

1930s and the Depression

World War I and Farming

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the government encouraged farmers to plant more wheat to win the war. When the war was over the bottom fell out of the markets and that meant lower prices for crops. At the same time the railroads increased their rates to coincide with the increased demand on shipment. Although production was increasing, by 1920 the price of wheat had fallen below \$1.00. Farmers were making less than it cost to produce the crop. Rainfall amounts between 1919 and 1923 were above average and harvests were very successful and over twice as many acres were planted to wheat as ever before. By 1922 wheat and cattle markets collapsed, along with all other farm prices and loans made during the war on land and cattle were being called. Farmers were dumping wheat on the market, trying to raise cash to meet their bankers' demands. Banks who had stuffed their portfolios with papers secured by high priced land began to fail. With the shortages of manpower during the war, farmers had been motivated to replace it with machine power. It took more bushels to make a profit and farmers took on huge debt to mechanize their farms.



Imagine waking up one day and hearing your parents say that the bank has shut down and all their money is gone and the same has happened to many other people in your town. No one can afford to buy much, so businesses can't afford to pay their workers. Your mom and dad, and many of your friends' moms and dads, lose their jobs. How will your family buy food? Where will the money come from to make house payments or rent? What about your allowance?

The Great Depression years which followed the stock market crash of 1929 were very hard ones for Americans all across the country. Many people lost their life savings, homes, businesses and jobs.

Residents of the Great Plains bore an additional

The Eller House

burden in the form of ongoing drought and the billowing dust storms which earned the decade the name "Dirty Thirties." The western third of Kansas was part of what became known as the "Dust Bowl."

Some people, discouraged by the drought, dust and hard times, packed up and left for California or elsewhere, hoping to start over in a kinder land. Others remained on their farms and in their towns, hoping for better days. They survived by learning to make do and do without, and by helping one another out.

President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs benefited many people. Among these programs, the Works Progress Administration put people to work constructing bridges, roads and buildings across the country. In downtown Colby, you can find three WPA-era buildings: the current grade school, city hall, and the swimming pool.



Life in the 1930s

Look around the room. What is different from your living rooms today? Is there a TV set? Computer? CD player? Look for these items. For families lucky enough to own one, a radio was the main source of news, information and entertainment. Many farm homes had battery-powered radios before electricity was available. They could listen to President Roosevelt's "fireside chats," to music, and to daily and weekly adventure and comedy programs like "The Lone Ranger," "Little Orphan Annie" There were no stereos yet, and record-players were uncommon. Most families who wanted to hear music made their own, playing and singing around the piano or guitar. Although families in town would have had access to electricity in the 1930s, electric wires did not reach into the farmland until later. This house was not wired for electricity until 1949.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1932, and again in 1936 and 1940. He enacted several programs to bring relief from the depression and dust bowl, and to try to insure that some of the factors that led up to this terrible time could not recur. Roosevelt visited Colby during the campaign of 1935.



Stock Market Crash

Wild speculation in the stock market ended with the crash on Oct. 29, 1929. The crash along with factory and farm overproduction combined with a fragile world economy resulted in the Great Depression. It greatly affected the everyday lives of ordinary people and brought a sense of national and personal despair, fear, and failure. By 1932, thirteen million workers (one out of every four) had no jobs; banks closed, saving accounts disappeared, and families lost their farms, homes, and businesses. Nations around the world plunged into severe depression as well.

Entertainment

In October of 1927, the first Thomas County Free Fair was held in Colby. It was an outgrowth of the Farmer's Institute and provided education and entertainment.



In 1929, Colby held its first of many Tractor and Implement Shows. Implement companies showed machinery on main street. It was a huge success for many years. Entertainment after 1927 for the youth often involved a visit to the summer resort at Hemstrom's farm north of Colby. It was a popular spot for swimming, picnics and dances. In spite of the hard times, these activities continued throughout the depression.

Girls' Play

Nobody had very much money in the 1930s, so kids had simple homemade toys like a spool necklace or a rag doll. A family might not be able to afford cloth to make into dresses and other clothing, but they could "make do" by using the cloth bags that flour and other foods came in to make clothing. These bags often had pretty prints on them, and women could make a dress by saving a few of them. Girls could make their own paper dolls and outfits by cutting them out of magazines and catalogues.

The First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was a very visible figure during the Depression years, and many girls grew up admiring her. Many young people, usually girls, wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt to ask her personally to help them and their families.



