

## Hard Times, A Helping Hand

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### Abstract (Summary)

Another letter came from a 38-year-old steel worker, out of a job and stricken with tuberculosis, who wrote of his inability to pay the hospital bills for his son, whose skull had been fractured after he was struck by a car. The writer, once a prominent businessman, was now 65 and destitute, his life insurance policy cashed in and gone, his furniture "mortgaged," his clothes threadbare, his hope of paying the electric and gas bills pinned to the intervention of his children.

### Full Text (1613 words)

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IN the weeks just before Christmas of 1933 -- 75 years ago -- a mysterious offer appeared in *The Repository*, the daily newspaper here. It was addressed to all who were suffering in that other winter of discontent known as the Great Depression. The bleakest of holiday seasons was upon them, and the offer promised modest relief to those willing to write in and speak of their struggles. In return, the donor, a "Mr. B. Virdot," pledged to provide a check to the neediest to tide them over the holidays.

Not surprisingly, hundreds of letters for Mr. B. Virdot poured into general delivery in Canton -- even though there was no person of that name in the city of 105,000. A week later, checks, most for as little as \$5, started to arrive at homes around Canton. They were signed by "B. Virdot."

The gift made *The Repository's* front page on Dec. 18, 1933. The headline read: "Man Who Felt Depression's Sting to Help 75 Unfortunate Families: Anonymous Giver, Known Only as 'B. Virdot,' Posts \$750 to Spread Christmas Cheer." The story said the faceless donor was "a Canton man who was toppled from a large fortune to practically nothing" but who had returned to prosperity and now wanted to give a Christmas present to "75 deserving fellow townsmen." The gifts were to go to men and women who might otherwise "hesitate to knock at charity's door for aid."

Whether the paper spoke to Mr. B. Virdot directly or through an intermediary or whether it received something in writing from him is not known.

Down through the decades, the identity of the benefactor remained a mystery. Three prosperous generations later, the whole affair was consigned to a footnote in Canton's history. But to me, the story had always served as an example of how selfless Americans reach out to one another in hard times. I can't even remember the first time I heard about Mr. B. Virdot, but I knew the tale well.

Then, this past summer, my mother handed me a battered old black suitcase that had been gathering dust in her attic. I flipped open the twin latches and found a mass of letters, all dated December 1933. There were also 150 canceled checks signed by "B. Virdot," and a tiny black bank book with \$760 in deposits.

My mother, Virginia, had always known the secret: the donor was her father, Samuel J. Stone. The fictitious moniker was a blend of his daughters' names -- Barbara, Virginia and Dorothy. But Mother had never told me, and when she handed me the suitcase she had no idea what was in it -- "some old papers," she said. The suitcase had passed into her possession shortly after the death of my grandmother Minna in 2005.

I took the suitcase with me to our log cabin in the woods of Maine, and there, one night, began to read letter after letter. They had come from all over Canton, from out-of-work upholsterers, painters, bricklayers, day laborers, insurance salesmen and, yes, former executives -- some of whom, I later learned, my grandfather had known personally.

One, written Dec. 19, 1933, begins, "I hate to write this letter ... it seems too much like begging. Anyway, here goes. I will be honest, my husband doesn't know I'm writing this letter... . He is working but not making enough to hardly feed his family. We are going to do everything in our power to hold on to our house." Three years behind in taxes and out of credit at the grocery store, the writer closed with, "Even if you don't think we're worthy of help, I hope you receive a great blessing for your kindness."

Another letter came from a 38-year-old steel worker, out of a job and stricken with tuberculosis, who wrote of his inability to pay the hospital bills for his son, whose skull had been fractured after he was struck by a car.

One man wrote: "For one like me who for a lifetime has earned a fine living, charity by force of distressed circumstances is an abomination and a headache. However, your offer carries with it a spirit so far removed from those who offer help for their own glorification, you remove so much of the sting and pain of forced charity that I venture to tell you my story."

The writer, once a prominent businessman, was now 65 and destitute, his life insurance policy cashed in and gone, his furniture "mortgaged," his clothes threadbare, his hope of paying the electric and gas bills pinned to the intervention of his children.

A mother of four wrote, "My husband hasn't had steady work in four years ... . The people who are lucky enough to have no worry where the next meal is coming from don't realize how it is to be like we are and a lot of others... . I only wish I could do what you are doing."

Another letter was from the wife of an out-of-work bricklayer. "Mr. Virdot, we are in desperate circumstances," she wrote. They had taken in her husband's mother and father and a 10-year-old boy. Now the landlord had given them three days to pay up. "It is

awful," she wrote. "No one knows, only those who go through it. It does seem so much like begging. "

Children, too, wrote in. The youngest was 12-year-old Mary Uebing. "There are six in our family," she wrote, "and my father is dead ... my baby sister is sick. Last Christmas our dinner was slim and this Christmas it will be slimmer... . Any way you could help us would be appreciated in this fatherless and worrisome home."

The wife of an out-of-work insurance salesman added a postscript to her letter, one not intended for her husband's eyes: She had just pawned her engagement ring for \$5.

Also in the suitcase were thank-you letters from people who had received Mr. Virdot's checks. A father wrote: "It was put to good use paying for two pairs of shoes for my girls and other little necessities. I hope some day I have the pleasure of knowing to whom we are indebted for this very generous gift."

