## **SOMEPLACE LIKE AMERICA** AN INTRODUCTION

*Hobo Kenneth Burr, thirty-five years old, was murdered on December 5, 1984, in Santa Barbara, California. Shortly after, a flier was tacked to trees and telephone poles.*

*"This is a warning to all tree people," it read. "You are not welcome here in Santa Barbara. I will make life difficult for you. I have a faithful and respected group of citizens behind me. You bastards are low life scum and will not endure. I promise you."*

*The flier was signed "B. Ware." The phrase "tree people" referred to the homeless men and women who slept in a park under or near a Moreton Bay fig tree, a member of the ficus family with a trunk 40 feet in diameter. This stunning specimen could shade ten thousand people on a sunny day, by one estimate.*

*A resident unconnected to Burr's slaying had posted the flier, wishing to capitalize on the murder to scare away the tree people. At the same time, cops were "sweeping" the homeless at night to make their lives uncomfortable.*

*For journalists, this had all the elements of a good story: a town that was a rich enclave, homeless masses, a homicide, mean cops, and a vigilante. Days after Burr was slain, Michael Williamson and I rolled into town with backpacks and sleeping bags.*

*We quickly ran into the Reds—Wayne, known as "Crazy Red," and Rick, "Regular Red." The Reds were nicknamed because of their hair, not their politics. Not long after we met Crazy Red, who was a Vietnam War veteran, he asked me a question.*

*"Do you want to know what I think of the War on Drugs?"*

*"Sure," I said.*

*"Only way to fight one."*

*How could I not like him after that? We spent the rest of the afternoon with the Reds. It was a typical day in the life of the homeless. That is, nothing happened. Crazy Red loved to read. He showed us how he got a free newspaper. With a practiced snap of the wrist outside a coffee shop, he smacked a* Wall Street Journal *box, and it popped open. He preferred the* New York Times, *but its boxes were more difficult to break into.*

*We went to the spot where Burr's body had been found. All that remained of his camp was a torn Bible, a scattered pack of playing cards, and beer bottles.*

*Come evening, the Reds took us to meet Kelly. We watched her crawl from a wheelchair onto an old couch beneath a bush. We also met Joseph Phillips, sixty-four, and Geraldine Graham, seventy-three, who stood below Chico's Cantina, watching young people dance. The two eventually bedded down with blankets behind a dumpster. They shivered—California coastal nights are a lot colder than you might imagine.*

*The Reds told us the sweep wouldn't happen for a while. We drank coffee at a diner. Then the four of us unrolled our sleeping bags with other homeless people beneath the spreading branches of the mighty fig tree.*

*At midnight, commotion: blazing lights, shouts, police moving in fast. Dozens of tree people, clutching blankets and sleeping bags, fled. We ran with them. I looked back at the encroaching phalanx of cops and sputtered, indignant, "How can they do this!? This isn't right!"*

*Crazy Red looked at me as if I were crazy.*

*"Where do you think you are?" he asked. "Someplace like America?"*

My America is one of iconic landscapes, places of lost dreams and hard-lived lives. The Deep South: abandoned cotton gins and vine-covered shacks of tenant farmers. The Great Lakes region: rusting stacks of ghost steel mills on forested riverbars; the ruins of a Detroit hotel with a rotting piano collapsed on the floor of its ballroom, where one imagines giddy couples dancing away the nights after the men came home from World War II to an industrial America that promised a limitless tomorrow. All through the Midwest and the West: century-old grain silos; telegraph lines that now transmit only the sound of the wind; storm-ravaged homesteads with blown-out windows on the desolate prairie. California's Central Valley: forgotten backwaters where people who evoke the Joads still walk lonely roads flanked by orchards of orange, peach, and prune; the sun-blasted camps of the newly unemployed of 2010, in secret patches of dusty digger pine, just as their counterparts formed the Hoovervilles of the 1930s.

My America is also seen up close in the eyes of its people. They are eyes that speak without words.

