WE ALL WORKED TOGETHER

A Memory of Drought and Depression

By

James Hearst

James Hearst is a poet whose work, as he says, "came out of the Midwest, out of the life and the reality and the nature of the Midwest." His grandfather came to Iowa in 1859. Grandfather Hearst bought a farm southwest of Cedar Falls, planted a large maple grove there, and called the place Maplehearst.

James Hearst's father was born and raised on Maplehearst Farm, as were his father's brothers and sisters, his own sister and two brothers, and James himself. "My mother's father, Grandfather Schell, came from Bavaria to escape service in the German army," he writes. "It is to my mother that I owe my love of books and good taste in literature." After his father left the farm, James and his brother Charles worked it in partnership. They fed cattle and raised hogs.

In 1941, Hearst was invited to join the staff of the department of English and Literature at the University of Northern Iowa, where he taught for 34 years. He rose to full professor, though he had no degrees, and UNI awarded him an honorary degree in literature.

Hearst has published eight books of poetry, written articles on assignment for Wallaces' Farmer *and* The Nation, *and done many book reviews for the* Des Moines Register *and the* Chicago Sun. *He worked for a short time as farm-editor for a newspaper. But most of his life, he farmed and taught school.*

The following is James Hearst's memory of the Depression years, a personal history by someone who knows – through experience – what he writes about, and who knows how to write about experience.

Ed.

The worst of it began for us in 1934. I remember how the dust settled so thickly on the pastures that the cattle would not eat and cows, and calves, and steers wandered about bawling their hunger. We found it hard to believe. We all knew about dust storms in the dry plains of the Southwest, but for drought and wind and dust to sweep, like a plague, over the fertile fields of Black Hawk County, Iowa seemed a bad dream, not real. But it was real, all right.

We endured it for three years. I think it was the dust that gave Mother the shivers. She stuck paper strips along the window sills, rolled rugs against the doors, but still it sifted in, dry and fine as talcum powder but gritty to taste and touch. The dust left a film on dishes in the cupboard, on sheets folded in drawers, on woodwork and chairs, on people's faces and hair. Outside if the wind blew, visibility would be cut to a few yards. Autos ran at mid-day with their headlights turned on. Drifts of dust piled against fences like snow, sometimes two and three feet high. Years later after the ground had been plowed and planted many times, the stain could still be seen where the drifts had been.

Spring came with no rain. That was the first sign. The winter snow melted and ran off during a sudden thaw in March. The water could not soak into frozen ground and it ran off down gullies and creeks. Even then, on the bare and frozen ground, the wind chiselled furrows and filled the air with dust. In April and May the ground baked in summer temperatures. Farmers stirred the ground as little as possible, and the damp patches dried almost before they turned up. But we sowed the oats, harrowed in the clover, and planted corn when the time came. This is what farmers do.

An old farmer once said, the time to plant corn is at corn-planting time. Crops are planted in their season. This wisdom lies deep in the farmer's blood. When spring comes he rises early, looks at the sky, tests for wind and temperature and impregnates the earth with seed. He is his own almanac.

In the spring of 1934 we came in at the end of the day exhausted from the heat

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Maplehearst Farm (courtesy of the author)

and flying dirt, and feeling there was no sense in what we were doing. In some places in the field where the dust devils came whirling, seeds were pulled right out of the ground. In other places the seeds lay dormant in dry earth. It takes moisture for any roots to grow, but my brother Charles did not dare set the corn planter deep enough to reach damp earth because the seeds would smother. So we hoped for rain and plowed and disced and harrowed and planted just like our neighbors without knowing what else to do.

Late in May a few showers fell and some of the kernels sprouted. But in July, when the corn needs an inch of rain every week, even the clouds burned off. The sun fired the stalks that had grown and left them waving dead white tassels with no live pollen. The ears turned out to be stubby cobs with a few kernels on them. That fall, we chopped one hundred and twenty acres of corn to fill the silo, when eight acres should have done it.

