# Lessons from yesteryear

## Voices of the Great Depression

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*Editor's Note: In light of the ongoing recession, we asked five local residents to reminisce about what it was like to live through the Great Depression.*

Sam Heisey said the biggest effect the Great Depression had on his life came when it started.

The family was running two farms in Clay Township. The year before, Heisey's father suffered a nervous breakdown.

Then came the autumn of 1929.

"I had just started at Schaefferstown High School, about five miles away, and the easiest way to get there was by trolley car — the Ephrata-Lebanon line, which was a mile away from home. There was no ridership (after the Great Depression started) and it went bankrupt. My transportation was gone, then," Heisey said.

With no way to get to school, Heisey, then 13, dropped out of school to help on the farms.

At times, the Heiseys hired extra help for threshing wheat and silo filling. Wages were $1 per day plus a meal.

"Dad hired three extra men we didn't need, but the families needed help," the 93-year-old Brethren Village resident said.

The family raised poultry and dairy cows and grew tobacco and wheat. "We had a lot of wheat. That was a large part of the operation of all farms," Heisey said. "Wheat would sell at a profitable rate, but the Great Depression changed that quickly. It dropped from $2 to less than $1 for 100 pounds."

The price of milk, he said, also dropped to $1 a hundredweight.

"That's not too profitable for any farm," he said.

Eggs dropped to 20 to 22 cents per dozen, he said.

"When we graded them, we got more for large and 4 cents less for mediums," Heisey said.

But falling prices worked to Heisey's advantage when it came to cars. A Chevy that originally cost $1,100 to $1,200, dropped to $595 and then to $525, he said.

"I could have bought a new Ford business coupe with one windshield wiper and window for $495," he said.

But instead, he bought a used car, and got a Chevy sports coupe for $350 when he was 18. "That was quite a bargain for a guy with no car," Heisey said.

Heisey's advice for today's families is to save their money.

"I learned a lot about things from people who had nothing stored away," Heisey said.

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The Great Depression ran from 1929 until the onset of World War II and remains the worst economic catastrophe of modern times. At its peak in the United States, about a quarter of the work force was unemployed. Millions of families lost their life savings, their homes or their farms.

The family of Sam Heisey's wife, Arline, was among them.

"My parents didn't really tell us a lot, but they had to give the house back to the bank. They owed $1,000 to $2,000 on it," she said.

Her father was a machinist at Fleetwood Machine Shop, which made the bodies of Cadillacs and Buicks, but he lost his job. The family moved to Kutztown and finally to Willow Street. The town had no barber shop, so her father opened one in their living room.

After her father sold their car, they walked everywhere, she said. When their shoes wore out, they put cardboard in them. She had one Sunday dress and two or three school dresses.

"We had no ice cream anytime we wanted," Arline said. "The ice cream man came around our lane, but there was no money, so we couldn't get it."

They made do with "poor man's pot pie" — dough flavored with salt and pepper, but no meat. Sometimes her mother was able to add chicken to it, she said.

One Christmas, she got "a blackboard and my sister got a bench to sit on. That was it," she said.

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Marian Griffith of Pleasant View Retirement Community, Manheim, was a young girl during the Great Depression.

One day it was snowing hard, Griffith recalled. Her father was on his way home from Downingtown High School, where he was a math teacher, when he saw a couple and their two children walking through the snow — Griffith couldn't remember whether they were headed for Harrisburg or Philadelphia. Her father brought them home with him.

"They had a good meal and stayed in our house. The little girl only had a thin coat, so she got my old one and a doll," Griffith said. "He bought them bus tickets and got them on their way."

Because her father was a teacher, he had no trouble keeping a job during the Depression, she said.

Thanks to his job, the family didn't starve. She recalled that because families in those days didn't have electric

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refrigerators, just small ice boxes, her father rented a locker at the West Chester Ice Co., where the family kept the meat from half a cow and a pig they had bought and had slaughtered.

Her mother picked up meat from the locker on her weekly trips to the grocery store.

Her family didn't have a farm, but their house at the Exton crossroads was in a rural area, so they had a garden and chickens.

They also had a cow, Josephine, that her dad milked. "We had to churn our own butter. That was an awful job," she said.

