

Review Essay: *Flood of Memories*, by George F. Armes and Lois Armes Lawrence

This memoir, a collection of family reminiscences, covers the years from World War I to World War II and its immediate aftermath. Though the book's emphasis is on the memories of a particular family, that family and the changes its members witnessed in American life are clearly representative of broader historical, cultural, and economic changes in this country. Anyone whose parents or grandparents were born in the twenties, grew up during the Great Depression, and came of age during World War II – arguably the most significant American generation since the Civil War – will find something to value here.

The book is aptly titled, since it begins with the 1937 Louisville Flood, an incident central to the childhood of both authors. The memories well up from there, spreading like flood water back to the twenties and forward through the rest of the depression and the coming war. Structurally, the book is not a continuous linear narrative; instead, it moves as memory does, associatively, connecting story to story because of character or theme rather than sequence. Chapters tend to occur in blocks focusing on a particular figure. For example, Chapters One-Eight center primarily on Mae Emma, the authors' mother, while Chapters Nine-Thirteen center on their older sister, Sammie. Chapter blocks are separated by anthology chapters entitled "Oft Told Stories." These chapters not only add anecdotes but bring in additional narrators or witnesses, thus lending the dimension that comes from multiple perspectives.

The strength of this book lies in its rendering of sharp, particular details. For example, during the depression, the family would arrive late to the local farmers' market, buying bags of apples at a cut rate when the farmers were tired and anxious to sell. Then family members would can jars of apple butter and apple jelly. In a similar story, the father of this clan, a railroad man,

would bring back bags of black walnuts from places he traveled in the course of his work day, and then the family would form a production line to shell the nuts. A lot of American families got through the depression years because of this kind of ingenuity and hard work. *Flood of Memories* evokes for us a time when “live chickens were carried home for supper with their legs tied together” before being beheaded, plucked and gutted (p. 179). Obviously, this was a different world than the one more prosperous Americans now occupy, though not necessarily a richer one.

Perhaps the most memorable image in the book is the one we get of the family patriarch, Archie, in the immediate aftermath of a tragic car accident in 1949. Despite a broken leg and ankle, Archie walks continually around the battered car, checking on other family members, until help arrives. He dies shortly after, and his death signals the end of an era. Family members move to different states to pursue their lives, a dispersal and unraveling which, again, mirrors the larger national pattern as America altered from an agrarian working-class culture to the industrial/technological empire it now is.

This reviewer, as someone who was born after World War II, was struck by how much opportunity has been bequeathed to us by the sort of people remembered in the pages of this book. When this generation is gone, as it soon will be, there is something strong and fine in the American character that will no longer exist. For those of us who remain, it is essential that we remember, and the significance of a book like *Flood of Memories* is that it will help us do so.

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