The corn had to contend with more than the drought. Hordes of chinch bugs marched out of chinch bug country to attack it. Think of a voracious appetite surrounded by legs and equipped with a mouth and you have a chinch bug. It feeds on corn in its tender, succulent stage and leaves the corn rows in tatters, flapping like a row of scarecrows. I saw them as barbarians swarming over the land of cultivation. We tried to defend our fields. We took post hole augers and dug holes along the edges of the fields, holes a foot deep and about a rod apart. We half filled them with creosote. We trapped a lot of the bugs, and often only the first half dozen rows of corn suffered. Once the plant became mature, stalks tough, leaves hard and shiney, the chinch bugs went away.

But more mischief came. Grasshoppers, like the locusts of the Bible, clouded the skies and settled on our oat fields. Grasshoppers have a nasty habit of eating just the small stem that fastens the oat kernel

Maplehearst Farm (courtesy of the author)

to the stalk. We were left with a field where empty heads of straw waved in the wind and the ground was covered with kernels. Brother Chuck said, "We ought to have a flock of turkeys and let them clean up the fields."

Alfalfa was the one crop we had that did not wither. Apparently its roots dig deep enough to find moisture. It stayed green, bloomed, made two cuttings of hay. The grasshoppers did not harm it, I don't know why. But when we cut the last few rounds in the center of the field, grasshoppers hung from the alfalfa plants in bunches, a strange yield for a hayfield.

July was the worst month. Day after day the temperature rose above one hundred degrees. When we came out to the fields after dinner, the machines were almost too hot to touch. We wound the iron steering wheels with tape to protect our hands. One day at noon as we quit for dinner, one of the men jumped on my tractor fender to ride to the house. He jumped off faster than he jumped on. "Hells bells," he yipped, "it's like sitting on a hot stove."

In September rain came, rain that should have fallen during the summer. It had been a starved, withered, dried up crop season. People just did without and we all tried to hold together our livestock and machinery. A worn out feeling slowed steps and lowered voices. No one died of despair but we were glad when the year became history. We harvested what crops we had, feeling that we had done all we could.

The drought had followed the Great Depression. That really was a time that tried men's souls. One of our neighbors once said, "When you break a horse's spirit, he's no good any more." I wondered if it was the same with men. I thought about it one night sitting at the desk in my study. All of us, father, mother, brother, sister and myself involved in sweat, worry, debt, trying to keep the farm going. It seemed to me like a law of diminishing

returns, the harder you worked, the less you received. I saw no way out.

Depressed prices for farm products existed years before the stock market break. Most city folk did not realize that since the end of World War I farmers had been ground between the millstones of high overhead and low prices. Many farmers blamed Herbert Hoover for pulling the rug out from under them when he withdrew support for the prices he had guaranteed. When the war was over, Hoover no longer needed hogs, corn, butter, eggs, sugar to feed the troops and our Allies. And so prices fell and stayed low all during the '20s.

By 1930 our family reached out all its hands to stay alive. We knew we had the muscle and we proved it. Father took a job with the Farm Bureau (he was President of the Iowa Farm Bureau for 13 years) and his pay check helped bolster the bank balance. My sister, Louise, taught school and her check, when she got one — during the Depression school teachers were not paid regularly — went to the same place. Mother made cottage cheese and sold it and eggs to the Blue Bird restaurant in town. I had a small check from my army insurance. Chuck ran the farm, tried to keep worn machinery in action, the pigs healthy, the hired men paid. Farm families suffered from the Depression in a way that was different from town families. When a factory worker lost his job and pay check, he knew where he stood — probably in the bread line. A banker knew where he stood, too, and when his bank closed its doors, unable to meet its obligations, he jumped out of a ten-story window, or shot himself, or just went home and shrivelled into a sick old man.

But on the farm the situation was not as clear. Farmers knew about debt. Most farms had a mortgage on them, the machines were not paid for, the livestock had been bought on loans. In normal times these obligations were paid off with money from the sale of crops and livestock. Now, with such low prices, the money failed to appear when loans, bills, interest came due. We ate what we produced — no one went hungry on farms. But the effort to hold together all the things he had worked for sometimes marked a man and his family for life.

