

THE DIRTY THIRTIES

BY HOWARD P. JOHNSON

Dr. Johnson, retired head of agricultural engineering at Iowa State, contributed this personal story of Depression farm life.

During the 1960's one of Iowa State's football teams was known as the *Dirty Thirty*. While they didn't win the conference title they had a couple of respectable years. The name, *Dirty Thirty*, renews memories of the years, 1930 to 1940, the dirty thirties. They were years of hard physical labor, stress, and even anguish.

My father was a tenant farmer, having worked 14 years as a hired hand after arriving from Sweden. He began farming with his brother in 1918. My parents married in 1920 after his brother's death. While the farm economy sagged in 1923 and 1927, they had a family of five children and a new Oldsmobile by 1930.

In 1929 the stock market collapsed; by 1932 many small banks failed returning about one dollar in three. My father had little in the Odebolt Savings Bank to lose. Our loyal hired man, who had worked for years for \$50 a month and room and board, had about \$1300 left of \$3200 he had saved for retirement. Many farmers "lost the farm."

Extremes of weather visited western Iowa from 1931 to 1936. During two of those years hail storms in late summer damaged or destroyed the corn crop. The countryside reeked with stench of corn silage after the hail storm with strong winds. High temperatures accompanied dry years. In July 1934 a temperature of 118° F. was recorded. The winter of 1935-36 is noted for continuous days of below zero temperatures and heavy snowfall.

The severe drought year of 1934 is famous for dust storms. Drifts of sediment collected along fencerows and sifted onto windowsills. Grasshoppers and chinch bugs chewed on scant greenery. Our farm well was dry that summer. My father hauled water in a livestock tank from a neighbor's well two miles away. He finally sold the herd of Angus cattle as market beef because of lack of reliable water supply. We moved to another rented farm in March 1935 where the water supply was reliable. Father planted rye in the dust that fall to have pasture for remaining livestock in the spring.

The farm economy was disastrous most of the 1930's. Three dollar hogs and 10¢ corn marked farmer's memories. We burned moldy corn after an early fall freeze rather than buy coal. A market hog (180 pounds) brought five dollars. The government sealed corn at 25¢ per bushel to bail out crop farmers. Banks sold good land in central Iowa for \$60 to \$70 per acre after foreclosure.

Sleeping sickness of horses plagued western Iowa in 1936. Four of seven of our work horses died that summer including my riding horse, Cap. We thought he would survive; he died in his stall one night. The loss forced dad to buy a row-crop tractor, a John Deere B with steel lugs. Horses were being replaced.

We lived with minimum provisions and cash. Our lifestyle was sparse with outdoor hydrants and toilets. The REA delivered electricity in 1938. I trapped during winter from about 1932 to 1938. A good skunk pelt was worth \$2.50, a rare mink \$10. Muskrat pelts, worth about a dollar, were easy to stretch and the odor less persistent. I drove a tractor 10 hours a day in 1939 for a dol-

lar a day plus room and board. I received three dollars a day during threshing season hauling bundles from the field and pitching them into the threshing machine.

I rode to high school with a neighbor in a disk-wheeled 1928 Chevrolet for 50¢ per week. There was some discussion about the cost of transportation plus books in 1936. A few farm boys didn't go to high school. Missing high school would have destroyed my life. I wanted to go, too, partly because a neighbor boy I admired attended. My parents decided to support my interest. I took bookkeeping instead of physics; bookkeeping texts cost \$1.22, the physics text, \$4.

My father never recovered financially before WWII; we never had funds to purchase land, always a farmer's ambition. The opportunity to increase income came after the war. However, he died in 1944 from the lingering effects of "yellow jaundice," which he contracted years before as a hired hand. We rarely saw a doctor. The hospital was a place to go to die.

The family survived with few physical and emotional scars. We had learned to work, to study, and cooperate with neighbors. The trying years taught us to be frugal and cautious. I don't remember feeling poor. The farm offered gardens, potato patches, chickens, hogs, and beef to butcher and a place to live. Cash flow was minimal mostly related to eggs and cream sold to the local co-op. We attended church most Sundays; our faith helped us face tomorrow. In many respects life was good to us through the dirty thirties. The thirties trained a conservative generation.

On the Cover...

Handsaker barn in Story County will be on tour.

photos by Don Poggensee