Among those Michael and I remember the most: The eyes of a woman who has fallen from upper-class privilege and is now standing in a charity food line are still proud and hurting a year after she lost the big home. A frugal white-collar mom, raising children on her own, works two jobs year-round, in some seasons, three; her eyes fill with tears as she talks about how she is barely surviving. A waitress in her sixties, whose tips are way down, will never be able to retire and believes she'll work until she falls dead; her sleep-deprived eyes gaze into a realm of numbness as she sprints between tables. Unbridled fear is in the eyes of a Latino man, a U.S. citizen, who is terrified of being stopped and once again bloodied by cops who assume that he's undocumented because of his brown skin.

There are so many more, named and nameless, thousands of eyes.

Take a minute and turn through some of Michael's photographs. The eyes you see tell a story of decades of economic assault.

There is something else visible in these eyes: toughness. Study the image of Ken Platt and his son on the cover of this book—both generations epitomize this steel-like resiliency. Or turn to the second section of photographs and look into the eyes of the woman who has just come home with her husband to a little shanty made of blankets strung over wooden poles, hidden in the bushes beside the Colorado River, after she has put in a long night shift working at a casino.

You cannot defeat people with eyes like these.

Some say that Americans are no longer able to stand up to tough times the way the "greatest generation" of the 1930s Depression and World War II did. But this is so very wrong. We are wounded as a culture today, certainly, and many of us are soft, bewildered, made numb by loss. Yet something is going on. We are at the front end of a process. People will rise to the challenge of these hard times. We have a long way to go before the transformation occurs, but it will happen.

I know this because I've been out there looking into the eyes of Americans, some of whom I've visited repeatedly over the decades, listening closely to what has happened to them. There's a lot I don't know. But American working people, I know. Mine is a journey that began in 1980, when I hired on as a police reporter at the *Sacramento Bee.* I was unaware then that I would soon be drawn into the lives of America's economically dispossessed and homeless. At the *Bee,* I met up with Michael Williamson. He was young like me, newly a staff photographer after having spent a few years as a copy boy. Michael would go on to cover this story with me. It's not a story we set out to do. It found us.

By 1982, we were immersed in reporting the recession of that decade, which

was then the worst hard times since the Great Depression. (Those days now seem nearly idyllic in comparison.) Over a period of three years, we documented the decline of a steel town; this work became our first book, *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass.* We traveled around the nation with job seekers by bus, by thumb, in boxcars, and in a rusting 1973 Olds Delta 88. We slept in rescue missions and hobo jungles. We saw, over and over and over, desperation and terror in the eyes of the newly homeless. It was a look we weren't supposed to see in America.

Throughout the next few decades, we continued interviewing and photographing workers, white collar and blue collar, whose lives had been growing steadily worse, despite the glowing economic reports found in the business and popular press. We hit the road for newspaper and magazine articles and for books. Other times, we went just because we felt it had to be done, even if our work never saw publication.

A conservative estimate is that we have journeyed, together and separately, a half million miles by car and freight train around the country since 1980 to experience the material presented in this book, talking with hundreds of people. In 2009 alone, Michael traveled forty thousand miles—twenty-five thousand driving, the rest by air—over four and a half months as he took some of the pictures found here.

## THE MARCHING PHALANX

Even though this book chronicles three decades of our work, my passion for this quest is rooted in events and research dating to the 1930s.

*Someplace Like America* was conceived when I was at Yaddo, the artists' colony, in 2007. In the colony library, I'd reread work by Louis Adamic, who had been at Yaddo in 1931 and 1933. This Slovenian immigrant had faced hard times while he was emerging as a young writer. He traveled a hundred thousand miles around the country between 1931 and 1937 for his 1938 book *My America.* Adamic, though no stylist, had an ability to write about the present as if it were the past; that is, he possessed hindsight in the moment. His forgotten book provides an incisive portrait of a desperate nation.