One day Chuck and I received a phone call from a man who had once worked for us. He was working in the John Deere factory in Waterloo. John Deere paid better wages than a farmer paid. Now he felt the abrasive touch of unemployment. "Come and get me," he said over the phone, "I'll work just for my food. I ain't going on relief."

Already our two hired men worked on pretty slim wages. They each had a house to live in and food to eat. Chuck said, "What will we do, we haven't work enough for another man."

But we cranked up our Model T Ford and drove to Waterloo. I will never forget the sight of empty parking lots, taverns closed, the factory, dirty and silent. No smoke from the forges, no hurrying men, no railroad cars shuttling in the yards, no clatter of machines, nothing but emptiness and the stale brassy smell of poverty.

We found Herman, standing in line at the Salvation Army headquarters. "I knew you'd come," he said, "but I thought maybe I'd get a bowl of soup."

We took him home, fed him and turned him over to Mother. She needed help in the garden, trash cleaned up, spading done, lawn mowed. "Do you want to stay

A Farmers' Holiday roadblock (courtesy The Des Moines Register*)*

with us?" she asked.

"No," he said, "I'll walk. It ain't but four miles. I'll come everyday. Why, Mrs. Hearst, I don't know when I've eaten a piece of meat."

"What about your wife and children?" Mother asked.

"My wife, she works at a little cafe and eats there. The kids get a free meal at school. She brings home scraps for the kid's supper."

That's the way it was. Herman walked out in the morning and back at night. Mother's cooking filled out the hollows in his cheeks and the sun soon changed his factory pallor. We had plenty for him to do — on a farm, work has a habit of appearing whenever there is a spare pair of hands to do it. He kept the lawn mowed, the garden weeded, the chicken house repaired, and he chopped down a couple of dead trees. He screwed new hinges on sagging barn doors, shored up loose window panes with putty, and reshingled a spot on a shed roof where a tree limb had fallen during a thunderstorm. When summer came he worked in the fields loading hay bales and shovelling off oats from the combine. Late in the fall Chuck found him a job with a farm machinery dealer, and he walked four blocks to work instead of four miles. He earned enough to feed his family. Perhaps President Roosevelt did not lead the country into the promised land, but he

pulled the economy out of its rut, dusted it off, and began to make it run again.

The terrible days of the Depression put marks on folk never to be erased. Families found themselves penniless when the banks closed. These were good hard-working people whose entire savings disappeared like smoke. Retired farmers begged for jobs as janitors in schools and churches, as nightwatchmen in factories. One morning I heard on the radio that one of our neighbors had gone out in the field with his shotgun and killed himself so his wife and children could have his insurance. The mortgage on his farm had been foreclosed. He had nowhere to go.

"What's the good of foreclosing a mortgage?" Mother asked. "The bank or insurance company can't sell the farm, can't even rent it and expect to get the rent?"

"But that's the way things are done," Chuck said, "it's an old custom to kick a man when he's down."

The Farmers' Holiday movement spread like an epidemic. When a farm was foreclosed and the farmer's goods and livestock sold at auction, the neighbors made it a "penny sale." Everything the auctioneer offered for sale brought the bid of one cent. When the sale ended, the livestock, grain, machinery, household goods were returned to the owner for pennies. And one look at the hard determined faces of the men surrounding the auctioneer discouraged any outsider from raising the bid. In western Iowa a judge tried to stop such a sale with a legal writ and found a rope around his neck, and the other end over a tree limb, and there were plenty of hands to pull it tight.

Creameries were picketed, cans of milk and cream dumped into ditches, tons of butter destroyed. It was violence born of desperation in an attempt to call attention to the farmer's troubles.

One July morning I drove two miles north to the Benson creamery to see with my own eyes what was going on. About a half a mile from the creamery a truck slowly moved across the road and blocked me. Two men with rifles got out, and I was shocked to see old Einer Clausson and Jake Miller.

I said, "What in hell do you guys think you're doing?"

Old Einer looked me right in the eye. "You ain't going any farther, Jim. No one but us members can go down to the creamery. What are you doing over here anyway, you boys don't milk?"

