Great Depression Lore

The Great Depression was a time of financial instability for everyone in America, and many places beyond. The whole world was left reeling after market crashes, and leaders of the land had no idea what to do to help people. Suddenly, after the prosperity of the twenties, nearly everyone had to cut back.

Cutting back meant different things to everyone though. People in the citys were the hardest hit, as their jobs relied most heavily on the market. Unskilled in all but their specialized city job, going from making plenty of money to fund an expensive house and the newest of everything, the loss of job that hit much of corporate America left families homeless and unable to find any kind of work.

In rural America, farmers had been poor for a long time, and would continue to be poor after the depression ended. As long as they had not overreached their funds, there was plenty of opportunity to live off the fruits of their labors, even when they could not afford anything in the local store.

Regardless of the difference in effects that lack of money had on different types of people, the sheer scale of the hardships being experienced created a sense of community that brought many together. Unselfish service became the norm, and most people did what they could to help out their neighbors.

Folktales from the Depression (FA 01 528)

One way for young men to get around when they lacked any kind of transportation of their own was to ride freight trains. Transient workers could hitch a ride on an open box car free of charge as long as they avoided any guards. Many prison wardens would also provide a free meal and place to stay for those who had no money for lodging. Several farmers who had abstained from excessive debt during the Roaring Twenties were able to successfully keep food on their table for themselves as well as the transients who stopped by. Those who had enough were generous with those who had not. With a bit of luck, people looking for work were able to travel cross country almost free of charge.

Unfortunately, the nature of transient work made it hard for many young men to keep in contact with young ladies. Correspondence was the only way to court without a permanent address, and most men gave up the travel life once they had a wife.

There were very few jobs that could support a wife and family successfully. Working the land, or working at the train station were very popular options for young families, but despite hard work and
long hours, many families still only had bread to eat. Having a bit of lard on bread was a welcome change to those who had only had bread for a long time.

Sometimes even bread was hard to come by, so families would subsist on flour cooked in water with a little bit of spices in it for flavor. Meat was exceedingly scarce, so drippings were saved for gravy, and gravy was put on everything from potatoes to eggs.

One man’s family situation had gotten so bad that he had only potato peelings to eat for lunch, and lost the strength to lift bags of grain for work. His employer, noticing this, brought flour and other food stuffs to his family so that he could eat, and kept him on the payroll while his strength slowly returned. At that point, he could work as well as anyone else.

Works Progress Administration/Works Projects Administration projects helped employ many of the unskilled workers who had been living with no money at all. Though they couldn’t work very much, the pay was good enough to support a family of average size with little trouble. Unmarried men often worked in the Civilian Conservation Corps. They would live together in camps, and most of their wages had to be sent to their families, so the CCC was the most popular public works project.

During the Great Depression, little money could be spared for medicines or doctors’ visits. Home remedies were necessary for familial health. One woman remembers using lard and sulfur to remove ring worm. Another used a boiled onion with sugar to create a homemade cough syrup. Sage brush, common across much of America, was used in everything from tea to pimple removers.

For sore throats, kerosene with a teaspoon of sugar was considered a safe and effective cure. Axle grease was used for chapped hands. Many women made their own soap and hand cream because buying soap was too expensive. Garlic was a common remedy for rheumatism, asthma, high blood pressure, and worms. Cow manure was smeared on the chest to cure pneumonia and used as a poultice on infected sores. Slivers were removed with salt bacon, or bread and milk. Many weeds and herbs were used for serious conditions, with fair results.

One of the less affected professions during the depression was teaching and school administration. Public schools never failed to pay their employees. However, many students did not come to school when their financial troubles grew to a point where their parents could no longer afford to pay for their shoes.
Though public works projects would not employ women whose husbands were working, many couples found a way to work together in private employment. One man ran a gas station, and put a gas pump near his home during a time of prosperity. His wife ran the pump at home while he ran the pump at the station and together they made quite a tidy profit.

For the very poor in the 1930s, the term “home” could be somewhat flexible. Some were built directly on the ground and were infested by rats. Others lacked any kind of insulation and let in every gust of wind and all the dirt that came with it. Many children died while their families were destitute and had to be buried in little dirt plots with sinking gravestones.

While subsistence farming and home gardens ensured that many had enough to eat, professional farming was not as successful. Fresh produce was too expensive for many people, so even when the ground was fertile and beautiful food was being produced in great proportion, no one could buy it, and it was given away for free. Commercial farms were constantly being sold off to pay back taxes. Bartering and trading fresh produce became an attractive alternative to selling, and people who produced became their own market together.

**The People’s View of the Depression in the West (FA 01 622)**

During the Great Depression, popular recipes included things like Cornmeal Mush, which consisted of cornmeal boiled in water with milk on top if it was available, or Hasty Pudding, which consisted of flour boiled in water and served with cinnamon and milk. Occasionally, more complex recipes, like Vinegar Cobbler or Milkless-Eggless-Butterless Cake could be used by the families with a bit of wealth to spread around. Even then, fresh ingredients were hard to come by for those who did not live on a farm.

