

Down and out

by LINDA TAYLOR

IF YOU'VE EVER taken cod liver oil you'll know it has a taste you can't forget. People who lived through the Depression say the same thing about it. If you didn't live through it you'll never really understand what it was like — if you did, you'll never forget it.

Most of your parents were not as old as you are now during those 10 years between the stock market crash of 1929 and the start of World War II in 1939. Many of them weren't even born, others were just children. But most of your grandparents could tell you stories about the thousands of people who roamed the country looking for work; about the struggle to have enough food, clothing and fuel, if you were lucky enough to have a house you could afford to keep; about the humiliation of having to accept government relief; about the government 'soup kitchens' where food was dished out of wash tubs to those who couldn't afford a meal.

They could tell you about city people who sold everything they owned to buy food or pay the rent; about those who lost their houses; about farmers who abandoned their farms because they couldn't pay their debts; and about factories which closed because few people had the money to buy their products. Store owners went bankrupt and locked their doors when they had sold the last stock on their shelves. Thirteen-year-old children had to leave school to work for a few dollars a week to help support their families.

FAMILY DISASTERS

Imagine what it would be like if your father or mother lost their jobs. Like the people in the 1930s, they would look for any odd job they could find. In summer, there were lawns to cut; in fall, there were storm windows to clean and hang; in winter, there was snow to shovel. But, there were more people looking for this sort of work than there were people who could afford to pay them.

If such a disaster struck now, maybe you could help out. You could deliver papers, sell lemonade, or deliver goods for your local merchants. But, how many children are in your neighbourhood? And would there be enough work for all of you?

Maybe your mother could find part-time work in a department store or an office but, whatever she did, she would make very little money. As they did in the Depression, businesses would hire women and children because they could

pay them less. Some of these ideas might work out at first, but what would happen when there were simply no more jobs to be found?

If you live in a house, your parents probably have to pay a mortgage. Most people borrow money to buy a house and have to pay back so much every month. That loan is called a mortgage. In addition, they have to pay for taxes, heating, lighting and water. If all these bills added up to more than you and your family could earn you would have to start selling the things you own; the things you think are necessities would become luxuries.

During the Depression, most people didn't have cars. They walked. Many didn't have telephones. They visited their friends. There were no televisions. People read books and listened to the radio. Auction sales became a favourite pastime, both as an opportunity to pick up a few dollars and as entertainment for those who had nothing left to sell.

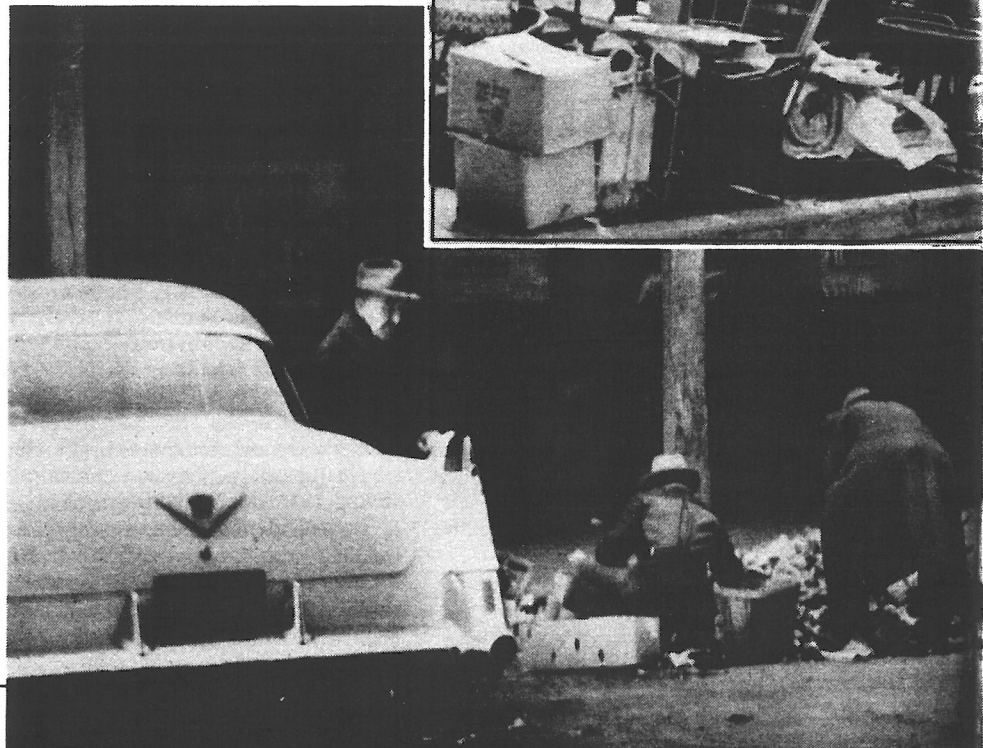
Once everything was sold and still the Depression continued, and still there were no jobs, it became impossible to pay the bills and many lost their houses. If mortgage companies don't receive the monthly payments on loans they take back the property for which the loans were made. This process is called foreclosure and victims of it during the Depression were forced to move into cramped rooming houses. And, without any money or prospect of finding work,

the only alternative for many was to accept government relief.

THE JOBLESS

When the Depression started it was thought to be temporary; things would soon improve. But, by 1933, the unemployed gave up the idea of finding a job. By this time, more than 700,000 Canadians were unemployed. They represented 28 per cent of Canada's wage earners.

