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Local Residents Offer Perspective, Advice from the Great Depression

By Jennifer Wake



Farm Security Administration: farmers whose topsoil blew away joined the sod caravans of "Okies" on Route 66 to California. (Circa 1935)
Photograph from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.



Rossmoor resident Frank Wilking, 96 Lafayette United Methodist Church members Bruce and Martha Gerringer Moraga resident Ed Jones, 89 Photos Jennifer Wake

With stories of tent cities being erected in towns across the country (some as close as Sacramento), hundreds lining up to apply for a single job, and Feed the Children trucking food for 3,600 families to northern Indiana last week, our current recession seems dire. Local residents who lived through the Great Depression, however, underscore that it could be a lot worse.

In addition to economic woes, by May 1934, one of the most severe droughts in U.S. history covered more than 75 percent of the country and severely affected 27 states. In 1935, experts in Pueblo, Colo., estimated that 850 million tons of topsoil had blown off the Southern Plains.

Lafayette United Methodist Church member Bruce Gerringer, 82, lived in the small town of Buckeye Hill in southeast Colorado during the Depression and remembers the huge winds that kicked up these dust storms.

"We just barely made it," Gerringer said. "During the wind storms, it was so bad that my mother used to scoop the dirt with a shovel to sweep the house. All the windows were stuffed, all the doors were stuffed. If we went outside, we needed ropes to walk from one building to the next. The storms were so high, you could see them coming for miles."

During 1939, Gerringer said his family farm lost 110 cows and horses to suffocation.

Long-time Moraga resident John McCormick was also born in Colorado, but says Denver was spared the devastation of the Dust Bowl, but not of the economy. He was ten years old when the stock market crashed in 1929. Although his family had bought a house in 1925 and his father still had a job during the Depression, by 1933 his family could no longer make the payments and they lost their house. At the same time, their car broke down and they lost that, too.

"My parents finally separated due to their financial problems," said McCormick. At age 15, he worked 40 hours a week. "I slept at high school," he said. "You had to sleep somewhere."

Ed Jones - who is recuperating at a care home in Moraga - was nine years old in 1929. He remembers stuffing pieces of cardboard in his shoes to get by. His family lived in a three bedroom house in Oakland, and family members would come to stay while they looked for work, or took training courses.

"All the boys (including uncles) would sleep in one room, all the girls in another, and my parents would get the third. That was the rule," he said. When Jones was 13, his father became ill and wasn't able to work. Jones worked two jobs - one behind a soda counter, the other making deliveries on foot for a local pharmacy - while his 17-year-old older brother went to work at PG&E to help support his parents and three other siblings.

Lafayette United Methodist Church organist Ken Mansfield's family also struggled. Mansfield was about four years old when his family lived in a cabin on a hillside above the Salinas Valley. "There was no water, no electricity and we cooked on a woodstove," he said. "We felt very lucky if we were able to shoot a quail or deer to eat. It affected my life. I always finish what's on my plate."

Gerringer, McCormick, and Jones all served in the military. According to the book, "Families, History and Social Change," more than 70 percent of boys in nearby Berkeley eventually served in the armed forces following the Depression. By 1943 there were more than 40,000 victory gardens on vacant plots in the East Bay.

Moraga Retreat Care resident Margaret Steiner, 93, said, "You learned a lot of ways to extend your food budget with omelets, hash and casseroles. If you had anything like an apple tree, you canned all your fruit. You didn't buy frozen food or strange canned food."

In the 1930s, while attending college, Steiner's big treat was to stop and get a sticky bun and a cup of coffee, costing 15 cents - not incredibly cheap, considering it cost the same for a day at the movies. "We had to ration our outings, and try to find other things to do that didn't cost money."

For those going through hard times today, Steiner says, "Don't spend it 'til you have it, unless it's an emergency." As for the stimulus package, she says to give the President a chance. "He has so many things in the works. Let's encourage him."

McCormick thinks people shouldn't worry about the stock market, either. "Forget about it. In time, the stocks will come back up," he said. "The scary thing is that my Depression lasted from 1929 to 1941. Keep your fingers crossed; this could be a long time."

Rossmoor resident Frank Wilking, 96, says that although the Great Depression

was a devastating time for our country and its citizens, "we got through it."

"This is a deep recession, not a depression," Wilking noted. "But it's awful damn close to it."

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