Molasses was utilized daily as a replacement for sugar, jam or honey. The distinctive flavor does get repetitive after a while, so there are variations allowed to families who could afford the luxuries. Bacon grease or heavy cream could be used to create different textures and sweet flavors when mixed with molasses.

For those living in the west, already struggling to survive the difficult frontier life, the crash of the stock market did not change quality of life very much. A culture of bartering existed among successful farmers, ignoring the banks and monetary system completely and adjusting to fit with each person’s level of need. A pound of butter could be exchanged for a bushel of potatoes, or two weeks room and board could be paid with a set of cut glass dishes.
Canning was a necessary practice for most anyone who had access to fresh food. In the country, where farming was the most common occupation, everyone canned and exchanged their crops so they could stay healthy all year long. The prevalence of canning also explained why there were so many mason jars about. In certain areas, mostly in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, moonshine was a community activity. For some, moonshine was the only way to make money for store bought luxuries, so sills would be working around the clock. Children began drinking moonshine around age twelve, and anyone with extra time would work and protect the stills.

Since everyone drank their moonshine out of handy, resealable canning jars, they all had an indentation on their nose from the narrow lip of the jar. Some even had scars from drinking from chipped jars. The revenuers sent from the city to enforce the prohibition were easily recognizable by their attire and their lack of an indentation, and thus easily avoided.

“We Laughed So We Wouldn’t Cry”: Stories about the Great Depression (FA 01 769)

For those who lived through the depression, poverty was normal. Their friends and neighbors were going through the exact same struggles, and for children, there was really nothing to compare their lifestyle to. After the economy recovered and children had a chance to grow up and discover prosperity, they recognized the scene of their childhood as lacking.

Despite the lack that everyone was experiencing, there were still families that had more than others, and opportunities for generosity and unselfish service were a nearly daily occurrence. One family experienced an opportunity for service at a ward picnic where instead of potluck; each family brought their own lunch. The disparity between the fresh corn on the cob, roast beef sandwich and marinated cucumbers with their neighbor’s plain bread and butter sandwiches was obvious. The mother’s decision to share was instantaneous, and the family was fine with having a sad lunch for one day when they were helping out their fellow ward members.

Many young men would go door to door soliciting food. Such young men were put to work performing simple household tasks in exchange for the meal. Children welcomed the reprieve from chores, and the exchange saved the young men from the indignity of begging. The story highlights the lack of fear for strangers that people during the Great Depression exhibited again and again.

When searching for a bathroom on a drive with a child that had a weak bladder, one mother encountered a household of children who were dirty and hungry because their mother was bedridden. Sending her family home, the more financially able mother cleaned the house, purchased
food and medicine for the children, and prepared a meal for the hungry children before she returned home. She had never met this family before, but there was no consideration for strangers or distrust of those who lived a very different lifestyle.

Another young child went to school with a young boy who never brought lunch. Suspecting that his family lacked the resources to provide him with a lunch, the boy told his father. Together they made the decision to provide the young boy with a lunch every day for the rest of the year.

On her birthday, one mother was presented with five dollars from her husband and told to spend it on herself instead of the children. She went into town to follow her husband’s instructions when she encountered a destitute woman with two children in a baby carriage. One was clearly too old to be there, but had to ride because she had no shoes. Instantly, the mother gave away her birthday money to provide for the child’s shoes, and returned home with no money, no hat, and a warmer heart.

Those who lived in the city and had better jobs before the depression often lost more and had no way to reclaim their lost lives. One man had worked for the government in Washington DC, making quite a good income for his family. The next year, he had not a single penny to his name and was unable to get a job in Salt Lake City after spending an entire day walking up and down the street and enquiring within every single property along Main Street. He was afraid to go home at the end of the day because he had no earthly way to provide for his family.

One couple lived on donuts for the last few days of every month because they were the least expensive way to get calories needed to survive, and their food budget would not stretch to encompass an entire month. Other couples experienced similar situations with Quaker Oats or other nutritionally deficient. These were not the poor but well fed people who worked farms in the west, or the completely destitute business people from the east. They were the students attempting to get an education during a time when there was no job market to await their advanced degree.

When the couple had their first baby, they had to use the tub in the place of a cradle for their baby, and often had to forgo food when they had to purchase expensive baby food for their small child. They and all their neighbors commiserated over their tiny one bedroom apartments. Some were so small that they had to put their bed up on the wall just to be able to open the front door. Some even shared a single bathroom with five other family apartments.

Eventually, the Depression ended, and people were able to move on. The effects of their sacrifice are still being felt today, generations later. Grandparents who had grown up after their parents lost
everything encouraged thrift in their children. With each rise and fall in the world market, people worry that history will repeat itself. While that would be devastating to most people, the American people have already proved that they can survive and thrive beyond such a difficulty, and they would be able to do it again, should such a disaster occur.