, any little work, so he could get a few nickels and maybe a cup of coffee. But, he said, "everybody refused because I got these sloppy clothes and all, and then they were afraid to let me in". And, also the way he talked, they

knew he was not an American. So, he kept on walking; finally he saw this store and he came in. And he asked if he could do some work. He says, "I'll wash the windows." We had three big windows in the store. And he says, "Just give a cup of coffee, and just something because I'm hungry too". So, my husband says, "ok", he says, "I'll give you the coffee first." And, I had my mother-in-law staying with us. We lived upstairs above the store, we had a little room in the back. So he rang the bell and my mother only got to the top of the steps and he told her, "There is a fellow here who was very poor and he wants some coffee so fry him a couple of eggs and make him three or four sandwiches because he looks tike he can eat them. He's a big fellow. And, bring it down to the store". So she did, and he ate all that and he said well now he wants to, "I want to thank you for that but", he says, "I have no money to pay you, so let me wash the windows." So, to make him feel good my husband gave him the bucket with the water and a brush and he washed the two or three windows in the store. And then he went to work and my husband gave him a pair of coveralls and a couple shirts, and a couple suits of underwear and a few pair of socks. No shoes, because we didn't have no shoes for sale and he says, "Here, what is your name?" And, he says, "Sam". I forgot his last name.

EHRLICH: I don't think I ever heard it.

TRATTNER: I knew it, but I forgot. And, my husband says, "Where you going to sleep?" He says, "Oh, I sleep any place, any place, under a tree". It happened to be in summer time. "I come back, I come back to you." And he says, "OK, anytime, you come back".

EHRLICH: Excuse me, mother, for interrupting. He wanted to come back because he was extremely proud and he felt he hadn't earned what we had given him, and he wanted to come back and he could barely stand, he was so ill. And, we weren't looking for repayment of any sort, but he kept coming back time and again.

TRATTNER: And, we found work for him, just so we could give him something and give him a meal so he don't feel bad cause the Polish people are very proud I know that for a fact. They're very proud; they wouldn't let you give them anything unless they pay you back for it, see. And he was one of those. And he used to come in and he always washed a window, and we never washed a window before in our lives so often as we did when he was coming in. And, on Sunday he wouldn't come. So, every Sunday, you remember, we used to pack up whatever I made for ourselves whether it was chicken, whether it was roast, whatever it was, after we got through eating, we packed it up in a big bowl, didn't we?

EHRLICH: Well this was after he moved to Hooverville, You didn't tell about when he moved to Hooverville.

TRATTNER: That's right. And we just kept on going, where he was staying, where he was sleeping, we don't know. And finally one day he come up over, and he said he built himself a house.

EHRLICH: No, not yet. He lived with us. We talked him in to living with us. And being extremely proud, he wouldn't stay.

TRATTNER: He did stay in the basement, remember. . .

EHRLICH: Yea, well not for long, and after awhile he wanted to be on his own. There wasn't

enough work, we didn't have any work either, these were depression days, you know, nobody was working. There were no customers; how often can you wash windows? So he tried to get jobs in the neighborhood's hardware store and all; nobody had any work. And he said no, he didn't want to be a charity case. And this Hooverville was in existence and he built himself a house, now if you have a view -- have you seen any pictures of Hooverville?

WEBB I've only seen one.

TRATTNER: Well his house was the best one.

EHRLICH: Well, people lived, families lived. . .

TRATTNER: In cardboard boxes.

EHRLICH: Pepsi-Cola sign, a Coca-Cola sign or a corrugated box and they were satisfied with it. Glass, nails, everything all over the ground. He got this lumber; he got driftwood, and he built a little doll house. It was so small that you couldn't stand in it. But, it had two slabs one on either side -- on one he ate, and on the other he slept. He painted it green. You remember?

TRATTNER: Yes.

EHRLICH: He made window boxes and had live flowers growing in all of this rubble. He had a bucket a big bucket he made it like a stove. It was the only heated place in Hooverville. And the only place where they ever had flowers.

WEBB Nobody else had them?

EHRLICH: Nobody, else. We always included him in the family. Thanksgiving, Christmas, anything. And sometimes he didn't want to come; he felt like, you know, it would be like charity. So, we'd pack our baskets and we'd go down there.

