

The Great Depression

October 29, 1929 has been labeled "Black Thursday." The American economy collapsed. The stock market crashed. Investors rushed to sell their securities, but no one was buying. Those investors who had bought on margin found their loans called by the banks, and forced sales followed. The marked decline became a disaster. That day 16,420,030 shares were traded on the New York Stock Exchange, and the average value of fifty key stocks fell forty points. By mid-November, industrial securities had lost nearly half their value, and the Dow-Jones index had dropped from 327 to 199. Within a month a large part of the paper values of the preceding decade had been totally wiped out. (America, A History, Oscar Handlin, 864, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968.)

The Depression affected everyone. Before the crash, interest rates for loans of all kinds had been high, and in the next few years, many homeowners who had bought homes with a high interest rate prior to the onset of the Depression found it difficult to meet their payments. Those who did not actually lose their jobs found their incomes drastically reduced. Many lost their homes.

Farmers found it difficult to borrow to put in crops. Prices went down and many farmers did not even harvest their crops because they could not get a fair price for them. At the same time many people were starving. Farmers who could not meet their mortgage payments lost their farms. One advantage that the farmer had was that he could raise enough food to feed his family, but he, too, found it hard to get the cash for non-farm items he needed to survive. Bread lines sprang up everywhere. Homeless, jobless men were on the move around the country trying to find jobs. Banks were closing their doors forever, leaving many families without their hard-earned savings.

Before the Depression stopped home-building almost entirely, my father had built up a prosperous plumbing and heating business. I do not know the name of the bank in Ogden, which failed, but Dad, along with many other depositors, lost money that he had deposited in that bank. I don't remember hearing my father and mother discussing their problems, but I do remember some of the effects upon the family of those tight years between 1929 and 1941.

Dad's business slowed almost to a standstill. All he could get was repair jobs, and then his customers couldn't afford to pay him. Dad was a soft touch. I don't know how many widows' repair jobs he did at cost, but I remember my mother saying if he could collect all his delinquent bills, we would be rich.

Things got so bad that Dad and his brothers, Angus and George, decided to go together and homestead a farm in the Uintah basin. This way they felt they could at least feed their families until the Depression eased. The Langfords have an instinct for trying to farm in almost impossible situations, and this experience was no different.

(After we returned to Utah from Schenectady, New York, Tracy gave a lot of "diamond" talks at local colleges and high schools. When possible, I would accompany him on these excursions. One of these talks was to high school science students at the high school in Roosevelt, Utah. It was a cold, dismal day in winter, and the snow and dust blew across the road as we approached Roosevelt. Tracy had been with me on many genealogy trips, and was familiar with some of the areas the Langfords settled. As we were driving

along, he said, "How did the Langfords miss this place?" They hadn't. Roosevelt is in the Uintah Basin.)

It turned out that Dad would have been better off to stick to plumbing repair jobs. When he and his brothers harvested their first hay crop on the farm, Dad caught his hand in the hay stacker. It was a bad accident, and besides the injury to his hand, a ligament was torn from his shoulder. The only doctor in the area was a country doctor, and unfortunately, not very competent. He solved the problem by cutting the ligament out. Infection set in, and I remember that it was more than a year before Dad could go back to work—and that was hard on everyone. Hard, because Dad was a very proud man. Generous, if he had the money to give to his children when they needed it—but too proud to say, "I'm sorry, I don't have the money" if he was broke. Instead, he would say, "What did you do with the last money I gave you"—or, "What do you think I am—made of money?"

We were never hungry because Mom had, as usual, canned, canned, and canned. But money was needed to buy basics, pay the mortgage, pay the light bill, etc. Mother was a wonderful seamstress, and she found a job with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) sewing dresses and shirts, which were passed out to the many needy people in the community. That fall, all our school clothing came from that source, which was even harder on Dad's pride. Dad never did recover the full use of his injured hand. For the rest of his life he had stiff fingers on that hand, and one shoulder was always slightly lower than the other.

When Dad was finally well enough to go back to work, he got a job as a plumbing superintendent on WPA projects. He earned the handsome salary of one dollar a day. Dad kept the WPA job until plumbing repair jobs picked up a bit, and then he quit. He considered that working for the WPA was welfare, and his pride wouldn't let him go on working for the government any longer than he had to.

Often Dad took his repair pay in kind. There was a lot of trading done during the depression. Dad did plumbing for a Mr. Jones, who gave singing and music lessons to my three older sisters. In our ward, a dentist by the name of Dr. Pincock, who lived just a block west of our house, did our dental work. In return, Dad did his plumbing. Mother also sewed and canned for Mrs. Pincock when the plumbing work gave out.

Dad made Mother quit working for the WPA when he went back to work, but a local tailor heard about Mother's expertise with the needle and wanted her to come and work for him. When I was high school age, she was able to talk Dad into letting her work for this tailor. We were the lucky recipients of her labors there, of course, because the tailor would let Mother buy gorgeous woolens and materials, at his cost, to make clothes for her four daughters. I can remember one beautiful black coat that she made for me while I was a senior in high school. That coat lasted me until Sherlene was born.

Jobs were very difficult to come by. Jr. high and high school kids worked on the farms, which were nearby in North Ogden, Roy, and Riverdale. One time I can remember that my three older sisters and Mother had jobs picking cherries. They considered me too young. I got to tend my three younger brothers. Mother took all her earnings out in cherries to can for the winter.

When I was in the tenth grade, however, I was big enough to pick beans out in Roy. The farmer would bring his truck into Ogden very early, about five in the morning. We would all climb in the truck and huddle together to try to keep warm on the open-air trip out to the farm in the cool of the summer mornings. I could generally pick from ninety to one

hundred pounds, and at a penny a pound that would be almost a dollar a day. I was very proud of myself. My sisters could beat me by about 25 pounds, and some of the big boys could do even better. Our earnings went for schoolbooks and clothing.

