Excerpt from "The Story of Hooverville, In Seattle" by Jesse Jackson (1935)

This is a true story of my own experiences. I was one of the first twenty to build a shack upon the property of the Seattle Port Commission located upon Seattle's waterfront, bounded by Railroad Avenue on the east, Dearborn Street on the north, Connecticut Street on the south and the waterfront to the west, that was destined to pass through many difficulties, and grow to a little shanty city of six hundred shacks and one thousand inhabitants.

It was in October 1931 that I, a lumberjack, long out of employment, found myself out of funds, seeking relief from charitable institutions. The depression had just begun, and no national or state relief system had been set up, so the task of handling the relief of the needy was being attempted in a feeble way by charitable organizations that were not prepared to handle such a gigantic and unexpected problem, and naturally the relief given, through no fault of theirs, was pretty bad.

...I walked down the waterfront to the vacant property of the Seattle Port Commission where a shipyard once was located. When the shipyard moved to another location, it left behind concrete machinery pits plenty big enough to make a room, and plenty of scrap lumber and tin that could be used to build crude shelters, any of which would be a big improvement over the hard floors of the charitable institution... It was not many days before our numbers increased, and within thirty days the shanty town had grown to near one hundred shacks, and then we faced our first difficulty.

The Seattle Health Officials decided our shacks were unfit for human habitation, and posted official notices on our doors, notifying us of the fact, and giving us seven days in which to vacate... At the expiration of the seven days notice, at 5 am, just as daylight was breaking, in one of the heaviest downpours of rain that fell in Seattle that fall a regiment of uniformed officers of law and order swooped down upon us with cans of kerosene, and applied the torch. Amidst the confusion that followed, we salvaged our few belongings, and just as soon as the officers were out of sight, we returned and rebuilt our burned shanties.

A month later this performance was repeated. This time we did not rebuild, but dug in, instead. With any kind of a digging tool we could find, we shoveled the loose sand out of the concrete pits, over the top of which we placed tin for a roof. This time we knew that there would be no burn-out. The concrete and tin were fireproof and would not burn.

...In June 1932 the new city administration was inaugurated, and a committee of different city departments visited us and called us together. The spokesman for the party told us that we were going to be tolerated until conditions improved, but that they were going to lay down a few simple rules for us to follow and appoint a committee to enforce them. The rules laid down were most reasonable. The Health Commissioner decreed that we must get some material and build shacks on top of the ground and come out of the gopher holes. We laid down a few other simple rules covering sanitation. The Police and Fire Department heads were also reasonable.

The committee appointed was composed of two whites, two negros and two Filipinos.

After we were informed by the department heads, we went hurrying hither and yon in search of material with which to build more suitable houses. By this time the business houses had become more friendly to us and were very liberal with scrap lumber and tin, and the building of shanties got under way on a big scale. It seemed but a few short weeks until more than a hundred shacks were under course of construction.

...As several of us sat around an open camp fire one evening, one of the shanty dwellers remarked that "we must have a name for this place; we can't call it any old thing." One man spoke up with "this is the era of Hoover prosperity; let's call this place Hooverville." So the name given through sarcasm to the then President Hoover, has clung to this place ever since.

At the beginning, it was difficult to get a lot of fellows to consider regulations, and we discovered that some of our committeemen were unsatisfactory. A meeting was called and we displaced them with others. One of the new members is the writer, who perhaps is no different from the other, but was soon being called "Hooverville's Mayor." The new committee set about a more rigid enforcement of regulations and was ably supported by the city authorities.

When Hooverville was started in 1931 the business houses in this part of town were pretty hostile to us. They looked down upon us as a bunch of shiftless fellows, and no doubt wanted to be rid of us; but when they saw us begin the determined uphill struggle of building ourselves houses to live in, their attitude toward us changed...

...The shacks in Hooverville are built out of every sort of material, and all sorts of architecture are followed, as it suited the taste of the builder and the material he had to build it from. Some are no bigger than piano boxes, and some have five rooms. There is no gas or electricity or running water. Kerosene oil lamps are used for lights, and wood to cook and heat with.

...Hooverville is a colony of industrious men, the most of whom are busy trying to hold their heads up and be self-supporting and respectable. A lot of work is required in order to stay here, consequently, the lazy man does not tarry long in this place.

A big percentage of the men have built pushcarts, using two discarded automobile wheels, no tires, and any sort of a rod for an axle. They push these cars about through the alleys of the business section of Seattle, collecting waste materials, mostly paper, which is sorted and baled and sold to the salvage concerns, thus realizing a little each day. Others have made row boats, and fish in the waters of Elliott Bay for a living.

...I am mentioning our residents as men, because Hooverville is in the main sense the abode of "forgotten men." The city authorities have decreed that neither women nor children would be permitted to live here, so no more than a dozen elderly women, and no children, have ever lived here. The men are past middle age in life. Seldom is anyone living here who is under thirty years of age.

The population is a sliding population. It goes up and down with the seasons. In midwinter it is at its peak, somewhere near one thousand two hundred and fifty, and goes down in midsummer to one-half that figure.

...The Federal authorities carefully checked over the population last winter and found every race of people in the world here, and two dozen nationalities. Twenty percent are native born.

...We do not have a great deal of trouble in enforcing regulations laid down here. The most of our people try to do the right thing. Of course we, like all other communities, have our share of undesirables. They are for the most part those unfortunates who drink denatured alcohol or canned heat, and are commonly referred to as "dehorners." There are others whose craze for legitimate drink is so strong that they are also are troublesome. If it is humanly possible for us to handle our boozing element ourselves, we do so, if not, the City Police is called, and they must face the Police Court for punishment. The most unruly offenders must also suffer a punishment meted out by the residents of Hooverville. We collect a party of Hooverville residents and remove the offender's shack...

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