Adamic raised questions long ago that are valid today, essentially the questions that I want to ask in this work. Do we want to tolerate hunger and desperation, with a large and growing portion of our population living in Third World conditions? Or do we want to care for one another? Do we want to reserve life chances for a very few who are wealthy, or do we desire to be a nation of opportunity, offering a level playing field for everyone?

Adamic wasn't my only inspiration. I've long been a student of the 1930s. As a

child, I listened to my elders talk about the Great Depression. I read books—an early one was *The Grapes of Wrath*. When I moved to California, I scoured the Central Valley's back roads, locating landmarks from Steinbeck's reporting for his novels: Weedpatch, Pixley, Marysville, the Tagus Ranch east of Highway 99, which was the Hooper Ranch where the Joads picked peaches. I did a bit of field labor under the hot Central Valley sun.

I studied the Farm Security Administration photographs, including those by Dorothea Lange, who did a lot of work in the Central Valley during the Great Depression. I also befriended Carl Mydans, who at the time was one of the last living FSA photographers.

I met some of the few surviving Dust Bowl migrants, including one who had been involved in a cotton strike that turned bloody when farmers opened fire on unarmed protesting workers. Lillian Counts Dunn was there on October 10, 1933, when farmers' bullets pocked holes in the American flag flying over her head, and strikers fell dead and wounded around her as she shielded her fourteen-month-old daughter at the union headquarters in Pixley. That strike became a basis for Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*.

In addition to reading Steinbeck and Adamic, I delved into other books by serious documentarians: Sherwood Anderson, James Rorty, and Edmund Wilson. The fiction of John Dos Passos, especially his American trilogy books, was also influential. I concentrated on works that had been published in the Depression years. To me, observations made in the moment were more valuable, because I wanted to compare the psyche of Americans then and now. In many cases, books written later didn't capture the uncertainty and fear of those times—no one writing during the depths of the Depression knew how things would turn out.

I sparingly quote just a few of these writers, yet all of their voices were in my head as I worked on this book. There are echoes of the 1930s in recent events. That decade's lessons course through this book amid the stories of today's fallen workers.

Of all the writers who influenced me, Steinbeck's voice is among the strongest. In 1999, Tom Wolfe spoke to my students in the Communication Department at Stanford University about his method of operating as a writer. When he approached the reporting of a story, he said, his "Theory of Everything" was "status," or social position. By this, he meant that people are motivated by "group expectations." As he had explained in an interview one year earlier, "How other people view us has an important effect on how we view ourselves."

Long before Wolfe articulated this notion, Steinbeck had elaborated his theory of the "group-man," the idea that people can come together in a "phalanx," an assemblage that can develop its own motives and behaviors—which might be quite

different, even at odds, with those of individual participants. From my reading, his concept most clearly applies to authoritarian groups, those with an "iron fist," as he wrote. I think of it as a "marching phalanx" when powerful groups conspire, wittingly or unwittingly, against individuals or social groups who do not wield political or monetary clout. In *The Grapes of Wrath,* for example, the big eastern bankers and local cops were arrayed against farm laborers and dispossessed migrants.

This book is about today's marching phalanx. Again, it's about big bankers and, in some places, local cops. It's also about politicians who don't care about people who can't or don't give them donations. And, once more, it's a story of people and weaker groups caught up in events beyond their control, dealing with tragedy and challenges.

## THE VIEW FROM THE AMERICAN STREET

When I first began to think about doing this book, my intention was to give context to the then-raging bubble economy. I knew that millions of Americans were in bad shape and were not sharing the benefits of the alleged boom. Then things took a bad turn in the fall of 2008, when the stock market tanked. I sent my Columbia University journalism students down to Wall Street to cover the story. They half-expected to find people jumping from windows. (No traders leapt to their deaths, even in 1929; that tale of the early crash is fable, or wishful thinking, as historians have documented.)

Now, two years later, officials brag that another Great Depression has been avoided. Yet what has been done for workers and low-income Americans, who have for too long been bleeding? When we look at where most of the help has been directed, it's plain to see that we took care of the wealthy, just as we'd been doing for the previous thirty years. Trillions for the titans. Crumbs for the rest of us.