TRATTNER: On Sunday, for his dinner.

EHRLICH: Yes, and one, only once could go in there with him. And we had, and we'd bring him dinner, and we'd sit down and eat with him in Hooverville, so he wouldn't be alone. And that's the only way we knew he'd have a good meal, cause he was a fine gentleman, and he was as honest and as clean as anyone could be. And he used to criticize the other people. He said, "they get drunk, they got their kids running around dirty", and he'd show us how, remember he'd pull out his underclothing, and he'd say, "I wash every night." You know my hands -- but he was trying to live his own life. Now you asked about ethnic groups. This is all built up. Someone called him a dirty Polack and drew a knife on him, and Sam killed the other man.

TRATTNER: Did he kill him?

EHRLICH: He killed him. He was acquitted; it was ruled self-defense. There were witnesses. But , the family of the other man threatened revenge. And that's when Sam left town.

TRATTNER: Yea, he came over once, he said, "I'm leaving town, and you'll never see me." I said, "Where you going?" He said, "I don't know where — if I can just get somebody to pick me up and take me to the next town - wherever I can get a ride to—doesn't make any difference to me where I go." And, remember Dad gave him a five dollar bill.

EHRLICH: Yea, and he left because of this trouble between the groups. The people who lived there, on the whole, compared themselves as strictly American.

TRATTNER: Yea. All American.

EHRLICH: And they had no use for anyone of foreign heritage, at all.

WEBB Were there foreign people who would have lived there if they hadn't been discriminated against?

EHRLICH: I don't think so. Because, we had an Italian community, remember not far from us and they, were hard up, three or four families moved into three or four rooms. They took care of each other.

WEBB You're talking about the hill area?

EHRLICH: No, oh no, this is far away from the hill area. This is close to the riverfront, there was a block or so in which a lot of Italian families lived. But, they took care of each other. And, other than that, it was a German community. Very German. And, on the whole, there weren't too many, who were extremely poor.

TRATTNER: No. No, there weren't because most around south St. Louis, everyone owned their own house.

EHRLICH: They had good stable jobs.

TRATTNER: They didn't make as much money when the Depression came along, they cam down on their wages and all that.

EHRLICH: There weren't too many who were without work entirely. But the people who lived in Hoover vi He, not only didn't have work, on the whole they didn't care to have work. They were without ambition completely.

TRATTNER: Most of all, they didn't care

WEBB Did you get the impression that these people lacked ambition or that they had been so beaten down by the Depression.....

TRATTNER: I think they were so beaten down that they just didn't care.

EHRLICH: Well, they also, their background was not good, they were — if they did make a dollar, rather than buy a loaf of bread or something or food for the child, they'd drink it.

TRATTNER: Or they'd go to the saloon.

WEBB You mentioned children in Hooverville. I was under the impression that there were, there was just an over-abundance of men living there alone.

TRATTNER: No, no, we saw many children living there.

EHRLICH: Little kids, I remember seeing running around the diapers hanging loose and dirty and everything. No, there were family groups. So Sam finally joined the CCC. (Civilian Conservation Corps).

WEBB He must have been young to do that?

EHRLICH: No, he wasn't too young, I think he was older than you were at that time, mother?

TRATTNER: I think he was about fifty. (This is about 1931 or '32).

EHRLICH: He always called you Mom, but I think he was older than you and dad. And how long ago, how long did it take for him to come back? Come back from Philadelphia; he walked back from Philadelphia. When he left, he was a sort of sickly fellow, he came back like a bull, muscles protruding and he walked from Philadelphia, I remember this because he wouldn't accept a ride. He couldn't pay for it.

WEBB So, all that pride.

EHRLICH: I imagine it was at least three to five years after he left. He came back, he and worked on the road all that time, CCC or WPA (Works Progress Administration) or whatever it was. And he came back and he said now this trouble has blown over and I want to stay here because this is my family. And it was the same story. "So stay, you're welcome, be a member of the family". But no, "I have to earn my keep, you know". And there just wasn't any earning your keep there just wasn't enough to do.

TRATTNER: So then he went away, we never heard from him.

EHRLICH: Don't you remember how he went away? My father finally talked him into accepting welfare.