"I just came over to see if what we heard is true."

"If you heard we was dumping milk and cream, you heard right. Right now that creamery is a dead horse."

I shook my head. "You, Einer, and you, Jake, with guns for god's sake. Are you really dumping the trucks?"

"You damn right. Just look down that road and see that big new truck upside down in the ditch? You think the fairies did it?"

The truck lay on its side, and you could smell the milky suds that filled the ditch. I looked down the road past the creamery and there was another group of men with guns. I said, "Do you really think this kind of monkey business will raise prices?"

"We can sure raise hell and maybe some of the big bugs will get it through their thick heads that we're hurting out here."

I thought about it. "I suppose the papers are sending out reporters and photo men?"

"You bet," Jake said, "and more are

A Farmers' Holiday roadblock (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

coming. Now Jim, you get out of here before you get in trouble. This ain't any business of yours, no skin off your nose."

It seemed ridiculous but I didn't want to laugh. I said, "Go to hell, Jake. You going to shoot me?" These men were my neighbors.

For the first time Jake grinned. "I might have to if you get fractious."

"Well," I said, "I'm all for you if this will help. But I think you have things bass ackward."

"Listen, boy," Jake said, "you go get you forty cows to milk night and morning, seven days of the week and find the milk isn't even worth the feed. You can get damn tired of pulling tits."

I shifted into reverse. "OK, I guess I'm in the wrong pew. Good luck."

The Farmers' Holiday movement did startle the newspapers into headlines, even the staid *New York Times*. The farmer's predicament began to haunt the public — and Congress. It helped elect Franklin D. Roosevelt.

When I drove in the yard Chuck had started for the house to wash for dinner. At the table he asked, "Are they really doing it?"

"They're doing it and they mean business too."

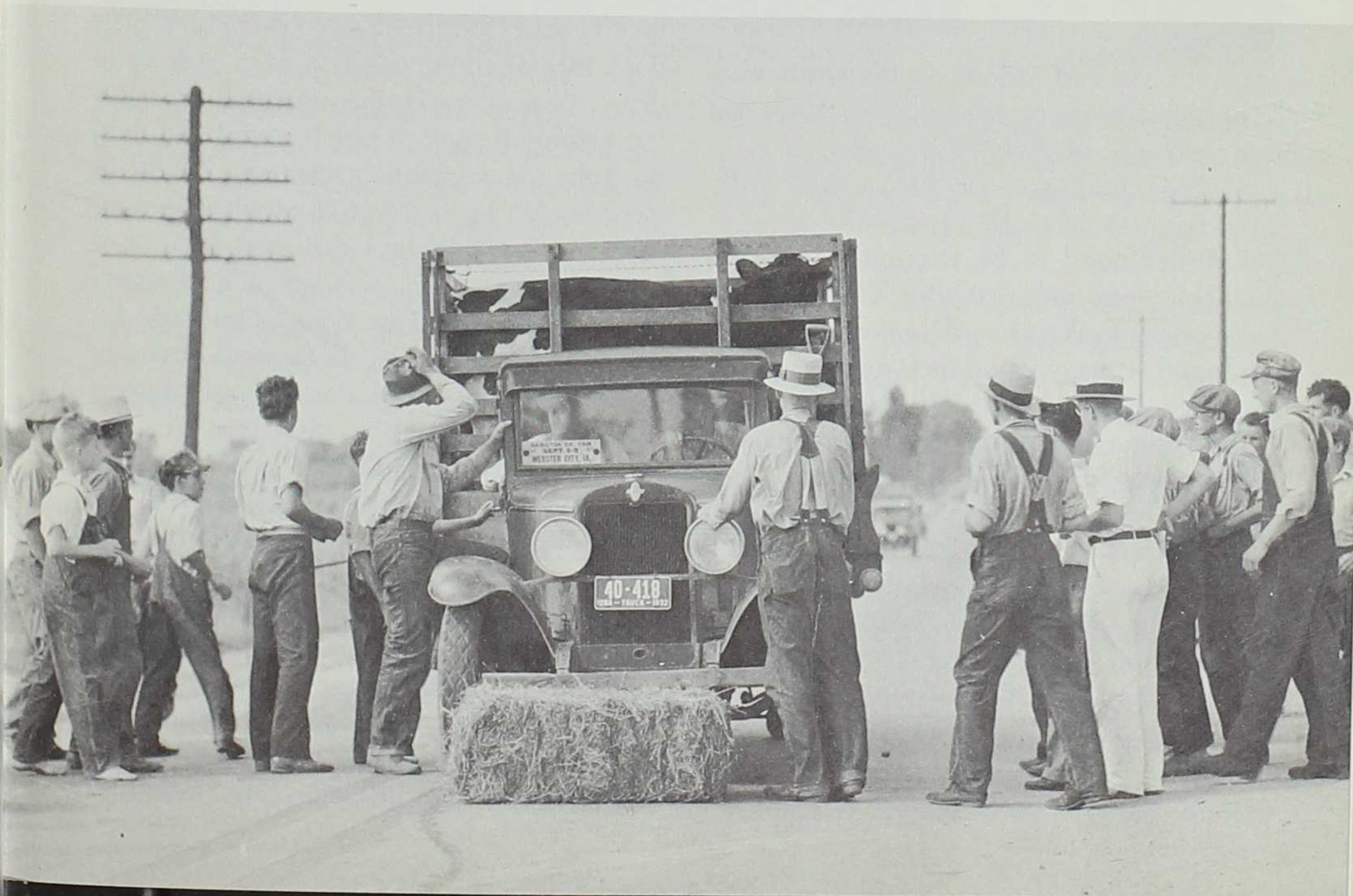
"Crazy as coots," Chuck said.