Griffith recalled men coming to the door, asking for food. "They must have had our place marked," she said.

"We always had once a week someone ask, 'Missus, could you give us something to eat?'" Griffith said. "Mother would heat up leftovers, and they'd sit on our porch and eat.

They also put out food for tramps in a tin on a pole in the garage.

"We knew not to touch it because they might have been sick," she said.

Her mother also was aware of the tough times for the neighboring children. "My mother would make homemade soup and take it to school so the kids would have a good meal. Some were hungry," Griffith said.

Griffith said she prays that today's recession will get better for people. "It's not touching me, though. I'm living in a pretty nice place. I don't have to worry about it," she said.

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Paul H. Weaver was in his late teens and living with his parents in Diamond Station below Akron when the Depression hit.

"My dad was a tenant farmer until 1928 when he bought a truck farm," Weaver said.

The family raised a lot of vegetables and berries and had a peach orchard.

Weaver's brother didn't like to go to market; instead he liked to go out in the fields. That left tending market to Weaver, who left school after eighth grade because his father opposed further schooling.

"I learned how to work the practical way — enough to get me through life so far. I tended market (at Ephrata Market) from the time I was 17 until 79," said Weaver, who is now 96 years old and lives at Landis Homes in Lititz.

The family helped the neighbors by hiring their children to pick blackberries, raspberries and strawberries for 2 or 3 cents a quart.

Weaver thinks farm families fared better than those living in the city.

"We never went hungry," he said. "We had our produce and we butchered a couple pigs and had cured hams in the attic. We always had plenty to eat, but no money."

Weaver worked for his father until he was 21. His father paid him well, and he was able to save a little.

"We didn't run around every evening. We had no money for gas," Weaver said. "We did have a good home and didn't have to pay board. We had it good and didn't know it."

Weaver married Norma Landis in 1935. He said another couple joined them on their honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls to help defray costs.

After he was married for a while, Weaver purchased the family's 35-acre farm for $12,000, the same price his father had paid for it.

"We had rough times, but we got through," Weaver said. "You just have to adjust. We were taught to save our money. Stay at home more and take care of the job you have. We were brought up to work; there was no time for play."

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Quarryville Presbyterian Retirement Community resident George Cross was a child living in Philadelphia during the Depression.

"People were losing homes and everything. Families moved in with each other," Cross, 79, said. "We bartered for food and clothing. What you had you gave to someone for something else."

Cross and his mother, who was a legal secretary, moved into his great-grandmother's home along with his two aunts and their families.

"We had three families living in our home. It was kind of crowded," Cross said. "For the (three) children, they hung beds from the ceiling and the parents slept on the bottom."

Their families had a sufficient but hardly abundant amount of food, he said.

When the milkman brought bottles of milk, they'd freeze it and scoop the cream off for their ice cream, Cross remembered.

They ate graham crackers with milk, as well as day-old bread.

"Everything was made. We didn't buy a lot of cakes and cookies," he said.

While some of their food was store-bought, some came from neighbors who had family in rural areas, he said.

They didn't get a lot of tramps asking for food. "They were more in the downtown shopping area. We were still on the main line, but a little ways out," Cross said.

Clothes were passed from the oldest to the youngest and then passed on to other families, he said. Flour sacks with nice designs were used to make blouses or skirts for the girls, he said.

"I had two or three pants and two pairs of shoes," Cross said. "One size fits all."

When their socks got holes in them, they darned them. They became experts in shoe repair, too. They had a shoe holder mounted on the wall to rest the shoes on while they nailed and glued new pieces of leather in place, he said.

Cross' school attendance wasn't affected by the Great Depression. "School was right near our house, so we could walk it," he said.

For entertainment, Cross said, "we used to take a tennis ball, cut it in half and take our parents' brooms with the handle off and play half ball. You toss it like a frisbee, take a broom handle and hit it."

They used clotheslines for jump rope.

"Of course, we got hollered at for it," he said.

Cross' advice to get through today's recession is the same he gave his own children: "Get rid of your debt. Keep one credit card. What you use, pay off when the bill arrives. Buy what you need, not what you want."

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