TRATTNER: Oh, is that how, see I don't remember no more. I'm too old to remember that.

EHRLICH: And, I can remember like it was yesterday. And, the office must have opened extremely early because it was before breakfast that Daddy took him to the welfare office. And, he said he would accept welfare until he could find a job; he had never (done this in his life. This went entirety against his grain. But, we had talked him into it. So, they came back and the welfare people said yes, he was entitled to welfare but because he had not resided in St. Louis for a year or two before he was an itinerant case and they sent him to the itinerant office and they said yes, he was entitled to welfare but because he had formerly resided in St. Louis he was a St. Louis (City Welfare Division) case . Anyhow, he said to daddy let's go. So, my father figured, well, he's just disgusted and went home. And I remember breakfast just like it was yesterday. We all sat down and we had scrambled eggs and the whole works you know, and he got up. And then all this time that he was gone, when he lived in Hooverville, and when he went on the government projects he told my mother to keep his

clothes in the trunk. And she kept it. And after breakfast he got up and he pushed himself away from the table and he said, "Now, mom, give my clothes away." He said, "All my life I've refused charity; once I asked for it, and they won't give it to me, and I'm going out and kill myself because the world is not a good place". And I remember daddy, and Norman, and both rest in peace, my grandmother pulling on him, and the two of us crying and he pushed everybody out of the way and he went out. All of his clothing was marked with the name of our dry goods store. We notified the police and they had never found a trace of him.

TRATTNER: He was very — as poor as he was, he was very, very proud.

EHRLICH: But, this is your answer to the ethnic groups. Yes, they were prejudiced, very much so.

WEBB I was very interested, I had seen one picture of the shacks and the very small ones, I'm sure that none of them were very large. I was wondering whether you could describe some of the areas—-

TRATTNER: That's what I was thinking. Did anybody ever tell you where it was at?

WEBB I have a reference to the foot of Chouteau Avenue along the riverfront.

TRATTNER: No, I don't remember, I was talking to her before. It was either near Compton, Compton avenue or Neosho, around there — south somewhere but I cannot place it. And, I even told my daughter, Mrs. Ehrlich, I says, "You ought to call up Magnolia Police Station, somewhere on Magnolia. If there's still a station there, I don't know, I haven't been there for well, for maybe the last twenty years.

EHRLICH: More than that.

TRATTNER: More than that. It's close to Tower Grove Park, but there's a police station on Grand and Magnolia — used to be a police station. And, I'm sure, maybe, of course, the police are not there no more — those were so many years ago. But, I'm sure that they could tell you where it was — I don't remember. It's either Magnolia Police Station or Lynch Street Police Station. See Lynch Street runs around there south too. I think that's the only two police stations that were there. It's so long, you don't think that you have to know about it, you just drop it all together and it just slips out of your mind and a years a person goes through so many things that you forget about those things that are not so important. I imagine the Magnolia Police Station ought to know about where it was at; but I think it was around — it's close to Broadway -- so many; Compton, Neosho, and I don't know there was other than streets, you know. But, around Compton down there you ought to find out, maybe they can give you some clue to it, where it was at. But where exactly, I don't remember. . . wherever they found an empty place... They got a big cardboard box. They made like a doghouse sometimes, if they had more boxes, they made it higher.

EHRLICH: There was no community spirit.

TRATTNER: No.

EHRLICH: It was dog eat dog.

TRATTNER: And after Sam went away, we never did go there anymore. Those conditions lasted for awhile yet. They got better a little bit. So, I don't know what happened to the whole community. I don't know what became of it. After Sam was gone, we didn't have no interest. no business going down there.

WEBB Were there ever any organized relief measures for the people who lived in Hooverville? Did the Red Cross or the Salvation Army help them, do you know?

TRATTNER: I don't know. Because of the way they lived... The Red Cross annual relief would have been able to do something for them, I think they would have done. Because to come and see those little houses, one here with doors, and another standing there, you know, where the chimney sits on top, you know. It was terrific, you know. If they were able to give any help, I imagine that they would.

EHRLICH: I don't know. Other than people going for a free meal at the Salvation Army, I don't think they got any help.

TRATTNER: I don't think they got any, because like I say, if they would find any other place to let them live, they would.

