

-MY STORY-

Growing Up On A Farm During the Great Depression

Roland Krogstad

I was born in a farmhouse in Hartland Township, Pierce County, Wisconsin in 1921. I attended Forest Home one-room Country School from 1928 to 1936. I attended Ellsworth High School, participating four years in baseball and football and graduating with the class of 1940.

My parents, Rudolph and Mabel (Eidem) Krogstad took over operation of his father Albert's 160-acre farm in East Hartland in about 1920. They engaged in diversified farming on a 50/50 rental basis, working the land with horses and a Titan tractor. We had pigs for meat, cows for milk, and chickens for eggs and meat. We grew hay, corn, oats, barley, wheat, and lye. We had a raspberry patch and an apple orchard for fruit. Every spring we planted a large garden with veggies for the summer table. Mother canned fruit, vegetables, and meat for the winter table.

The Great Depression was accompanied by drought, hot, and dry years, especially during 1931, 1934, and 1936. Crops failed, and cattle were turned into the fields to do the "harvesting." Prices for farm products dropped. Egg prices declined to about six cents per dozen. Milk dropped to less than one dollar per 100 pounds.

Our family ate a lot of leftovers. I remember saying, "In 1929, we lived on hash all winter," meaning fried potatoes and ground beef or pork. Although we grew much of our food on our farm, we went to a nearby store, at Bay City, Maiden-Rock, or Esdaile, to get such things as sugar, coffee, cereals, thread, and utensils. We usually took a crate of eggs along to be candled and credited to our grocery bill. Surplus farm products were also distributed to Wisconsin's needy and unemployed. We received a few sacks of free government wheat to be ground into flour. I liked the bread.

Growing up on a farm during the Great Depression meant that I was taught many farming skills and values at a young age. Since money was scarce, we learned to live without, "clean up our plates," and take care of our clothes and other belongings. Exchanging help without pay (bartering) was common.

It was common for children to help with work on the farm as soon as they were able. Being the oldest boy in the family, I learned to milk cows by hand at age seven. Four years later, I drove horses for plowing, harrowing, and cultivating corn. I helped put up hay and shock grain. By age 14 I drove a bundle team on the threshing crew. Brother Bill helped mother with the housework.

Soft water came from roofs of the home and piped into a concrete cistern adjacent to the kitchen. In summer time the cistern served as our "refrigerator" by hanging pails and other food containers on ropes from

the top of the cistern. Later, a small hand pump was installed to pump water from the cistern up to the kitchen. Bob's job was to keep the cook stove reservoir full for heating the soft water. Hard water for drinking and baking purposes was pumped from a 400 foot well into another cistern for livestock, household drinking and cooking purposes.

Monday was wash day. We didn't have an automatic clothes washer and dryer. Our first washing machine, a wood stave "tub" with an agitator, was belt driven by a gas-engine prone to run out of gas and difficult to start. The wringer rollers were operated by a crank and "elbow grease." Mom used the washboard to scrub the clothes. We boys helped carry baskets of washed clothes to hang on the clotheslines in summer and winter. Freeze-dried clothes had a special refreshing aroma.

We didn't have cell phones. We had a large wall-mounted telephone containing a magneto with a crank to ring the bells and carry our voices over an eight-mile rural, 10-party line installed by the Hartland Farmers Telephone Company in 1910. It had about 200 subscribers on several party lines connected to a switchboard in Esdaile. When someone called a neighbor on a party line, all phones rang. Those who listened were referred to as "rubber neckers." For lights we had candles, kerosene lamps and lanterns. About once a week mom heated her curling iron in the chimney of the kerosene lamp so she could curl her hair. Later, an Aladdin lamp with a mantle gave brighter light.

Brother Bill and I looked for opportunities to make extra money. We collected pieces of scrap iron from around the buildings and hauled a couple loads in our play wagon to sell to our neighbor Harry Serrill our trucker. We sold garden seeds for 10 cents a packet. I trapped pocket gophers for 10 cents a tail, and worked for neighbors for 50 cents a day. A couple of winters when roads were drifted shut for the mailman, he asked me to carry the mail on skis across the fields for over two miles for about 50 cents. This made me feel good, that I was trusted to do this responsible job. During the fall of the year I helped Dad trap skunks. He skinned off the hides and sold them to a fur dealer in Red Wing. One dry year when Lake Pepin was low, we tied a washtub to our waist and went barefoot into the water to hunt for clams. We sold the shells and some nuggets for about \$3.00.

Mother took pride in raising a lot of chickens. They were raised by cluck hens or ordered through the mail. They were used for barter, five young chickens to our Methodist preacher for baptizing my youngest brother Bob. We gathered extra food such as butternuts and wild blackberries in the pasture and along roadsides. I tapped maple trees during the spring and boiled maple syrup for mom's pancakes and French toast. We identified bee trees for possible honey in the fall. We wore hand-me-down clothes which mother patched for longer wear. When no longer usable she sewed them into rag strips to be made into rag rugs.

Threshing Days: Once a year during the month of August, a steam-powered threshing rig came into our driveway. This was an exciting time for children. It took about 10 teams of horses with wagons and 20 men to thresh our small grains. Two neighbor women worked over hot stoves to prepare and serve two delicious meals per day. Two lunches were also served per day, one in mid-forenoon and one in mid-afternoon. They

were brought to the rig area and to the field where the men were loading bundles.

