

A Teenager During the Depression Years

Dewey Englesma

My first teenage year was spent as an eighth grade student in the same one-room public school house where the Hope Protestant Reformed congregation assembled for their worship services on the Lord's Day. Our family had been members of this small rural church from its origin during the 1924 "common grace controversy". Throughout the years 1929 to 1936, we had been without a minister and, although several calls had been extended, it wasn't until 1936 that we received our own pastor. He accepted the call with a yearly salary of nine hundred dollars – truly a depression-day wage. It was barely enough for an existence, let alone a living.

When the year 1929 with its economic disaster crashed upon the nation, I was nearing my fourteenth birthday, and my formal education had been concluded. By today's standard it would be labeled a meager education; and right so, for the eight grades with some fifty or sixty pupils were being taught by one teacher.

There wasn't a party to celebrate my graduation, but I was the recipient of a gift. A horse and cultivator were passed along to me, indicating that I had passed my "Shibboleth". I crossed the ford, and it was time for me to begin a man's work. For you see, my parents were farmers, and relatively poor even before the depression years, as they cared and provided for the needs of their eleven children. Now their financial struggle was intensified as they bent their backs to keep from losing the farm. These efforts became a daily battle as the returns for their farm products not only continued to decline, but some produce even became worthless.

How well I remember one such occasion. I was selected to make the early morning (2:30 a.m.) safari to the local wholesale market with the strawberries which had been picked the previous day. I found the market flooded with berries for the harvest that June had been plentiful but the buyers were few. Several hours later, and with day light arriving, the disgusted farmers began to pack up and leave. I became desperate and sold the whole load to the lone buyer at twenty-five cents a crate. I was sick to my stomach as we made the transaction, for this price would hardly pay the cost for the sixteen containers. But neither could I force myself to dump them in the Grand River as some of the growers had threatened. Upon arriving home, I told my father the circumstances of the deal, and he estimated that the eight of us had worked that whole day for the sum total of \$1.50. Well, that was the last of berry picking for the season. The younger children were glad and didn't hide the fact either. We older ones were a bit more sensitive to the heartache and despair of our father and mother as they watched this bountiful red ripe field shrivel and go to waste.

Incidents such as this were multiplied during the long lean years and have made a lasting impression on me. Because the last forty years have been years of prosperity and affluence, the majority of this generation's teen-agers find it next to impossible to visualize, let alone sympathize, with the life style of the depression years, and its lack of what is currently deemed a necessity.

Beside the daily barn chores of milking, feeding, and cleaning, there was the seasonal field work of plowing, harrowing, haying, cultivating, grain cutting, potato digging, and the never-ending berry and bean picking. If ever a thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen-year-old boy is expected to hold up his end, it is in the bean and berry patch. And let me clue you, my brothers and sisters (especially my sisters) were not hesitant to let me know exactly what was demanded of me here.

It was also the duty of the teen-age son to provide water for the multitude of house-hold tasks. This water had to be carried by the tons of gallons from the spring which was a least a block away from the house. And it didn't matter, be it blizzard or blistering heat, the call was continually – water!

Also to me, the boy just out of knee britches, was given a third name. Besides my given name and water-boy, I responded to wood-boy (really in the Frisian dialect it has a much nicer sound). It was – don't forget the wood, young one. How could I forget? I had already spent day after day after day at

the opposite end of the crosscut saw cutting down the trees, then trimming the limbs off with the axe, after which the wood was sawed into stove length pieces to be hauled upon the sleigh and stacked up beside the barn. Here is where insult was added to injury. “Scrounge around for some kindling too.” So the wood was brought in again to be greedily devoured by the huge kitchen range. That apparatus surely had an insatiable appetite.

No, it wasn't quite all work and no play. We had our fun too during many an evening and noon hour while the horses rested. (Horses must have their rest periodically; I often did wonder – and what about me?) We played either softball or baseball depending on which type of balls we found lodged in the debris along the banks of the river. The bats were either a wagon wheel spoke or a taut straight tree limb. Yes, even the fielder had his mitt. This was the one item which required a bit of know-how in order to protect our hands and fingers. Whenever I tell my own children how we improvised, every single child goes into gales of uproarious laughter and their remarks border on disbelief. But to me it was serious business to get this “mitt” to fit just right. I would take a burlap sack, fold it into a tight square and tie each corner with binder twine. If with precision and care, the twine was tied just taut enough, a perfect pocket would be formed – which was my goal. My brother and I spent many hours using our home-made equipment. The aged grandmother who lived with us was of the opinion we were “wasting” our lives by our frequent participation in this sport, which she considered to be simply worldly pleasure. According to her my father should see to it that we were in the house learning the Scriptures.

In order to provide bread for his children, or to keep a roof over the family's head, many a husband and father engaged in some rather peculiar tasks. I personally knew a man, a close family friend, who came to our farm for the express purpose of hunting for frogs. This man was a skilled tradesman, ambitious and diligent but unemployed. He would arrive in the morning and spend the day sloshing through the swamps, bayous, and along the river bank whacking these pop-eyed creatures with his club. Whenever he was finished for the day, he would come to the back yard of our house where the boys would help him cut off and skin the legs of these critters. He sold these appendages to a local hotel for a few cents a dozen and so earned a couple of dollars. Today when we visit together we share a hearty laugh as we reminisce over some of the unusual and ridiculous means of earning a thing dime in the frogging days. The evening's conversation invariable closes on a more sober note as we recall God's watchful care over us through those trying and humbling years.

I have tried to portray for you young people, teen-agers, and others, a glimpse into the life of one who lived in the depression years. Our God takes care of us, as He has done for all His people throughout the ages past. He is faithful and knows us and our circumstances. He will surely save His Church through all of history. For He is God, and history is His eternal counsel unfolding before our eyes, and in our lives it has its salutary effect.

So, we can say with the assurance of faith to you Protestant Reformed teenagers and others, do not fear what may come, and will come in your lives before Christ returns. How comforting for all of life are the words spoken by Habakkuk the prophet in chapter 3:17, and 18: “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stall: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

But they were good years we believe, since all of God's works are good. We can say too, that we were content, even though there were many difficulties. It is entirely possible that at the present time the struggle to maintain a Christian walk is even more difficult. To be sure, we who are God's children do not despair because of the lack of physical bread. I believe it to be true that when the child of God has little earthly bread, God provides His children with bread that is of inestimable value – the spiritual bread of life.

Originally Published In:

Vol. 34 No. 2 April 1975