That was from George W. Monnot, who had once owned a successful Ford dealership but whose reluctance to lay off his salesmen hastened his own financial collapse, his granddaughter told me.

Of course, the checks could not reverse the fortunes of an entire family, much less a community. A few months after one man, Roy Teis, wrote to B. Virdot, his family splintered apart. His eight children, including a 4-year-old daughter, were scattered among nearly as many foster homes, and there they remained for years to come.

So why had my grandfather done this? Because he had known what it was to be down and out. In 1902, when he was 15, he and his family had fled Romania, where they had been persecuted and stripped of the right to work because they were Jews. They settled into an immigrant ghetto in Pittsburgh. His father forced him to roll cigars with his six other siblings in the attic, hiding his shoes so he could not go to school.

My grandfather later worked on a barge and in a coal mine, swabbed out dirty soda bottles until the acid ate at his fingers and was even duped into being a strike breaker, an episode that left him bloodied by nightsticks. He had been robbed at night and swindled in daylight. Midlife, he had been driven to the brink of bankruptcy, almost losing his clothing store and his home.

By the time the Depression hit, he had worked his way out of poverty, owning a small chain of clothing stores and living in comfort. But his good fortune carried with it a weight when so many around him had so little.

His yuletide gift was not to be his only such gesture. In the same black suitcase were receipts hinting at other anonymous acts of kindness. The year before the United States entered World War II, for instance, he sent hundreds of wool overcoats to British soldiers. In the pocket of each was a handwritten note, unsigned, urging them not to give in to despair and expressing America's support.

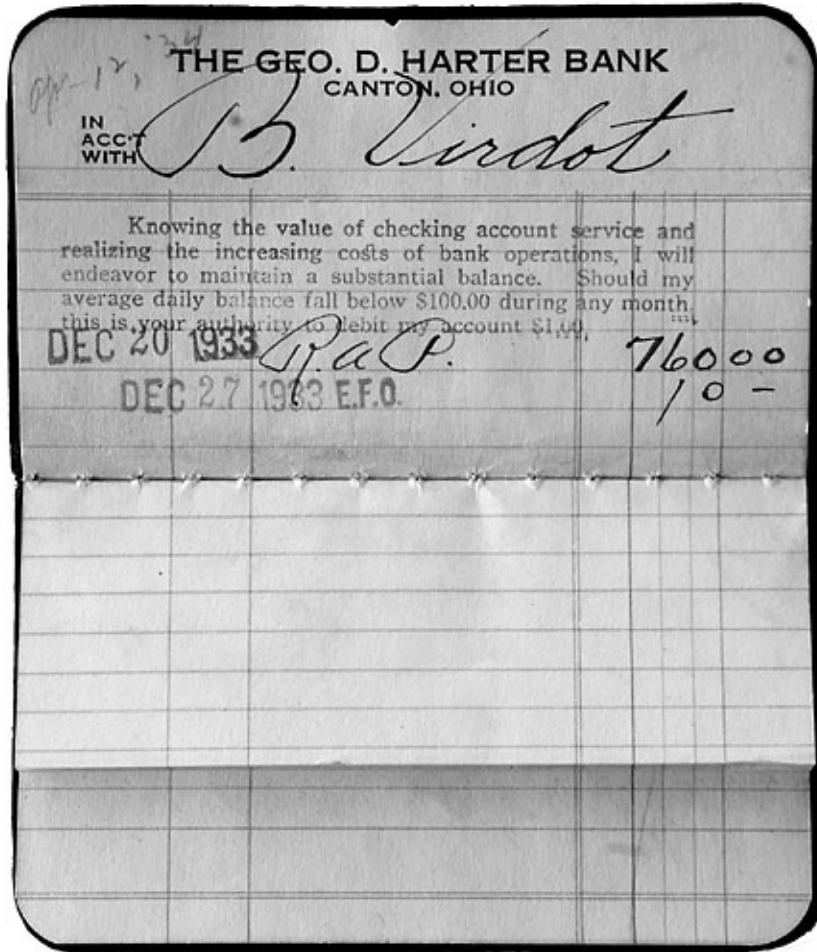
Like many in his generation, my grandfather believed in hard work, and disdained handouts. In 1981, at age 93, he died driving himself to the office, crashing while trying to beat a rising drawbridge. But he could never ignore the brutal reality of times when work was simply not to be had and self-reliance reached its limits. He sought no credit for acts of conscience. He saw them as the debt we owe one another and ourselves.

For many Americans, this Christmas will be grim. Here, in Ohio, food banks and shelters are trying to cope with the fallout from plant closings, layoffs, foreclosures and bankruptcies. The family across the street lost their home. From our breakfast table, we look out on their house, dark and vacant. Multibillion-dollar bailouts to banks and Wall Street have yet to bring relief to those humbled by need and overwhelmed by debt. Already, the B. Virdot in me -- in each of us -- can hear the words of our neighbors.

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**[Photograph]**

The Mysterious Benefactor "B. Virdot," Above, and Some of the Checks He Sent to and Letters He Received From Desperate Residents of Canton, Ohio, at the Height of the Great Depression. Below, His Bankbook. (Photographs by Tony Cenicola/the New York Times)