

Depression Letter Reveals Despair

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Are you sick and tired of hearing about the Great Depression? Do the old timers' Depression stories remind you of the old geezer who claimed he walked seven miles a day to country school and back—uphill both ways? Was the Depression really so bad?

Today's article will quote extensively from a letter recently unearthed. Dated Feb. 9, 1933, it is written to one of his sons by the editor of a small town newspaper not unlike the News-Republic. Although a weekly instead of a daily, it is a somewhat smaller operation, but nevertheless it illustrates the plight of small businesses of that era, when merchant advertising dwindled to almost nothing.

With minimal editing, we quote directly from much of the letter. My comments are in parentheses. After family salutations, the editor gets right to the point with his son: "I do not know what is to become of us. Frankly we face the next thing to bankruptcy. I called the office force into conference Sunday afternoon and reduced (his employees) Ike, Tony, and Rudy to \$25 (a week)."

"They are to take time off at that when there is no business. Nothing for overtime, and an 8 hour day for only 3 days a week. (Actually, the men were not paid for three weeks, but came to work anyway—where else were there any jobs? One son, newly married, already worked at the shop)."

(He continues that the office secretary will probably be fired.) "Even at the(se) reductions I am doubtful that we can make it...we three (including another son)..... will have to do most of the work ourselves and put in 15 hours a day. I will have to pay you and Gordon (still another son) in stock in the business. And Dorothy (daughter in law) and Mama can help with the news. Burl (still another son, self-employed elsewhere) may have to help with money in return for the stock."

"You will think all this is fanciful. It is not, it is the grim possibility (weekly charges were down to half of normal). Of course the idea is to save what we have...various things convince me that when the turn comes in the times, advertising and other business will return. We cannot lie down and quit. The situation calls for a heroic remedy, and I must depend on my (five) boys to help."

"I can't (ask) Momma to use her money (it was less than \$500 anyway) for we may have to have it and Gordon's and Bobby's (the fifth son) to pay interest in July. We haven't the money now to pay bills that will be pressing within this month."

"I am writing you this depressing stuff because I want you to know the facts. I have worried over the situation till I see the way clear, provided I can depend on one thing—the



W.C. Dewel, owner and editor of the Kossuth County (Iowa) Advance, and who is quoted in this story. He was the Father of the author of all the stories in this book.

understanding, willing, energetic help of you boys in the attempt to save what we have out of the wreck.”

“The difficulty is to make you boys see the necessity. You are all young, you have life before you; naturally you think there will be plenty of time to recover, but I (age 58) have only ten years or so left (he really had 30, it turned out) and it is now or never with me. I know from experience that if we all pull together and save what we have, you boys will have a start, even if late, that will be invaluable. In fact, you may never get (a start) any other way”

Comment and Explanation

At the unpleasant risk of sounding like Michael Reagan (“my father...”), I confess that the letter is from my Dad to one of my brothers. I was in 8th grade, and knew times were tough but I was shielded from this letter and the facts. I knew bartering was occurring, for I distinctly remember that advertising in Dad’s newspaper was traded for a winter coat for me.

Subscriptions to the newspaper were paid in corn cobs for me to shovel into the furnace. Cobs burn up fast, I learned. I sold horseradish door to door, and kept up the garden. A brother raised rabbits—did we eat them, I wonder?

I did not know it then, but the mention of “Bobby’s money” in the above letter referred to my little bank account, some \$100, most of which I actually earned. Dad should have taken it—the bank failed shortly thereafter and all of my money went to wherever money goes when a bank fails.

A word about Dad, the author of the letter: He quit school in his early teens, but lost his left arm above the elbow in a youthful train escapade. He once said that this was the best thing that happened to him: Now he must use his brains! He returned to high school and went on to college, becoming a lawyer. In a few years he suffered another serious setback, a major loss of his hearing. This pretty much eliminated law as an occupation in a time when lawyers spent much of their time in a courtroom.

Newspapering seemed a doubtful choice considering his two handicaps, but somehow it put five boys through college between 1918 and 1942, despite the difficult Depression times described above. Even with the hearing loss and the missing arm, he won awards for his newspaper, and his thoughtful editorials were sometimes printed in the Chicago Tribune and elsewhere. Dad died a rich man in one sense anyway, enjoying the respect of his community and of his five sons.

Big Guy.