

More than One Way to Skin a Cat

by Mike Harris

Coming of age in the Depression years in the nineteen thirties marked my character. It set a pattern for the entire length of my long life.

Competition and need made for toughening of character and a ruthlessness in holding onto what was important. Once you got a job, employers were not satisfied with just getting the job done. There was no compunction or loyalty. If someone came along and offered to do the work for less, you could be looking for a new job in the blink of an eye. This lack of security forced employees to make decisions. There were two possibilities, join a union or find a way to make your job secure. This ruthless approach created the bosses' own monster. Unions were the only security the workers had. Believe me, until the late thirties and the beginning of World War Two, unions were at the peak of their power. Workers learned that if they did not protect each other and band together they were at the mercy of the bosses. In every industry workers united, miners and auto workers in the CIO under a leader, John L. Lewis. The garment industry, ILGWU, for woman's wear and the Amalgamated Union for men's clothing.

Strikes and picket lines were the norm. Compromise, albeit reluctant, got to set working rules and wages. Thus were the times. To succeed the individual had to do a little more than just the job. Personal self-interest forced the exploration of possibilities. Regardless of the job, possibilities always existed.

In my job, I elected to try to help myself by helping the best paid employees, the cutters, with an eye to perhaps getting to become a cutter myself. In three years I acquired enough knowledge, skill and smarts, and was the holder of a union card and making ninety dollars a week. The strategies and exploitation of all the possibilities I employed will have to wait, I am at my limit.