Corn Shredding: Corn harvest took place in late fall after the corn was ripened. Crews were smaller than for threshing. The corn stalks and husks were chopped up by the shredder and blown into the barn for fodder and bedding. The ears of corn were removed by the shredder and dropped into a wagon box and hauled away to be unloaded into a corncrib. Sometimes corn ears were husked by hand either before or after the corn stalks were cut in the field. Usually hogs or cattle were let into the cornfields to glean whatever corn or stocks remained in the field.

Building and Repairing a Fence: Straight lines were sighted or wire lines were stretched to line up white oak or steel posts about 15 to 20 feet apart. Postholes were dug about two feet deep and tamped firmly around the bottom of the wood post and again near the top of the hole. Posts were braced at the fence corners and at gate entrances.

Putting up Wood: Providing wood for the kitchen cook stove and the round oak heater was vital to keep the family warm over the winter months. Using the cross-cut saw, lifting logs, and swinging axes was good exercise for a baseball and football player in high school. I became adept at felling trees. Later, logs and trimmed branches were hauled and piled near the wood shed. The buzz rig was brought in to saw the wood into 16 to 18 inch chunks that were split and piled to dry before use during the next winter season. We boys had the job of carrying the wood into the house to fill the wood boxes.

Good Times and Bad: Our families were fortunate to have grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins living within close proximity, such as at Esdaile, Forest Home School, Warrentown and nearby farms. Many dropped by to say hello over a cup of coffee. Others lived in Red Wing, the Twin Cities, Chicago, and other places. Mother also liked to invite neighbors over for lunch and socializing. Family picnics and reunions were common at Colville Park, Red Wing, and at Uncle Ben's farm.

Our families took turns celebrating New Years, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas holidays together. If roads were bad, they would come by team and sleigh. Scandinavian foods were always a part of the festivities such as: lefse, Krumkake, Fattigmand, Rosettes, and Sandbakel. Children often went sledding or skiing. At other get-togethers, the adults played 500, canasta, or flinch, while others played dominos, Old Maid, or checkers.

Schools and churches put on programs by students for holidays and special occasions. Birthdays and weddings were celebrated. Annual church suppers were common. Saturday night dances were sponsored by dance pavilions. On the radio we listened to Slim Jim and the Vagabond Kid sing cowboy music, or listened to Amos N' Andy and Fibber McGee and Molly. We also entertained ourselves with records on a spring-driven gramophone record player. One day the spring broke and the record came to a dull agonizing halt. We then tried to spin the records with our fingers. Sunday afternoon softball and baseball games were played at Bay City, Ellsworth and other towns. Many times during the summer time we would take a bath in the kitchen and go to Red Wing on Saturday nights to see a movie, such as Tom Mix, Lassie, and Popeye the Sailor Man. The

Pierce County Fair in the fall was popular. Being in the Forest Home Champs 4-H club, I entered a Holstein calf. The judge lined up the six calves side by side. My calf was on one end. Could it be number one? It turned out to be number six!

Misfortunes

In addition to the hardships of the Great Depression, accidents, fires, floods, and sickness also occurred. Farmers and others were known for coming together to provide help to neighbors in times of emergencies and misfortunes. In late summer of 1930, Elmer Johnson, neighbor to the north of our farm, suffered a devastating loss when his granary burned to the ground. Early that morning, Thorsten Eidem, who was staying with our family at the time, phoned neighboring farmers, asking them to bring shovels and sacks to the Johnson place in order to save some of the grain which lay smoldering on the ground, exposed to the elements. A wind came up and blew sparks onto the straw pile (which burned completely), and into the haymow. Elmer Powers crawled on top of the barn to pour water on the wooden roof to prevent the barn from catching fire. Harry Serrill climbed and positioned himself inside at a window near the peak of the barn to prevent the hay from catching fire. Women carried water from a cistern and Elmer and Harry lowered ropes to pull the pails of water up to pour on the barn roof and haymow. They were successful in saving both hay and barn. I remember helping with the milking of the Johnson cows on my way to school while the men were shoveling to save the grain. Later, Elmer Johnson built a round fire-resistant steel storage bin for his grain.

The Armistice Day Storm of 1940 became known as the worst storm of the century. It started in the forenoon as an average rain. I was walking from a farm to a class at River Falls State Teachers College. The rain turned to driving snow and sleet. Roads became hazardous and travelers became stranded. Duck hunters were trapped near Lake Pepin. Football games were cancelled. Hogs suffocated in a straw stack on the Gordon Halverson farm.

When I was starting my sophomore year in high school our family was ordered off the farm and moved to Trimbelle Township west of Ellsworth to live in a country residence with animal privileges in the barn and pasture. Bill and I remained at Ellsworth High School until graduation. We hitchhiked or obtained rides from students and parents to high school.

A number of New Deal projects contributed to improvements and slow economic recovery in Hartland during the late 1930s, such as WPA on the Forest Home School ground. I worked in the chemistry lab under the National Youth Act in high school and joined the CCC camp for \$25.00 per month. Values of hard work and responsibilities on the farm during the Great Depression were not forgotten and still have an influence on my life today.