Comment

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Being young during the 1930s, I saw things as my father once said "only with the eyes of a child, and not as they really were." Dollars in those days were as big as wagon wheels, my dad recalled before adding, "And nobody had any." He told of a farmer who in desperation hauled by team and wagon a load of fifty bushels of shelled corn in the main street of Kanawha and then tried to sell the load for a five dollar bill. It was, said my father who was given to stretching things a bit, "the prettiest load of shelled corn I ever saw." That farmer hauled the same corn back home, unable that depression day to get ten cents a bushel for it.

Like most kids, I guess, the thought never hit me that we were "poor" until many, many years later—after the depression years of the 1930s. After all, there was always plenty to eat, and our farm home was comfortable—drafty, yes, and no heat in the upstairs bedrooms where we slept on mattresses filled with corn shucks and under horse-hide blankets that seemed to weigh a ton by morning. Our Sunday school clothes came by mail, ordered by Mom from the Sears and Roebuck and "Monkey" Wards catalogues. The fresh farm eggs from our flock of hens were traded for groceries in Kanawha. Dad also delivered the cream produced by our nondescript herd of dairy cows there regularly.

It was not until I was in country school taking a health course that I realized what skim milk was, and that we were sell-

ing the best part of what our cows had to offer in town. While Mom got the egg money to buy groceries, Dad took the cream check to pay for the bigger expense items. I didn't realize just how important the egg money and the cream check were until much later.

About the only hint that we were poor had to do with the ever-present concern my folks voiced about "the doctor's bill." There were seven of us kids, all active on the farm and elsewhere, and consequently we regularly received cuts and scratches that probably should have been treated. They weren't because of "the doctor's bill."

"Town," which was the small Hancock County community of Kanawha was a special place for us farm kids—the place where we went on every Saturday and Wednesday night during summer and less frequently during the school year and in winter months. Summer Saturday nights were super-special because there was always a double-feature at the theater—the town's main attraction—that almost always included a cowboy movie and another comedy or mystery movie.

Town kids seemed to think all farm kids were rich, with a lot of money to spend when they came to town. We farm kids thought the town kids had it better—no fighting mud or snow, and best of all, no chores, cleaning out barns and stalls, milking cows, and the like.

My father tried a lot of different crops in those years trying to make a little money—flax, rye, rape, sweet clover, and a new crop we called soybeans, as well as an acre of cucumbers two years for the new pickle factory in town. There wasn't much of a price when it rained and we all grew a lot of crops, and when it didn't rain we didn't have a heck of a lot to sell anyway.

My first contact with a federal farm program came one summer day when I moved some dairy heifers out to a small pasture not too far from the barn. Dad stormed out of the house and scolded me because I had put the calves on what he called "Roosevelt Acres." We were being paid nine dollars an acre to take that land out of production. Little did I know that many, many years later this same kind of attack—paying farmers not to produce because of surpluses, leaving the land fallow—would be used by administration after administration in an attempt to bring the flow of food from the farm into line

with domestic and foreign demands in hopes that a better price to farmers would result.

The big chore for us in summer was oats threshing, a neighborhood event that featured day-after-day, sun-up to dark, work. That crop was a lot of work, from the cutting and binding to the shocking and the threshing. A stalk of oats had to be handled by man and machine three times before the thresher, and then the grain itself a couple of times after that. The crop was never worth much either. As Roswell Garst said, "Oats is Iowa's surest crop—the surest to lose money."

But oats threshing had several trademarks: hot, hard work and big, magnificent meals cooked by the neighbor ladies day after day. A rainy day to interrupt all of this work was welcomed, except by those who had oats still to be threshed. The farmer who was last in the threshing ring one year was the first to have the crew and the big steamer arrive the following year.

Perhaps the biggest chore of all was cornhusking. Often nomads came for hire to help with this gargantuan task that began after the first frost and sometimes didn't end until after the first snow. I can remember husking nubbins after the Christmas free movie in town, wading with the team through snow drifts to try and harvest the drought-stunted crop that remained.

