Social Security, a Personal Story

By Dennis Knight

My dad’s father, William Knight worked hard for many years on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad and became a Section Foreman on what is now the now famous narrow gauge route between Durango and Silverton. He was responsible for the maintenance of ten to thirty miles of track, managing the work crews, materials and tool house. His family lived in the section house.

In December of 1923, when he reached the age of seventy, a man arrived at the door of the section house and announced he was taking over. He presented a letter. William Knight was fired because he was 70. The railroad did not send him off with a gold watch.

Now without means of support or even a place to live, the family moved to Alamosa to live with their oldest child, my Aunt Josie, the oldest of eleven, who already had her own growing family. Dad, then sixteen and the youngest, dropped out of Durango High School and went to work in Alamosa to help out.

I heard the account from my father many times as a boy and young man, but now that I am myself just a couple of years away from that milestone of seventy, it is ringing home.

President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935, at the height of the great depression as part of the New Deal. It was an attempt to limit the dangers of reaching old age and ease the burdens of widows and fatherless children. It gives expression to the principle “we are all in it together” and reflects the basic American values of hard work and the dignity and independence that should be its reward, through benefits earned by paying into the system. The concept has had foes from the beginning, but it has stood the test of time.

Our Social Security program has changed over the years, as it has needed to change. In the nineteen sixties, we folded into the mission medical care for the elderly, also funded by beneficiaries who pay into the system specifically for that service.

The programs today are facing challenges which will be and are being exploited by its enemies. The future of Social Security will be won as hard today as it was in 1925.

The story of William Knight in 1923 was the way of life back then. Work to an old age, get fired and live off the children. That was social security in 1923. What will it be in 2023?