WEBB They had to travel from Hoovervitle to the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army didn't bring, say, a soup kitchen, down there?

EHRLICH: No...I don't think so. I never heard of it.

TRATTNER: No, Sam never mentioned it. He never talked about his next-door neighbor, did he? The only time...when they had a fight with him.

EHRLICH: He did say that they were dirty and neglected the children, and they drank. It irritated him.

TRATTNER: He couldn't stand to see them so dirty. He said he didn't thinkthat American people should be so dirty. You remember he used to say that?

EHRLICH: Yes. Physically and mentally.

WEBB Sam had been an immigrant, right...first

TRATTNER: Yes.

WEBB And he had come over; do you think he had been sort of brainwashed as America, the Land of the Clean?

TRATTNER: I don't think so.

WEBB Or, was he...

EHRLICH: No, this wasn't his attitude with the people in our neighborhood. He had met other business people and he was well-liked, cordial and very...

TRATTNER: And honest...He was so honest. You could go out of the store and leave the cash register open and he was so honest, he would never take a penney. We always managed to give him a little money, a pack of cigarettes, and all that.

WEBB Now, the area that you lived in was predominantly German, right?

TRATTNER: Mostly Germans.

WEBB Then Sam would have felt sort of a closeness to them?

TRATTNER: Well, ... that I don't know

EHRLICH: Well, no, because, well, I am trying to think...yes, I guess most of them were Germans.

TRATTNER: Yes, most of them were Germans.

EHRLICH: Did he speak German?

TRATTNER: No. Just Polish, and very bad English.

EHRLICH: There weren't many who could talk to him really...just my grandmother. Yes, and Daddy spoke Polish. But everyone liked him. Everyone tried to get him to stay in the neighborhood, and be, just sort of a neighborhood handyman.

WEBB He was very individualistic, right?

EHRLICH: Yes.

WEBB You know, I was reading through the newspapers, and every once in a while you come up with some little sidelight information. And I found a place where it said that some of the people who lived in Hooverville made money by selling popcorn to people who were on sightseeing tours. Did you ever hear anything about that?

TRATTNER: That might be true. We don't know. But people used to come... it was something to see. I guess people who lived here for ages...it was something new for them. They never did see anything like that.

WEBB Do you think that a lot of people from St. Louis, say a11 over, would have wanted to go see Hooverville settlement, just to see what it was like? Or did people sort of mind their own business?

EHRLICH: I think people just minded their own business. They had enough of their own worries. They weren't too much concerned with their neighbors. No, when I said go slumming, I really think the people who may have gone down there were the quite wealthy. This was not such an unusual thing for anyone in the neighborhood. We were acquainted with Hooverville. We just knew it was there.

TRATTNER: Things were bad. Like she said...there was a little hardness.. people couldn't

make their payments, poor people, they had a little house and a couple of children, and they got along att right. And then when this thing came along, maybe the husband got laid off and many of them had their house taken away from them, so they just got themselves a tittle shack down there

EHRLICH: She's right. It was just some sort of dwelling and that's att.

WEBB How did they get food? Did they have to resort to stealing, do you think?

TRATTNER: Well, maybe so. I just don't know. But I guess maybe they went out and said, "I'll do this for you", and "I'll do this for you", and when you'd see a man coming with dirty and torn clothes, you could tell that he needs it, and many, many,...oh, gosh, I don't know how many came in...there was a hardware store, we were there, there was a shoe repair shop, and a saloon, and I don't know ...oh, I don't know how many men used to come in and say, "Can I have a cup of coffee? Can you give me a dime for a cup of coffee?"

EHRLICH: Yes, they wanted handouts...

TRATTNER: So, my hubby used to give them a dime or fifteen cents. He says, "You go and get yourself a cup of coffee." And. that is, if a man really looked serious about it. Sometimes a man would come in...I remember once when a man came in and said, "Can I have a dime for a cup of coffee?" So, my husband finds a dime and gives it to him. Instead of going to the saloon where he could get a cup of coffee, he goes and turns away and goes to another saloon across the street...and you knew he didn't get any coffee down there! So, that got my husband mad, so then the following day or so, this man comes in again. He says, "Mr., can I have a dime for a cup of coffee?" He says, "You come with me and I'll pay for the cup of coffee." So, he took him and was going to pay for the cup of coffee. He wouldn't go, because he didn't want the money for the coffee...he wanted the money for a drink. But Sam. He was really honest. He never drank. He never drank.