It was wonderful to have big sisters during the depression. The twins were good at finding jobs and they would get jobs for me in the same places they worked. This way I got a coveted cannery job while I was in high school. (Why anyone would covet that job is beyond me, but it is an indication of just how hard jobs were to find.) The job was peeling tomatoes. We had a good walk, morning and afternoon, to get to the cannery. The distance seemed especially long in the afternoons, as we walked home after standing all day peeling tomatoes. By the time we were through working all day, it was delightful to go to the hoses at the factory and clean off (as much as we could) the tomato mess, which was all over our hands, arms, and often legs.

A woman did not work if her husband had a job—one job to a family. If a woman got married, she was expected to quit working. I had a friend who tried to keep her marriage a secret so she could finish her nursing training. When the school discovered she was married, she had to quit school.

When my sisters applied for student aid at Weber College, they were told that anyone who dressed like they did surely did not need financial help. Dad had to fill out a detailed financial form to prove that he could not afford to pay tuition for his daughters. I remember that distinctly—it involved his pride again! He was furious! He had no intention of filling out that form. Mother finally persuaded him to do it so the twins could go to college.

The Depression was a boon to students of every age. Many Ph.D. holders taught in the grade and high schools. Sometimes it was easier to stay in school and get an advanced degree than it was to get a job. Tracy had a Ph.D. science teacher in Wilson Lane when he was in the ninth grade. And when he was in Lewis Jr. High School in Ogden, in the tenth grade, his math teacher, Alton Wangsgard had a Ph.D. Later, Dr. Wangsgard taught at the University of Utah. Tracy ran into him when he attended the U, and they invited us over to dinner several times while Tracy was a senior in college. We became lifelong friends of the Wangsgards. His wife had been a Sunday School teacher of mine when I was young, and her mother had been my Gleaner teacher in the 9th Ward MIA in Ogden.

The WPA organized and inventoried county records all throughout the USA, which was a great boon to genealogists. The Ogden High School was a million-dollar WPA project, and WPA crews improved roads and parks all over the country. One good thing about the work projects that President Roosevelt managed to put through the congress, was that at least people worked for what they got. This was a principle that should never have been abandoned in later welfare projects that the government initiated.

As a family, we survived better than many of our neighbors. I never really realized I was poor. That is, until a high school friend invited me to her home. Then I realized that by comparison, we *were* poor. Her father was a lawyer. Students at Washington Jr. High School were all about the same economic status. My family was as well off or even in better circumstances than many of my friends' families. And, during the Depression, it was a rare family that did not have financial problems.

In the Ogden City School District there were three Jr. High Schools—Washington, Lewis, and Central. There was only one high school and the student body contained a mix of students from all three junior high schools. At Washington, popularity and intellect largely determined class distinction lines, but at the Ogden High School, another element

clearly played a part—economic status. During the great depression though, even the richest families were affected.

When my father moved from 3249 Orchard Avenue to 3292 Orchard Avenue, on land that he had bought at a tax sale auction of repossessed property about the year 1937, he determined that he would pay for the house as he built it. He determined that never again was he going into debt for anything. It is this home that my children remember as "Grandma's house."

The experience that Tracy and I had during the Great Depression has greatly influenced our economic habits. The only things that we have ever purchased on "time" were our first major household appliances (refrigerator, sewing machine, and washing machine), our two homes we have owned during our marriage, and our first automobile. Every automobile since they we have paid cash for. The home we live in now (1711 N. Lambert Lane, Provo, Utah), we paid off as soon as we could, often paying extra payments on the principal of the mortgage. Some of my children might not think this was a very good idea—some of them were educated in business schools, which advocate leveraging. Our philosophy of debt, however, had been advocated by several of the prophets of the LDS Church during our lifetime. Their advice then and now was to get out of debt and stay out of debt. We think they have it right.

I don't know if our government, or any other government, can maintain the prosperity that has prevailed during the growing-up years of our children and our grandchildren. It is very possible that the generation of our great-grandchildren will not be as affluent as we have been. Will our great-grandchildren know what it was like to feel that six dollars was too much to pay for a pair of shoes, instead of seventy to one hundred dollars as is often the case now in 1995? Or that a dollar a day is a good wage, and hard to come by? Or make old shoes do by lining them with newspapers, or by gluing on a rubber sole? Or taking old clothes apart and fashioning new clothing from the fabric? Brigham Young said he didn't worry about the saints is their poverty, but rather in their prosperity. We have observed during our lifetime that prosperity brings much wickedness with it. Maybe during hard times a person is so busy just supplying daily bread, there isn't much time to get into trouble. Nevertheless, I hope we never experience another Great Depression.

It was the war that brought the Depression to an end. Women were encouraged (if not coerced) to go into the workplace. Industry started to roll at full pace again, turning out weapons for war. By the time the war ended, there was a shortage of everything—which led to perhaps one of the longest periods of prosperity our country has ever known.

I hope this little blurb will help my children and grandchildren's generation to get a glimpse of the hard times their family had during the Great Depression, and perhaps, to be grateful for their own many material blessings.

How grateful we are for the righteousness of our children and of our grandchildren in spite of the prosperity enjoyed by most families since the end of World War II (1945) until the present. At this writing, every grandson and many of our granddaughters who have come of missionary age have gone on missions. We know that we can't expect this to continue, as I'm sure that at least some of the girls may opt for marriage before or about the time they are twenty-one years of age or thereabouts, but that's all right, too. How else will we ever get some great-grandchildren? We love you!