

Chapter Seven

The Great Depression

In the previous two chapters we learned about our parents' childhood experiences. During the "Prohibition" years and during the "Roaring 20s," Louise grew up in an industrialized city, and Herb's childhood was in a very rural setting. These major events would have less of a direct impact on Herb or Louise, and more likely directly influenced the lives of their parents. The families in which our parents grew up were relatively well-off, and Herb and Louise probably experienced and remembered good times during the 1920s.

All of that would change as they entered and lived through their teen years, and into early adulthood. The 1930s are generally remembered as the years of the Great Depression. The following two chapters will explore what their lives were like as teenagers, and then as young adults, during the Great Depression.

Herb began his junior/senior high school years in 1929, left home to live in New York City in 1933, and joined the Navy in 1935. Louise left her Worcester home in 1929 to join her mother in Halcyon, California, where she would live practically for the rest of her life. Their daily lives during the 1930s certainly would have been influenced by the economic crises and social upheavals of the Great Depression.

For those reasons it may be helpful to include a very brief chapter on The Great Depression. There are numerous excellent sources of information on this topic, which our readers may be familiar with or easily access, and I will not attempt to duplicate any of them. I simply want to provide a context for this portion of our family history and for the stories that have been recorded or remembered.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 in the United States and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, and represented the harshest adversity faced by Americans since the Civil War.

Economic historians usually consider the catalyst of the Great Depression to be the sudden collapse of U.S. stock market prices starting on October 24, 1929. However, some dispute this conclusion and see the stock crash as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the Great Depression.

In his recent book Fareed Zakaria discusses the pros and cons of economic systems in western democracies and he summarizes this period as follows:

In the 1930s, capitalism had run aground, causing financial panic, collapse, and mass unemployment – and it seemed unable to right itself anytime soon. Along came Franklin Roosevelt, who let the government step in where the market was failing and got the country moving again. (Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World, W.W. Norton, 2020, P.61)

Economic Impact

Personal income, tax revenue, profits and prices dropped, while international trade fell by more than 50%. Unemployment in the U.S. rose to 23%. Most consumers, many of whom had suffered severe losses in the stock market the previous year, cut back their expenditures by 10%.

The United States experienced several widespread banking panics from the fall of 1930 through the winter of 1933. These panics took a severe toll on the American banking system. By 1933, one-fifth of the banks in existence at the start of 1930 had failed.

In the first half of 1930 consumers, many of whom had suffered severe losses in the stock market the previous year, cut back their expenditures by 10%. Interest rates had dropped to low levels by mid-1930, but the continuing reluctance of people to borrow meant that consumer spending and investment were depressed. Then a deflationary spiral started in 1931.

Farmers faced a worse outlook; declining crop prices and a severe drought in the Great Plains in the mid-1930s crippled their economic outlook. It ravaged the agricultural heartland of the United States. At its peak, the Great Depression saw nearly 10% of all Great Plains farms change hands despite federal assistance.

In Literature

The following paragraphs on the literature depicting the Great Depression can be found on Wikipedia.com, a collaborative online encyclopedia.

*The Great Depression has been the subject of much writing, as authors have sought to evaluate an era that caused both financial and emotional trauma. Perhaps the most noteworthy and famous novel written on the subject is **The Grapes of Wrath**, is published in 1939 and written by [John Steinbeck](#), who was awarded both the [Nobel Prize](#) for literature and the [Pulitzer Prize](#) for the work. The novel focuses on a poor family of sharecroppers who are forced from their home as drought, economic hardship, and changes in the [agricultural industry](#) occur during the Great Depression.*

*Steinbeck's **Of Mice and Men** is another important novella about a journey during the Great Depression. Additionally, Harper Lee's [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) is set during the Great Depression. Margaret Atwood's Booker prize-winning [The Blind Assassin](#) is likewise set in the Great Depression, centering on a privileged socialite's love affair with a Marxist revolutionary. The era spurred the resurgence of social realism, practiced by many who started their writing careers on relief programs, especially the [Federal Writers' Project](#) in the U.S.*

A number of works for younger audiences are also set during the Great Depression, among them the [Kit Kittredge](#) series of [American Girl](#) books written by [Valerie Tripp](#) and illustrated by [Walter Rane](#), released to tie in with the dolls and playsets sold by the company. The stories, which take place during the early to mid 1930s in [Cincinnati](#), focuses on the changes brought by the Depression to the titular character's family and how the Kittredges dealt with it. A theatrical adaptation of the series entitled [Kit Kittredge: An American Girl](#) was later released in 2008 to positive reviews.

*Similarly, **Christmas After All**, part of the [Dear America](#) series of books for older girls, take place in 1930s [Indianapolis](#); while **Kit Kittredge** is told in a third-person viewpoint, **Christmas After All** is in the form of a fictional journal as told by the protagonist Minnie Swift as she recounts her experiences during the era, especially when her family takes in an orphan cousin from Texas.*

Films Depicting Life During Great Depression

Of Mice and Men – 1939

The topic of home is front and center in this story, in which a couple of migrant workers, Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney, Jr., long for a home of their own, where they can be independent and raise rabbits. One of the men has an intellectual disability, and his poor decision threatens the big dream.

Make Way for Tomorrow – 1937

In the 1930s, many people lost their fortunes, and many of them were senior citizens. In Make Way for Tomorrow, a couple loses their home to foreclosure, and none of their five grown children are very enthused about taking them in. Reluctantly, two of them concede, but this means that Barkley (Victor Moore) and Lucy (Beula Bondi) must separate after many years of marriage. What's worse is that neither parent is made to feel welcome in their new accommodations. Of the film, Orson Welles said it "would make a stone cry."

Stella Dallas – 1937

In Stella Dallas, the title character (Barbara Stanwyck) pulls herself out of poverty by marrying well, but her past is never far behind her. She doesn't fool the members of high society and she fails to fit in. After she and her husband split up, she's determined that her daughter will continue to live the good life and Stella is faced with a difficult predicament.

Wild Boys of the Road – 1933

Wild Boys of the Road, portrays midwestern families in the very depths of the Depression. Two teenage friends decide to venture to New York to find work and discover that life hopping trains is less appealing, and more dangerous, than they anticipated.