# Memories of the Depression Years

## White Gold in Hard Times

WHENEVER I top Crowley's Ridge and see the straight ribbon of Highway 60 stretching across the flat boot heel of southeast Missouri, my mind goes back to the 1930s and '40s.

I think back on the little towns of Kennett, Senath, Hornersville and Wardell and our migrant trips there to pick cotton during the Depression.

Everyone had a goal of picking 300 pounds of cotton in a day, but not many reached it. I did once, the only time that I made $2.25 in a day.

It was hard work, 6-1/2 days a week from sunup to sundown. I remember finding the shade of a nearby tree or cotton wagon to enjoy a lunch of fried bologna, potato pancakes and fried pies prepared by Mother and brought out in a washtub.

On Saturdays, we'd quit at noon and head into town. Generally, we'd be given a quarter to spend. That went far enough for a 5-cent ice cream cone, a Coke and maybe even a movie.

Hard times? Sure, they were, and I'm thankful for everything we experienced. It produced a wonderful work ethic that we have enjoyed all of our lives.

—Laura Sullivan, Conway, Missouri

## Sticky Business

IN THE MID-1930s, at springtime, we kids went around our River Falls, Wisconsin neighborhood with a hand auger and tapped all of the large maple trees, collecting buckets of sap. The neighbors didn't seem to mind.

We then used the old cookstove in a neighbor's shack to boil off the

water. Our fuel was coal found along the railroad tracks. We usually ended up with several gallons of good maple syrup, which we sold in small containers in the neighborhood.

I remember when the miniature-golf course went broke and the putters were given to the summer playground program. All interested kids were given a putter and allowed to play on the city golf course two mornings a week. We hacked around the course using our beloved wooden-shafted putters for every shot!

—Eugene Deiss, Portal, Arizona

## Paragon of Politeness

WE LIVED near the Santa Fe Railway's Mormon Yard in the early 1930s, causing a daily stream of hoboes passing by our house. Mother fed them a lot, and they did odd jobs around our place in appreciation.

One morning at breakfast, Dad noticed a hobo walking past and said to my mother, "Looks like you've got another customer to feed." However, he kept walking past the house

In a few minutes, the hobo returned and knocked on our door. When Dad opened the door, the hobo looked in and saw us at the table, saying, "I'm sorry I disturbed your meal, but your house is on fire."

Dad and my cousin Charley ran outside to check and discovered a fire around the chimney, boosting themselves onto the roof to see what they could do. It was a good thing the fire department was called, not only to put out the fire but to rescue Dad and Charley off the roof; adrenaline got them up there, but it was too high for them to climb down!

After the initial shock, my mother yelled to the departing hobo, asking him if he wanted a meal. "No, thanks," he replied. "I have a train to catch."

—Al Evans, Sequim, Washington

## Dealers in Iron Ore

IT WAS NOT unusual, in the 1930s, to see many unpaved side streets in my small western Pennsylvania town.

On Church Street, a steep road near our home, the town government tried all sorts of stopgap measures to prevent erosion, but furrows would reach a foot in depth.

Finally, someone thought of using a combination of iron dust and small pieces of iron from the local blast furnace to pave the road. Workmen graded the road and laid in about a foot or two of the iron material.

This worked for several weeks until the local kids, me included, found that the junk man would pay a whole dollar for a washtub full of the iron mixture. We did our best to exercise moderation and dig only on the sides and the very center of the road. But before long, we had holes in the road up to our hips, and lots of them.

The authorities learned of our project, observed the battlefield and decided to hard-surface the road, taking away our easy money. We learned that capitalism had its limits.

—Frank Turk, Allentown, Pennsylvania

## Dust Bowl Days

THE 1930s were a time of the “terrible Ds” in Kansas: dust storms, drought and the Depression. But another D, dear friends, gave us the courage to get through it all.

School was often canceled because either the static electricity from the dust storms stopped the bus engines or headlights could not penetrate the darkness.

On occasion, when the dust prevented the schoolchildren from being taken home, our phone would ring and we were asked, “How many

kids can you put up tonight?" We'd supply food and a bed until the wind subsided.

Dust pneumonia broke up many families, and there was little money for supplies. However, on Saturdays, butter, milk, fresh or canned vegetables, a dressed chicken or perhaps a piece of meat would appear on our doorstep as appreciation and to help us "safely through another week."

Running your finger across the windowsill, you could count the different colors of dust layers—dirt from Oklahoma one day and Nebraska dirt the next.

During one storm, a family out for a ride waited beside the road until the air cleared. Upon returning home, they found that enough dirt had piled between the rafters above their living room ceiling to break the plaster loose and cover the furniture.

There are many such tales, but we pulled together, and that closeness enriched our lives, making them bearable and doubly precious.

—Lettie Leffingwell, Billings, Montana

## Working Through It All

MY FAMILY lost everything—our home, our car, our bank account and our father—in the Depression, and it would be 19 years before we recovered.

My first job came at age 5 or 6, when I hawked five copies of the Sunday newspaper before heading off to church. I sold them for 5¢, a 2-cent profit.

By the time I was 8 or 9, I saved enough to buy a hand-powered mower and cut lawns for 10¢ a yard—25¢ for a big yard.

I learned from a friend that you could buy candy wholesale at 4¢

and sell it retail for 5¢. I set up my “store” on a wooden orange crate at a street corner. I also learned the virtues of volume selling. A nearby factory had two daily work breaks, and I made sure to be there with my candy, chilled in our icebox. It was very popular.

Other young boys and I diligently watched the grocers’ fruit displays for a bad spot on an apple or orange. Once spotted, the offending fruit was quickly pointed out and asked for. It was great competition among us.

Many of the places we lived, there was a wood-burning stove. I would scavenge for scraps of wood and tar shingles, usually from demolished buildings. I also pried wooden-block cobblestones from one old street and filled my wagon with them; I was never stopped.

Many clothes I wore were recycled from the Salvation Army. Once, I was given what were supposed to be boy’s knickers but was really part of a girl’s snowsuit. Instead of stopping just below the kneecap, they went all the way to my ankles (I thought mine just sagged badly). These created some arguments between my schoolmates and me.

I clearly remember, among welfare children of my age, the fear of visits from a social worker. She had the power to remove children from a family deemed unsuitable due to financial circumstances. It was always a moment of great fear for me.

We survived the Depression through tenacity, industry and the strong conviction that, somehow, life would get better for us, and it did.

—Percy Pascoe Jr., Cuba, Missouri