Of those fortunate enough to be working, 56.2 per cent earned less than \$1000 a year, and another 23.7 per cent earned between \$1000 and \$1500 a year. Even 45 years ago, when prices were much lower than they are today, it was difficult to



feed, clothe and house a family of four on that amount.

And, many of those who kept their jobs had their wages cut drastically. There were literally thousands of people to fill their jobs for a fraction of their pay. They could do nothing but take what was given them and struggle to pay debts taken on before the Depression, when prices and interest rates on loans were higher.

Poverty became a way of life for thousands who previously had lived in comfort. Their dreams for the future dissolved as they joined relief lines where the destitute gathered to accept government assistance.

For many men who once had held responsible jobs and provided well for their families, relief was a disgrace. They put off accepting these 'handouts' until they had no food and fuel and were months behind in paying their bills. Many were further humiliated by a system which made it impossible to hide the fact that they were on relief. Instead of cash, they received vouchers to exchange for food, clothing, rent and fuel. They were meagre amounts which only allowed for absolute necessities; a life with no frills. Running out of toothpaste or razor blades could create a family crisis. The tragedy of illness was magnified because of inadequate medical help and little or no money for so much as a bottle of Aspirin.

While the poor in cities lost everything they had spent years working for, Canadian farmers suffered even more heart-

breaking hardships. The most written about aspects of the Depression are the devastating conditions of the Prairie farmers.

THE DUST BOWL

Farmers in Southern Saskatchewan, and an area which extended into Alberta in the west and Manitoba in the east (known as the Palliser Triangle), watched while winds literally blew away topsoil from millions of acres of land in 1931. South Saskatchewan, the hardest hit, became a desert, leaving 125,000 farmers destitute. In some cases, they auctioned what they had for a few hundred dollars and moved to the cities in the hope of receiving government relief. Others simply turned their backs on everything, leaving furnished farm houses, empty sheds, farm implements and dry wells behind them.

Further crop failures developed as a result of late spring frosts, a grasshopper plague which destroyed everything in sight, diseased crops (a condition called rust) and weather extremes between 1932 and 1936 which brought some of the coldest winters and hottest summers on record.

None of these things were new to farmers, but never before had they faced so much misfortune at once. Disasters struck one after the other and those crops which did grow were greatly reduced in value. Grains which sold for \$2 a bushel in the 1920s, brought only 40 or 50 cents a bushel.

Prairie farmers were not alone in their struggles, in spite of their uniquely harsh difficulties. A government survey on farm incomes showed that in 1932 the net cash income of the average New Brunswick farm was only \$20 a year.

RELIEF CAMPS

As the Depression continued to worsen, people from the West hopped onto grain trains in the hope of finding work in the East. They found closed down factories and easterners riding west in empty box cars. By 1933, they were completely frustrated in their search for non-existent jobs. Sometimes the roaming paid off with a temporary job in the bush, but, mostly, they travelled across the country because there was little else to do.

The problem of transients (drifters) was worse in Vancouver where the warmer climate attracted single unemployed men by the thousands. So, in 1932, the federal government established work relief camps for this band of young wanderers. Most of the camps were in the interior of British Columbia and many felt they were designed merely to isolate the transients to prevent a revolution.

In 1934, more than 25,000 young Canadians went to bush camps where they cleared trees, and built roads and landing fields. Their wages were 20 cents a day, plus food and shelter and about 1½ cents a day tobacco allowance (a pack of tobacco cost about 10 cents). The pay itself was an insult and, in most cases, the camp offered no recreational facilities. Those located in remote areas often had no connections with the outside world. The camps generally had little reading material and no means of pursuing an education through correspondence courses.

Operated by the Department of National Defence, these 'slave camps' were managed by ex-armed forces officers who believed in strict discipline. Between 1933 and 1935, disturbances took place in camps across the country. The camps had created the uprisings they were designed to stall.

Major trouble occurred in Regina when the famous On-To-Ottawa Trek was halted in that Prairie city. Unemployed single men were going to Ottawa to protest camp conditions. Police stopped them in Regina and a three-hour riot followed. One policeman was killed and more than a hundred demonstrators injured.

In terms of history, the Depression is as close as yesterday. To those born after it all took place, the Depression was simply a time, they are told, when people had little or no money. But, it destroyed many people. It left them feeling bitter about a government that many felt did little to help.

To the many who survived, it was a time they will never forget.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Sit down with your parents and go over the family budget. What would happen if the family's major source of income was lost? How would your family cope?
2. Interview people who lived through the Depression to obtain details on prices, wages and unemployment. From the interviews, write a report on conditions in your area during the Depression.
3. Imagine your family's income suddenly drops below the level needed to meet debts. Draw up a list of possessions you would sell in order to obtain money. Start with those things you would be most willing to sell and end with those you would be least willing to sell.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: *The Winter Year* by James H. Gray. Macmillan, Toronto. 1966. *Ten Lost Years* by Barry Broadfoot. Doubleday, Toronto. 1977.

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Many people, like this Montreal family (left) could not meet their rent or mortgage payments. The result was eviction and the family's possessions piled up in the street. Also in Montreal, unemployed men pick over garbage thrown out by a fruit merchant, hoping to find something to eat.

