

Federal Writers' Project Interview of Henry Gill, between 1938 and 1939

Mr. Henry Gill, "Pres." (according to the company letterhead) general manager, secretary, factotum, of the Northfield Knife Company is in his garage this afternoon, deeply absorbed in an eight column, four sheet newspaper from which he looks up as I enter. After exchange of the amenities, Mr. Gill refers again to his paper, holding it out for inspection. "What do you think of his?" he says. Under the masthead The American Guardian is proclaimed the circulation, 43,201 (new subscriptions last week 418) and the legend "Our County – Not the richest and most powerful on earth; but the leader in all that's good true and beautiful on earth."

Ever 'ear of it?" asks Mr. Gill. "Chap brought it up from the fire 'ouse this afternoon. They got a bundle of 'em through the mail there, addressed to the Northfield Volunteer Fire department. Been comin' for the past couple of weeks from out west – 'ere, you can see 'ere – Oklahoma City.

"Near's I can make out, it's some new plan for the revision of the capitalist system. They've got it figured out that its lack of buying power that's responsible for the depression, and they're goin' to give every family 'ead and income of at least twenty eight dollars a week while 'e's out of work and a minimum of fifty dollars when 'e goes back to work, not matter what 'h does. They're also goin' to repeal taxes. Don't ask me 'ow they're goin' to get the money. When I read that far I got dizzy.

"you can see 'ere where they're collectin' money from gullible people. Subscriptions to the paper fun from a dollar to five. They got a bill before Congress they claim, and now what they're tryin' to do is elect their own representatives all over the county. They make it sounds very plausible.

"Look 'ere" (reading from the paper) "The American Foundation for Abundance (that's what they call the plan – the AFA) would no break up monopolies. It proposed that the public take them over and put them under scientific management for the common good. It does not believe that it is the part of wisdom to turn back from an industrial gains amount the people. The only intelligent solution of the monopoly problem is the public ownership and public operation of the monopoly. Let us go forward not backward.

"Sounds almost like Communism, don't it. Only it goes a bit farther than Communism. They believe in the New Deal but they don't think it goes far enough. Listen to this (reading) We are supporters of the New Deal as just a tiny step on the road toward a New Day. However, we recognize that if the majority of our people continue to be content with just tiny steps like the New Deal that it will be centuries before the people come into their own.

"You can 'ave the paper if you want. There's plenty of them down at the Fire 'Ouse. Most of the lads didn't even read 'em. One of the two of them – Ed Willette thought it was fine stuff. He was arguing' with Bob Hawley about it. Bob says if anyone paid him twenty dollars a week while he was loafin' he'd never do to work. Said he never made that much in the shop when he was workin' and he got along fine. Ed said it wasn't natural for a man to want to do nothin' and He'd get sick of it after a couple of month and want to go back to work. 'Well," Hawley says, 'It might not be natural for you, but it's

natural for me. You give me twenty eight dollars a week for the rest of my life, and see 'ow much work I'll do.' So there they were.

"Wouldn't it make you sick? What the 'ell are things comin' to I ask you? We've got to go back, that's what we've got to do. Either go back or broaden opportunity in some way. Go back to the old standards of livin', or open some new roads for industry. There ain't no more frontiers. Used to be when I was a young chap if dull periods came a man would go west. There was always opportunity our in the unsettled country. There ain't no more of that. The country's settled from one end to the other, and conditions are no better out west than they are 'ere.

"So what are people goin' to do? Maybe there'll be some new industry come along to stimulate things. Like the automobile industry did in its day. Some say television will 'elp.

"And if there ain't goin' to be nothin' like that we'll 'ave to lower livin' standards to where they used to be, that's all. People used to content with simple things. It don't seem possible today, I know, but there were people in day who used to actually enjoy workin'. I do myself, to this day, I like to get out 'ere in the knife shop and tinker around. That's mostly what I keep it for, as I told you before.

"It may be on account of the machines. A man don't make anything himself these days. He's just part of the machine, so 'ow can 'e take pride in 'is work? But aven after your work in the shop was done there was work for you 'ome. Cut wood, chop wood, milk cows – that kind of thing. Look at all these stone walls around the 'ills 'ere. 'Ow do you think they got 'ere? They didn't grow. They was put ther by the 'and of man, and slow, back breakin' work it was.

"Look at the timbers in my little shop our 'ere. Hewn out with an axe, every one. And better than sawed ones at that, because the axe strokes had the effect of makin' the lumber weather proof. All these big beams make with an axe. Think of the work, and the time it took. Well, there wasn't any rush, there was plenty of time.

"The only think I'm afraid of is that people will never consent to livin' under lower standards. They've been education to expect too much. Take away their cars, and their radios and they vacuum cleaners and there'll be the devil to pay. There'll be an up'eaval of some kind, that's what I'm afraid of. And maybe we'll end up like they did in Europe.

"Well all we can do it wait and see what 'appens, I suppose. 'Ow are you comin' along with the 'history? 'Ave you seen all the local 'istorians ? Mr. 'Uniston? Mrs. Goodwin? Mrs. Bunstead? You might go up to see old Mr. Curtis. I don't know 'ow 'e'd be to talk to, though. 'E' kind of 'ard of 'hearin', and a little queer besides. Lives all by himself in a little shack. 'E' kind of touched on astronomy, probably wouldn't talk about anything else."