But have we really averted a crisis like that of the 1930s? The answer, officially, on paper, is yes—at the moment that I write these words. But many rapids (and maybe even a waterfall) appear to lie in wait in the economic river ahead of us. Regardless, I argue that millions of American workers are in fact in a Depression—and have been for some time—and that the overused modern expression "Great Recession" is misleading. In fact, if we applied this terminology to the 1930s, the Great Depression was technically two "Great Recessions," one that spanned the years 1929 through 1933, and another that ran from 1937 to 1938. Between 1933 and 1937, the market and other indicators upticked, a "recovery" that didn't, however, mean a return to pre-1929 conditions. Things regressed after 1936, when

President Franklin Roosevelt backed off on stimulus spending in the face of conservative opposition.

I'm not an economist, but from my street-level perspective, the technical definition of a Great Recession or a Great Depression might mean a lot to Wall Street and banking interests, but it means very little to the jobless and underemployed. These official pronouncements often seem like nothing more than semantics. My Great Recession is your Great Depression if you lose your job and your home. The oxymoronic term "jobless recovery" is an insult to those who have been laid off.

In the past century, the economic experts were repeatedly wrong in the lead-up to the 1929 market crash, and they continued to be wrong through the 1930s as they predicted a turnaround. And they're likely just as wrong now. Who knows what will happen this time? I don't. All I do know is that we should stop relying on the words of supposed experts and should instead listen to the voices of people like those in this book, listen to our own instincts as we try to survive. These ordinary people are the real experts.

This is not a wonky book about government policy or the merits of specific economic remedies. Rather, it aims to describe the human side of where we are today, trapped in an economy whose fruits have been denied to a majority of Americans.

It has taken thirty years of war against working-class Americans to get where we are. It may take a generation to get out of this mess. We are at a cultural and economic turning point. One era has ended; another, as yet unnamed, is dawning. How will it be shaped? As we begin to understand the pointed, painful questions that must be addressed, perhaps we can begin to change.

After a long career as a journalist and documentarian, I'm deeply disillusioned and cynical about our political and business "leaders." They have failed us, repeatedly.

Yet I am ever the optimist about the American people. One thing I've discovered in all these years of hearing Americans talk about their lives and dreams is that collectively we are strong. We are survivors. We emerged from hard times in the 1930s. We will do so again and will begin the long process of rebuilding an economy that works for everyone, but this can happen only if we relearn some lessons about caring for and relying on one another. And relearn we will, for we have no other choice.

## OUR JOURNEYS

As Michael and I traveled over the years, we didn't seek out individuals who offered polemics or who were absorbed in politics. We simply listened to Americans who were in trouble because of the economy. In our interviews with workers, some

people appeared to be liberal, others conservative, but most were apparently in that amorphous "middle." I can't write with certainty about their politics because we didn't ask about party affiliation. Left, right, center—we didn't care. Our focus was on them as people. (In most cases, they have allowed us to use their real names, although I have sometimes omitted a last name to protect an individual's privacy or have, in a few cases, changed a first name.)

Michael's photographs for this book represent a key story component beyond anything I could ever hope to accomplish in words. Michael is foremost a journalist. Yet, because of his life experience, he understands dislocation and loss at an especially deep level; his work for this book crosses into the realm of poetic intimacy. Michael is a bluesman with a camera. As in our other team projects, some of his photographs are not directly tied to the text—rather, they're separate narratives that enhance the work as a whole. (The occasional photos and document scans that appear within the chapter text itself are ones I have provided because I believe they reveal things words cannot. But these images cannot compete with Michael's photographs.)

The book opens with a series of "snapshots," in words, of America today. It describes the people we met on a five-day road trip in early 2009, from Washington, D.C., to Michigan and into the mid-South. I hope it will serve as prologue to the rest of the book and suggest the lens through which we'll present our entire thirty-year journey. It's important to understand, up front, that the growing disaster we documented in the 1980s remains with us, that the pain we found in those years persists, and that the contradictions have not been resolved.

