

Farming in the Great Depression

The Depression was not only a tragedy in the larger towns and cities of America. Although many people thought the rural areas were not affected, because farming was a self-sufficient occupation, Northeast Missouri was hit. It was an era that few will forget.

The troubles that affected the Northeast Missouri started, partly, from the stock market crash on October 30, 1929—Black Tuesday, but the failure of the stock market was not the only reason Northeast Missouri was struck with hard times in the 1930s. The failure of most banks in the area caused the floor of the local economy to drop. Many people woke up and found their life savings gone. Others not only lost their savings, but found that money just deposited, lost as well. Wallace Farmer, a life-long resident of Adair County, remembers his father putting money in a local bank after buying a single pair of shoes. When he walked across the street, the bank closed, taking his freshly deposited money with it. Only three banks survived the stock market crash: the National Bank, the Bank of Kirksville and the Citizen's Bank.

Farm production was also curtailed because of the stock market. Low prices, bad weather conditions, and chinch bugs plagued the farmers from 1930 to 1940.

Wallace Farmer remembers 1933 being a difficult year for farming. The farmers had swamped the market with livestock in a rush to gain money; prices were much lower than the product was worth—so low that it was often more expensive to raise a crop or cattle than to let the land lie idle. In that same year, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) which raised the price of farm products for paying farmers not to raise crops or livestock. By 1934, 936 out of 1,455 farmers completed corn and hog reduction contracts. The government controlled 87% of corn land and 95% of hog production.

Along with low prices, 1933 was the year of the chinch bugs which invaded and destroyed the crops that the farmers had raised. Russell Murfin remembers, "First the bugs would clean up the wheat if they could find it. Then, they would head for the oats. When the oats were gone, they would finish up the corn." To deter the chinch bugs, creosote was applied with log-like ropes that were dragged around the field. The bugs would not cross the oil-like substance. Mr. Murfin also remembers, "I had a German neighbor once. He caught on to the idea that if he soaked binder twine with the creosote and stretched it around it would do the same thing. He would just keep soaking it. He had heard it said the bugs wouldn't go over it. So he did that and a few days after, I asked him how his binder twine worked out. 'Did the chinch bugs go over it?' I asked. He said 'Nope...but they went under it!' " He added, "There was just no way to keep all the bugs from crossing the creosote."

Another reason farming was rough was the drought of 1934. The land was so dry that the farmers were forced to feed their cattle the leaves from the trees because they were the only thing green around. It is said that when the cattle heard the sound of an axe, they would stampede in the direction of the noise.

In 1935, the rain caused farming as much trouble as the dryness did in the previous year. Rain prevented farmers from

getting crops into their fields. If the crop did get planted, it was too wet in the fall to harvest.

In the following year, the drought returned, worse than it had been in 1934. The dry weather also brought dust bowls upon the region. Many people remember a time when the dust made the horizon hazy and left a film of dust on porches. This dust was once valuable topsoil that was left idle in Kansas and Oklahoma.

In the summer of 1936, grasshoppers invaded the fields of Northeast Missouri, causing considerable damage to corn, soybeans, and pasture crops. To deter the grasshoppers, the government distributed poison bran mash through the Adair County Agriculture Extension Agency. It distributed 10,000 pounds of mash to 56 farmers to protect 5,000 acres in crops. The next year, farmers saved an estimated \$60,000 with the poison bran. In 1938, 194 farmers reported 266 cases of sleeping sickness in horses. Meetings were held to discuss the disease and the treatment.

Through all the hardships of farm life, the center of the community was the school. Since church attendance had dropped so drastically, people turned toward the school for social events. Parties were organized by the Literary, which was the equivalent of the PTA of today. At these parties, the neighbors would gather and eat watermelon and ice cream "if there was money for ice," recalls Sue Murfin. Cards were also a favorite pastime during the days of the Depression.

In the city, while soup lines fed many people, country people ate about the same. "It was one blessing we did have," Sue Murfin said. Faye Farmer remembers, "We raised the food we had. I never remember any shortage of food. In the summer time, I remember we picked blackberries. The whole family would go in the morning and pick them. In the afternoon, we would clean and can them. We had 105 quarts that year." Meat was plentiful also because of low prices for livestock. What couldn't be raised was available at the store down the road. Wallace Farmer recalls one man "...walked down to the store one cold day with roosters to buy groceries with and on the way over, it was so cold that one of them froze to death. He took it back home with him and ate it."

When the World War II began, prices rose and the lack of jobs turned into an abundance of jobs. The Depression taught many about conserving money and the need to prevent another. Wallace Farmer sums it up when he said, "I think it's hard to express the overall feeling of people. I didn't ever think it would be any different that what it was. There just wasn't any money. I didn't know there was any other way but to be hard up all the time."

By Christopher Lowe
