

Depression-era Rochester, Minnesota

Today's financial problems pale in comparison to Great Depression

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When Marvin Fitzthum thinks of the Great Depression, he conjures the memory of his grandfather.

His grandfather was the director of an area bank at a time when banks across the country were failing. Fitzthum recalled how his grandfather paced the farm in Wykoff, haunted with anxiety over the fate of his bank.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had declared a "bank holiday" to stem the collapse, but no one at the time was certain whether the intervention would work, including his grandfather.

"It was a jolt," Fitzthum said.

Just like Fitzthum's grandfather then, the public today is preoccupied with the nation's economic troubles. Millions of jobs have been lost. The nation's auto industry is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. And no one is certain when we will hit bottom.

Great Depression comparisons

The Great Depression, the mother of all recessions, gives some perspective to our current woes. And it's not even close. Both statistically and anecdotally, the Great Depression was a totally different economic animal altogether. But as testimony of people's resiliency, the Great Depression is instructive for any age.

Just compare the numbers. The latest survey pegs U.S. unemployment at 7.6 percent, while in 1932, unemployment stood at 25.2 percent.

Or just ask Florence Burgardt, who was raised on a farm in Britt, Iowa.

"I was in high school, and we were very poor, which most people were. We had to scrimp to even buy a postage stamp," Burgardt, 92, recalled.



Marvin Fitzthum remembers that his grandfather, the director of an area bank, paced the family farm in Wykoff during the Depression, worried about the fate of his bank.

Or ask Ella Steinbeck. Steinbeck, 90, was raised on a farm 170 miles west of Rochester, in Lakefield, Minn. Steinbeck said food was never an issue, but money was always precious.

In 1932, Steinbeck traveled to Rochester with her sister for surgery at Mayo Clinic. They paid \$4 a week to stay in two rooms. When it was time for her father to pick her up, he had to sell a couple of hogs to buy a set of new tires for their vehicle.

There was very little style, as it is commonly known today, because everybody dressed the same. As the second girl in the family, Steinbeck always wore hand-me-downs, she said.

And if they were not hand-me-downs, they were made, never bought. Steinbeck recalled how her mother, an accomplished seamstress, was able to make several dresses out of 12 yards of print material ordered from Sears, Roebuck and Co.

Models of efficiency

Viewed from the vantage point of the first decade of the 21st Century, families during the Great Depression were the ultimate conservationists, letting nothing go to waste. Even as the economy was in shambles, families became models of efficiency. Flour sacks were made into dresses. Mothers canned fruits and vegetables. The concept of leisure was almost entirely alien.

Lillian Leqve, 87, lived in downtown Rochester during the Great Depression. As a grade schooler, Leqve had to carry water from a well at a nearby school and chopped wood.

She recalled how her father, on a Saturday night before the stores closed, would scrounge for bananas and oranges that the local fruit peddler planned to get rid of.

"That was how we got our food," Leqve said.

Even though they lived in town, Leqve's home shared characteristics of a farm. They had a garden that supplied much of their food. They also had a cow, three geese and 100 chickens that they kept in a coop.

Yet while their homes often were places of stability, signs of economic distress were never far away. Often, a bum would come knocking, seeking to wash a window or do some chore for a sandwich.



Lillian Leqve lived in downtown Rochester during the Depression. On Saturday nights before the stores closed, her father would scrounge for bananas and oranges that the fruit peddler planned to throw away.

Haven Streiff lived on a farm near Douglas, near where a freight train would rattle past. On the train would be scores of hobos, men and women. They would be in or on the freight cars. Some would be in the caboose. They were going to the Twin Cities or farther west.

"Some called them hobos and some called them bums," Streiff said. "My mother always fed them. She always gave them a slice of bread with sugar on them when they came to the house."

Not near as content

Everything was dirt cheap. Hogs cost a cent or two per pound. A quarter meant you were rich. Problem was, no one hardly had any money. So people traded in whatever was of value, like chickens.

Herb Holger, 91, a native of Harmony, recalled how his father-in-law, a painter, would return home with two chickens as compensation for his work. But he could never bring himself to butcher the chickens himself, instead taking it to the local butcher to do the dirty work.



Herb Holger's father-in-law was a painter during the Depression and sometimes was paid with two chickens.

Today, information and news is expected to be delivered via the Internet, Twitter and television almost instantaneously. But back then, news traveled more slowly. Holger had a relative who subscribed to the newspaper in town. After they were done reading it, it was passed from family to family. Finally, the 2- to 3-week-old newspapers would reach Holger's place.

"We'd get a whole stack of newspapers, and we'd sit there and read the old news," Holger said.

And yet for all the hardship, people were happy, Steinbeck said. Entertainment was simpler. Leqve recalled the finger-puppet plays they would put on. They would hang a blanket outside and then wait for passing cars to provide the projector lights.

"That was our movie," Leqve said.

Those simpler pleasures also extended to the kind of treats children ate. Several recalled how they got an apple before going to bed. Or they might sit around the table, eating a dishpan full of popcorn they had grown and popped.

"People aren't near as content nowadays as they were years ago," Steinbeck said. "You were content and happy with everything you had, but it's different now."