How the Depression Affected Children
1 of 3

What was it like growing up during the Great Depression? For many people, life was a daily struggle. At the peak of the Depression, 25% of the nation's workers -- one out of four -- were unemployed. No job meant no money to pay the mortgage or buy food and clothes for the family.

Times were hard whether you lived in a city or on a farm, whether you were an adult or a child.

Families unable to pay the mortgage lost their homes and farms.

As a result, about 250,000 young people were homeless in the early years of the Depression. Many became nomads, traveling the highways and railways.

[ President Roosevelt signs the Declaration of War against Japan, December 1941](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/wwii/jb_wwii_subj_e.html)

**Depression & WWII (1929-1945)**

October 29, 1929, was a dark day in history. "Black Tuesday" is the day that the stock market crashed, officially setting off the Great Depression. Unemployment skyrocketed--a quarter of the workforce was without jobs by 1933 and many people became homeless. President Herbert Hoover attempted to handle the crisis but he was unable to improve the situation. In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president and he promised a "New Deal" for the American people. Congress created The Works Progress Administration (WPA) which offered work relief for thousands of people.

The end to the Great Depression came about in 1941 with America's entry into World War II. America sided with Britain, France and the Soviet Union against Germany, Italy, and Japan. The loss of lives in this war was staggering. The European part of the war ended with Germany's surrender in May 1945. Japan surrendered in September 1945, after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**"I remember . . ."**

(Reminiscences of the Great Depression)

Everyone has a story to tell about the past.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, some Michiganians bartered and traded for food, clothes, shelter and services. Sharing and "making do" became a way of life. People who lived during the Depression have interesting stories to share about how they coped with hard times.

The following reminiscences were published in *Michigan History Magazine*, January-February, 1982 (Vol. 66, No. 1). The last reminiscence is from an oral history of Richard Waskin.

**Marie Beyne Gillis Tubbs Remembers Her Father's Music**

The business of my father (Theodore J. Beyne) was at a standstill. Since his hobby was playing the violin in the newly formed Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra, he had time to search within himself for things to do. He began to compose beautiful music—three symphonies, quartettes, violin, piano and cello concertos and other piano music.

My first memory of hearing his music played was at the beginning of the Depression at the band shell at the city's John Ball Park. His orchestral arrangement of Hoagy Carmichael's "Star Dust" was performed by the WPA orchestra, which had been formed to provide employment for out-of-work musicians. How clearly I remember, out of the depths of dark feelings springing from closed banks and no work, the wonderful sensation that comes from something more than "bread alone." And I remember his pleased reaction (he was overwhelmed) at the audience's appreciation shown with lots of applause. "Depression go hang for the moment."

**Phyllis Bryant Remembers Her Christmas Doll Bed**

In 1929 I was six years old, but I remember quite a few things from that era, especially growing up and never having too much.

What sticks mostly in my mind was losing my money in the bank. I didn't quite understand why that bank had to close and take my money, which probably was only a few dollars. When they started paying off a few years later, my check was eleven cents. It helped when my brother gave me his, which was eighteen cents, and my older sister's, which was twenty-three cents. I was really in the money then.

Beans were a common meal and were often given to us by a farmer friend. What helped them along was the hot homemade bread. We usually had lots of homemade cookies and cakes, too. But it was kind of great, going to family reunions and eating their "store bought" cookies and bread. My mother would cook for hours and hours on a little wood-burning laundry stove. Summers, a three-burner kerosene stove was used. I recall going to the gas station for ten cents worth of kerosene and can still smell the stink of it!

My dad was a carpenter and farmer and did lots of things to keep us going. We lived in the small village of Imlay City, close to a family that owned a cow. My dad milked her twice a day, fed her and cleaned the stall. In return we got two quarts of milk a day. With all the canning my mother did from our garden, our weekly grocery bill wasn't that big. We only bought the bare necessities....

Christmas was an exciting time, but there were never too many gifts. I got a doll bed one year with a doll and aluminum dishes. It was the best Christmas I remember. (A couple of years later it dawned on me that my dad had made the bed.) We always had homemade candy and popcorn balls. The lights on the tree were very difficult. If one burned out, the whole string would go out. So there you were with a good bulb trying all the sockets until you found the burned-out one. When there was no money to buy extra bulbs, all you had to do was break the bulb, twist the wires and screw the bulb back in the socket, being very careful if you didn't get all the glass off....

I was in high school in 1937 when the first strike in Flint occurred. I thought that was so terrible—men with good jobs, steady employment and making good money putting their families through that.