"That may be, but our friends Einer and Jake are on patrol with guns and they aren't kidding."

Mother asked, "Do you suppose the National Guard will be called out?"

Chuck said, "Probably some jackass will blast away and kill somebody. Then they'll run for cover."

I didn't think so. "Not these boys, they aim to stay until the whole affair gets na-



tional publicity. That's what they're after. They know dumping a few trucks of cream won't bring up prices."

"They give you a bad time?"

"They thought I was nosey. We aren't dairymen, they made a point of it."

Mother said, "You should have told them what you boys got for the last load of hogs you shipped to Chicago."

"After freight, commission and trucking, just about enough to wad a shotgun." Chuck spoke in harsh tones.

"I never thought of it," I said, "I doubt if they'd listen. They're all hepped up over the dairy situation."

We ate slowly, thinking about our neighbors out on the roads with guns. Mother said there was strawberry shortcake for dessert. It lifted our spirits a little. All she had to say was, "There is a flag in this water pitcher," and we knew by this family saying we must save room for a special dessert.

Chuck poured cream on his shortcake. "Those bastards in Washington can't get the sleep out of their eyes."

Mother said in a choked voice, "We have been through this before."

I didn't need to be reminded. A little over ten years ago, just after World War I, farm prices took a nose dive while city folk whooped it up on the stock market. Even our own banker said, "If farmers would stay at home and tend to business and stop complaining, they'd be all right."