We farm kids had a different kind of neighborhood hero back then—the man from Eagle Grove who had placed third in the state cornhusking championship contest (started by Henry Wallace). We looked up to this man who kept a steady stream of ears between himself and the bangboard. Such cornhusking heroes vanished, though, as the mechanical corn picker made its debut. We had trouble filling a wagon in a half-morning and welcomed those machines that could pile up a small mountain in rather short order.

The two greatest inventions had to be the corn picker and the milking machine. But Mom might argue that the two best new things were the rural electrification program and running water. Both of these came along about the time she was beyond the diaper era and had celebrated her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

My recollections include the country school, the one-room affair where all eight grades sat together with a single teacher.

And I guess we really had what could be called "the family farm," too. But only one of the seven of us kids is on the farm today—testimony to the change brought on by the tractor, the mechanical corn picker, and other technology. In retrospect, I doubt if too many members of my family really wanted to stay on the farm. My folks did little to encourage that, I think, because of the rather hard times they had experienced year after year with little to show for it.

In short, I think the fact that we were kids with this "small farm" start in life tended to make us more appreciative of the opportunities and all that came later in life. And later still came the realization that what our parents and we all had lived through had been pretty tough times.

In reference to Leland Sage's paper, there is no doubt in my mind that farmers were better off in 1940 compared to 1920, just from the manpower standpoint alone, plus REA, plus farm programs and all. Each surviving farmer always produces just as much if not more after the number of farms declines. Sage brought out the fact that farmers for generations have had the inherent capacity to bury themselves under surplus crops; they did so back at the time of World War I and during almost every decade at one time or another since.

The spring of 1983 is a good time to look at the role played by Henry Wallace, "the father of the modern farm program," because a record eighty-two million acres of cropland are being idled, or taken out of production this year. It is an incredible story—the fact that fewer and fewer hands tilling the soil can flood the markets, and produce too much, just as was the case back in the 1930s.

Joe Wall focused on the farm organizations and their roles during the tough times of the 1930s. For many farmers, such as my father, farm organizations weren't all that important. Dad did show interest in us kids being in 4-H and FFA, and taking part in the summer project tours and in the county achievement "fair."

Wall pointed out that the "high cost" paid for making progress in farming was that fewer and fewer farmers were needed. I saw this happen up close in my own neighborhood in Hancock County where farmstead after farmstead has vanished, including our own. Some of these that have disappeared off the

face of the farming earth were new farmsteads built during the 1930s, too. About the only old building still around is Amsterdam No. 9 country school. And it is full of soybeans.

Dorothy Schwieder mentioned a family that had no electricity until 1939. This struck home to me because that is about when the magic spark came to our farmstead, sidelining the old kerosene and white gas lamps we used and powering the hand-cranked cream separator. The old gasoline-powered Maytag washer, too, was altered so that a small electric motor did the work instead—without the noise and the blue smoke-haze that filled the washing room.

The big thing for Mom, though, was running water in the house. Never mind the fact that she got only cold water. After thirty-some years of raising kids and cooking for a large family and threshers, it was something. The landlord furnished the pipes and materials and we did the work digging the ditches from building to building, including the house.

There was a lot of work for my mother—the big family, a big garden, canning vegetables and fruit—my grandmother canned Angus beef. But I don't recall them complaining. There were tears, yes, but nothing like a protest or march for women's rights. They seemed happy with the church, the Rebekahs, and Oddfellows, and the family reunion every summer in the city park. Vacations were limited to short trips usually to see relatives or to go bullhead fishing in southern Minnesota.

If the city women had it easier back then, as was indicated here, I wasn't aware of it because I never heard my mother complain about her lot in life. Indeed, I remember her being grateful at times when things looked up or something new came into our lives. And there was almost a total commitment to her family—something I sort of took for granted back then, but since have learned to appreciate.