After these snapshots, the book's narrative is roughly chronological. Part 1 reaches back to the 1980s. Some of these stories from our book *Journey to Nowhere* are being retold in a different and shorter form, with new material, taken from my notes, that I didn't use in that project. You will be introduced to the city of Youngstown, destroyed by the closing of steel mills and the resulting loss of tens of thousands of well-paid jobs. You will also meet former steelworkers such as Joe Marshall Sr. and his son and Ken Platt. I tell their stories to show the forces that sent people on the road, desperately seeking work.

Some of them became homeless. We met Sam when he walked into a rescue mission in St. Louis, his second night on the street with nowhere to sleep. Michael and I jumped on a freight train with him as he headed west to seek work.

In Texas, we discovered Jim and Bonnie Alexander, homeless in a tent with their two children. They had migrated from Michigan after losing their jobs and home, hoping for employment in Texas.

These new members of America's growing "underclass" seemed bewildered, lost

and confused in an America they never expected would turn against them. It was a nasty era. Many Americans never escaped its dark grip.

Parts 2 and 3 move into the 1990s and the year 2000. In this period, Bruce Springsteen made a surprising entry into our lives, when he was inspired to write two songs based on several of the people we had introduced in *Journey to Nowhere.* Everywhere in those days we encountered people who had fallen out of the middle class, even in such supposedly good times. Among those we met in 2000 was Maggie Segura, a single working mother in Texas who had been thrown into desperate straits because her daughter was born with congenital health problems that weren't fully covered by her medical insurance. And we saw up close the effects of hunger among schoolchildren in Texas.

Part 4, set in the late 2000s, updates some of the stories from the previous thirty years. We returned to Youngstown and learned the fates of Ken Platt and the Marshall family. We revisited the Alexander family, who had something important to tell us about today's America. And I went back to visit Maggie, who continued to struggle economically, despite working multiple jobs. It's no exaggeration to say that many of these people have been in a Great Depression for the past three decades.

In part 5, we look at other people and places in 2009 and 2010. Michael and I were repeatedly drawn to the apocalypse otherwise known as New Orleans, still unhealed half a decade after Hurricane Katrina. I was in Arizona on the eve of that state's passage of the most repressive anti-immigrant legislation in America. In New York City, I went down to Wall Street and spied on the Big Boys who'd been bailed out with our tax dollars.

Part 6 recounts how some workers are coping with today's changing economy, by becoming self-reliant and by reaching out to build community. There's Sherri Harvel, an African American professional woman and a single mother, who has become an urban farmer in Kansas City. Former pulp mill worker Tim Lapointe, like many Americans, is becoming involved with his neighbors to get through these hard times. Their stories, coupled with the others in this book, epitomize the struggles people are facing today as well as the ways they are fighting back.

People are doing things on their own to survive and even thrive. That's the message of all the disparate characters you will read about.

## ABROAD AT HOME

That day and night in Santa Barbara with Crazy Red stuck with me. The reason became clear as the decades progressed.

Many of us who grew up in America between World War II and the end of the 1970s realized, as the 1990s and 2000s came upon us, that the nation of our youth was no longer to be found. Among those born during or after the 1970s, many know that something is amiss, though they have no personal historical context rooted in those postwar years on which to base their concerns.

Crazy Red was a street savant, far ahead of his time. He had never truly come home from Vietnam; his soul remained caught somewhere in the middle, out over the Pacific Ocean. Crazy Red was an outsider who lived on the edge of society, who viewed it from that great distance. He was, as the title of Anthony Lewis's long-running column in the *New York Times* suggests, "Abroad at Home."

So with those words, "Where do you think you are? Someplace like America?" Crazy Red gets to name this book.

Our title is meant as both a statement and a question. Our thirty-year documentation of this nation, in words and photographs, is our statement. And, through the voices of the people we came to know, we ask the question: what do we want to become as we move forward?