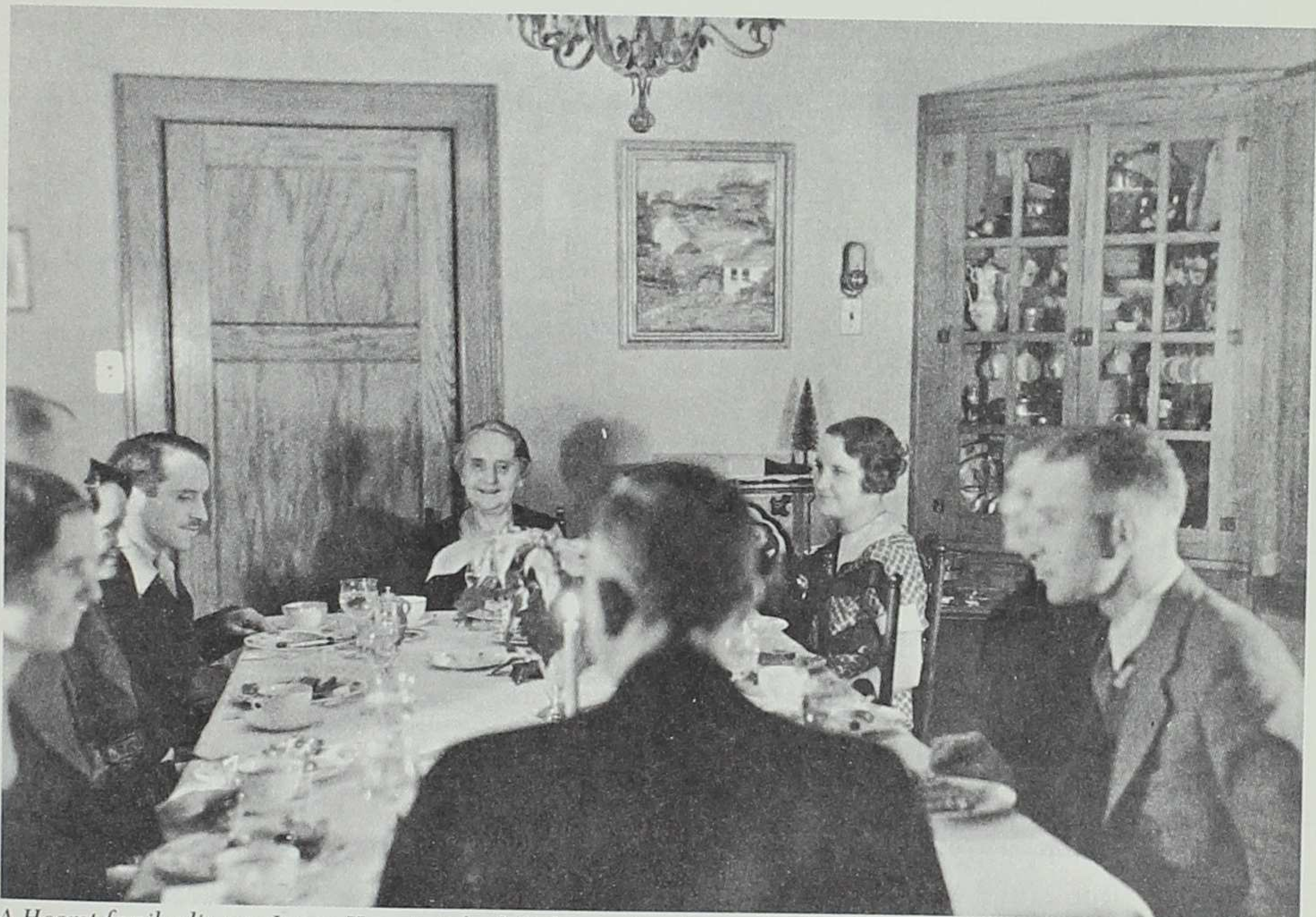
Our memories ran back over the years. Grandfather came to Iowa in 1859 and bought the farm. The whole family, uncles, aunts, Father, was born and raised there. Then Father bought out his sisters and brothers but still owed for some of the shares.

Late in May, the corn was planted, the oats up, the cows out to pasture. But the taxes had not been paid for over a year. How could they be paid, there was no money. Robert, the second son, who once stood six-feet tall and weighed two-hundred pounds and was a star tackle on his high school football team, was now slowly dying of cancer. All those trips to the University Hospitals, all those radiation treatments, all the medicines cost money.

There Bob sat like a ghost of himself, slowly wasting away. Never a word of despair, never a complaint, never any signs of anguish so often seen in people when they ask, Why does it have to be me? He still drove the truck to take gasoline and seeds to the field, and the car to take Mother to town. He tried to mow the lawn and help with the garden. We all felt something in us dying too as we watched him die.