EHRLICH: No, he never drank. Did he chew tobacco?

TRATTNER: I don't remember.

WEBB Well, you know, I had another thought white you were talking, but it's left me for a minute.

EHRLICH: Most of them made their living, such as it was, by doing odd jobs, or living from handouts.

TRATTNER: They may have chopped a little wood for the stoves...because there was no gas for stoves or furnaces, you know, there were alt tittle stoves. And they used to come in and chop down a couple of trees and they'd cut up the wood and you would give them a quarter or fifty cents. That's what they used to do.

WEBB You owned a dry goods store at Bates and Virginia, right?

TRATTNER: Yes, Bates and Virginia. 502 Bates Street, right on the corner.

WEBB That would be the northeast side of the street?

TRATTNER: It would be the northeast side of the street, that's right. No, it was the northwest.

WEBB Northwest?

TRATTNER: Yes, it was northwest...the street was right there.

WEBB I am thinking of the residences around that area. Just to the west of you, say on Bellerive Drive, or Louisana...

TRATTNER: All around there was beautiful homes.

WEBB Yes, they are. Many of them are still there, very well kept up today. Would the people at Hooverville, like your friend, for example, or others, would they have gone to a private residence for handouts? Or, did they just limit themselves to businesses?

TRATTNER: Maybe, some would have. But he (Sam) wouldn't. He was too proud too proud to do that. But, maybe others did. I don't know.

WEBB Do you know if there were other cases, tike Sam...men who were too proud to accept charity?

EHRLICH: We don't know of any...but, I'm sure there were. Many. I'm sure that there were or there wouldn't have been so many suicides during the Depression.

WEBB I realty got that impression. People found a handy gas jet and turned it on...and jumping off the bridge...

EHRLICH: Well, the government did try to help those who wanted help. But people didn't have much patience. They gave up very easily. They had worked for a long time, and everything was wiped out overnight. You know.

WEBB That must be a hard thing to come to grips with. I have, obviously, never lived through that. But was it so bad for people...You know, tike Sam. He couldn't just take a handout. He had to work for it.

TRATTNER: Yes, he had to work for it. Even when he came out of the hospital... that first day when he came into the store, and he says, "I'll wash the windows." The windows didn't need washing. So, my husband, to make Sam feel better, he brought him a bucket of water and a brush and he washed the windows.

EHRLICH: And he couldn't even stand up, though.

TRATTNER: He was really a sick man. And he (her husband) gave Sam a few clothes ..shirt...and alt this here...And he went away. Of course, in the beginning, to be truthful, we didn't ask him to stay, because we were afraid. You know, after aft, he was a stranger. You know, in a business... we didn't know what he was liable to do. But then, after he had come

in a few times, we noticed how honest he was and everything else, we asked him to stay in our basement, and he did for a little while. But, then, he just wouldn't accept all this. Because there was no work for him to do.

WEBB I was just trying to think. The area around Bates and Virginia is primarily residential today. Were there any big businesses around that area that would have employed...

TRATTNER: No, there were two dry goods stores and a man and a wife, maybe the daughter helped out and that's about all. There was a shoe repair shop and I think a saloon, barber shop...on Meremec Street, you know, there was a furniture store, and it's still there, and a big dry goods store and a few shoe stores. There was a big church, I remember too, down there...on Meremec and Virginia.

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EHRLICH: Of course, in those days we didn't see many black people...not even in Hooverville.

WEBB Even the Depression society was so segregated?

EHRLICH: Yes.

TRATTNER: No, they didn't even dare to rent or to try to stay here. The black people.

WEBB That's realty interesting.

TRATTNER: Cleveland High School. That was the only high school in the south, except Roosevelt...took all from Broadway, alt the way up and all the way down to Holly Hil1s...way down through Holly Hills...through Carondelet all through there. It was a big school. But did you ever see a colored person?

EHRLICH: Never.

WEBB My wife went to Cleveland, too. She graduated in 1965.

EHRLICH: I graduated long before then!