**Carmen Carter Remembers Turkey Farming**

In 1929 Orlo and I had been married two years and had a year old son, Douglas. We were just nicely getting started in the turkey raising business on his parents' farm near Bridgeton. We had about a thousand young turkeys that spring and we bought feed on credit during the growing season and paid for it when we sold the turkeys at Thanksgiving time.

But that year was different. The newspapers were full of news about bank closing, businesses failing, and people out of work. There was just no money and we could not sell the turkeys. So we were in debt with no way out.

But when we read about the bread lines and soup kitchens in the cities, we felt we were lucky because we raised our own food. Our house was rent free, just keep it in repair. Our fuel, which was wood, was free for the cutting. Then our second child, Iris, was born and our biggest expense was doctor bills. However, this too was solved when our doctor agreed to take turkeys and garden produce for pay.

About that time my husband and a friend started operating a crate and box factory near Maple Island. After expenses they were each making about a dollar a day. Food was cheap. Coffee was 19 cents a pound, butter 20 cents, bacon the same, with a five pound bag of sugar or flour about 25 cents.

Gasoline was five gallons for a dollar so for recreation we would get into our 1926 Overland Whippet and go for long rides. We also had an Atwater Kent radio we could listen to when we could buy batteries for it.

I had always liked to write poetry so I decided to submit some to Grit, a weekly newspaper. I was delighted when they accepted them and paid me $2 each for them. That money bought a large bag of groceries at that time. I continued to write for Grit for several years.

Orlo finally got a job as a mechanic at a garage in Grant. He earned $15 a week and for us the Depression was over. But it taught us to really appreciate what we had.

**Richard Waskin: An Oral History**

*Richard Waskin talks about life during the Great Depression. His parents were born in Poland. He was born in East Chicago, Indiana. When he was three years old he went back to Poland with his parents. They returned to this country when he was four years old. They came to the Detroit area where he spent most of his life.*

Mostly I remember if it hadn't been for my mother who was an excellent seamstress, and she seemed to find jobs here and there with the department stores, I don't know how we would have made it, because my father was a common laborer, a factory worker, and there just wasn't [sic] any jobs at that time.

Sometimes during the winter...when the snow fell in Detroit they called for people that they wanted to shovel the snow, and of course everybody didn't get hired—you just had to go out there and the foreman or whoever would be throwing the shovel and if you happened to catch it you're hired. And so my father would go out there and on occasion he would be hired and earn a couple of dollars or so for the day's work there. Otherwise it was kind of catch or catch can there....

Well, there's one thing that happened with me and perhaps I was fortunate that Detroit had, possibly, a welfare system. Well I know they did, 'cause we had it. One of the things was that I came down with a mastoid which was a very serious thing at that time. It's very rare now because of antibiotics. But my whole side of my head was swollen and they called what they called "a city physician." And at that time doctors made house calls. So he came out and took one look at my head and he called the ambulance immediately and they took me to Children's Hospital cause I was only 11 years old. And they operated on me that night and I must assume that that saved my life at that time. So that was one of things I had to go through.

But another thing as a child that I remember was that you stood in the welfare line somewhere on Michigan Avenue—I don't remember just exactly where—and they were passing out sweaters for children and we were fortunate enough to get me a grey sweater, and I can remember how proud I was of having that sweater and how warm I felt with that thing on.

Shoes, of course, were a problem and many times I remember I wore out the soles down to the pavement, so to speak, and you had to put cardboard in there. But then my father he got hold of some shoe forms--metal ones--and he would buy leather. He would cut out the sole--with nails and a hammer on these shoe forms --he would put new leather on my shoes and probably on my brothers' also....

I went to college, Wayne University, and because I was a champion runner—I happened to be the quarter mile champion. No, excuse me, this was in college. In high school I was west side champ in the city and so more or less recruited by Wayne—they had a pretty good track team them. And they had what they called the NYA, National Youth Administration. This was kind of a Depression department, you might say, and if you did some work for the university they would pay you enough so that you could pay your tuition and get through school that way.

So, being a champion runner I had no trouble getting on NYA and the coach then put me in the athletic office putting in figures for whatever was expenditures, maybe an hour's work a day or so. I pretty much got through college on my own. But that was when I became Michigan university champion in the 440, and I remember it was right here in East Lansing at Michigan State that they had the meet, and I think I have the photograph of me then and I do remember I was only 17 years old and they made a big point of it over the PA system.