I was just home from a two-year stay in the hospital after a bad accident. At the end of the college year we had had a fraternity party up the river. I dove off a boat dock into shallow water, a high jack-knife dive. Two years in the hospital! Imagine the money it took to pay hospital and doctor bills. How could a farmer already in debt for his farm stand so much expense? And farm prices had dropped in a well once the war was over, when no longer, "Food Will Win The War." One son dying, one on crutches, both in their early twenties. How could Father and Mother rally from crushing blows like that? It must have hurt Father to walk into the bank knowing he owed so much money and could borrow no more. And so the taxes were not paid.

During World War I the government had urged farmers to plow up every acre of land they could find, raise all the hogs they could, and guaranteed prices. When the war ended the government forgot prices, forgot the huge food factory that now had



A Hearst family dinner: James Hearst at far left, his mother facing, his brother Charles at near right, and his father with back to camera (courtesy of the author).

that the Sheriff would serve papers for non-payment of taxes and offer part of the farm for sale. This seemed a humiliation that Mother and Father need not suffer and on the day the Sheriff was to come, Uncle George took time off from his busy medical practice to take them out to lunch. The Sheriff who was a friend of Uncle George agreed to come while they were gone. The three brothers offered to act as a reception committee for Sheriff Wagner.

That day the weather seemed ordinary. Neither the cattle nor the hogs behaved in an unusual way. Leaves moved in a light wind. The windmill wheel turned slowly. The sun shone with the same light it gave to the battles of the Somme and Gettysburg. Peas and carrots in the garden grew in the straight or crooked rows in which they were planted. But it was a portentous no buyers for its products. Fertile Iowa land went begging. No one wanted to buy it. In the city people bought stocks on the feverish stock exchange, all hoping to be rich.

A family is not always crushed under the weight of misfortune. The family ties grow closer, ties of courage and strength. Louise and Charles assumed duties they knew must be carried out no matter how young and untested they were. The family did not sink into the quicksands of despair. Louise brought her friends home, and they filled the house with music and talk, jazz, cheese-on-rye bread, and spiked near-beer. Chuck dropped out of college to run the farm and help look after his two invalid brothers. Family life pulled itself up by its bootstraps.

One day, in 1923, we received notice

day for us and we three brothers sat at the dining room table and ate our lunch.

The dog barked as a car drove in the yard. A tall lean man without a hat stepped out, picked up his briefcase, walked briskly to the front door. Chuck opened it. "I'm Cap Wagner, the Sheriff," he said. "This isn't my idea of a good time but I wish you young men would listen while I read this summons to you."

He opened his briefcase, took out some papers, put on a pair of spectacles with silver rims and in a dull low voice read the summons. He folded the papers, put them in an envelope and tossed it toward the center of the table. "OK," he said, "that's it. Give the papers to your Dad when he comes back."

He went over to Bob and put his arm over Bob's shoulder. "How are you getting along, young man," he said, "you're having a tough time and I admire your guts."

Bob's voice trembled, "Will the farm really be sold?"

The Sheriff shook his head. "You have a year to redeem it. Don't worry, Bob, your Dad will get the taxes paid. It's just that the law says we have to do it this way. Remember me to your folks. So long." And he was gone.

It was a day burned in our memories. To lose part of the farm would be more than the family should have to bear. The farm was home. It was part of our life, like our own flesh and blood. I remember when a man we knew who lived in town called up Father and asked him if he was going to pay the taxes or would the 80 be for sale. We young folk took an instant dislike to the poor man and always treated him coldly.

Years later when Bob was gone, and anxiety and grief had dulled, the family thought of this as the low point in our lives. Eventually, the taxes were paid and the land redeemed. We just dug in and faced what had to be faced and survived. But no one who weathered the Depression ever escaped without a kind of obsession for security.

A couple of good crop years, and we were on the way up. We had discovered that working together made all the difference as we faced illness, death, felt the abrasive touch of despair. It was the working together that kept us going. President Roosevelt said once, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." That may have been just a political ploy, but after he said it, there was hope.

One morning, a couple of years after the worst of the Depression, I was out on the tractor discing in oats in a field along the road. Einer Clausson drove by with his milk truck and we waved to each other like the neighbors we were. □