Daily Chores

Without electric lighting, people used oil lamps and candles to provide light at night. The price of corn went so low during the Depression that farmers found it made more sense to burn it than to sell it

and buy expensive coal. There were other ways to get things

done before electrical power. A carpet sweeper and the broom did a pretty good job cleaning up floors and carpets, and they got a lot of use during the "Dirty Thirties." Guess who might get this chore? Try it out! The sewing machine relied on people-power to run: pedaling the treadle underneath made the needle sew. Give it a try!



Other forms of cheap entertainment were found in books, games and jigsaw puzzles. Families had fun playing cards, dominos and board games, and kids often made up their own games. The games "Scrabble" and "Monopoly" were invented in the 1930s and became quite popular. In a time when so many people had lost so much, the money and real estate you could gather up in the game of Monopoly was a pleasant fantasy.

Telephones were something of a luxury in this time. But if you had one and wanted to call your friend, you would first contact the area operator, who would then connect your phone line to that of your

friend. Privacy was not assured on the phone, since the operator and neighbors who shared a "party line" with you could listen in on the conversation!

Even before the Depression years, women saved scraps of material to make quilts and rag rugs with.



Cleaning

Along with the kitchen and back room, these rooms were added on when the house, built in 1903 in downtown Colby, was moved out to the Eller farm south of town in 1919. Indoor plumbing was quite a luxury. Before this was added, the Ellers had to use the outhouse out back. Any hired help still was expected to use the outdoor facilities, though they could wash up in the hallway sink.

During the dirt storms, towels were stuffed into the window cracks and under the doors. No matter how hard they tried, it was very hard to keep the dust out of the house during a dust storm. Towels were stuffed into window sills and under doors, but still it sifted in. It settled on beds and pillows, plates and food. It was in the air they breathed, causing a lot of respiratory problems called "dust pneumonia."

Occasionally, a ceiling would collapse under the weight of all the dirt that had quietly accumulated in the attic.



Boys' Play

Hunting small game was a way of supplementing the meat supply and preserving the crops. The late 1930s saw the beginning of the "Golden Age of Comics." Like the fantasy of real estate wealth in Monopoly and the glamour depicted in movies, comic books with heroes like Superman, who always "saved the day" offered hope and an escape from the harsh realities of everyday living. Do you think people use entertainment as a temporary escape from their problems today? How?



Cooking Meals

This cookstove could burn wood, coal, corncobs or other hard fuel. During the '30s, farmers found that the price of corn fell so low it made more sense to burn it than sell it for a pittance and then have to buy expensive coal. Refrigerators were popular items in the '30s, but homes that didn't have electricity, as this house did not, would stick with iceboxes, wells or kerosene refrigerators to keep things cool.

The dishes in the cabinet are turned upside down. Remember the dust in the boys' room? It sifted into cabinets, too, and people would store dishes upside down so they didn't have to wash the dirt out before using them every time.

Families in the 1930s who kept a garden going canned vegetables to see them through the year. If they had pigs or cows, they would can the meat when they butchered. Women who raised chickens or had a milk cow might sell the extra eggs or cream in town for some money to buy coffee, flour, salt and other supplies.

Casseroles like macaroni and cheese came into vogue during the 1930s. They were a good way to provide a filling meal fairly cheaply. Women learned to innovate, making cakes without butter, eggs, and/or milk if they didn't have the money to buy these ingre-

dients. SPAM, Ritz Crackers and Kool-Aid, along with Bisquick mix, became popular in the '30s.



The Depression and Farming

By 1930, farmers had scaled down and were spending less. They had returned to the days of home slaughtering, dressmaking and baking. Hired help was cut and women and children did chores and helped with the farming. Farming was in a state of depression and families were barely getting by. By 1931, wheat sold for 25 cents a bushel. Many dumped it on the ground rather than selling it. Unemployment became a serious problem and the jobless were put to work on various projects. One of these funded through local government efforts was the beautification of Fike Park. They removed unnecessary trees and the wood was used for fuel.



Drought!

Records show that in Thomas County only in 1930, 1933 and 1937 was the precipitation above the normal 18.02 inches for the decade. The first in a series of dirt storms hit on March 29, 1932. Air currents running close to the earth, picked up the topsoil. As storms increased the dust rose higher above the ground. Visibility shrank from miles to yards. The wind would roll, picking up great chunks of earth and throwing it into the air. On May 11, 1934 a strong two-day dust storm removed massive amounts of Great Plains topsoil in one of the worst such storms of the Dust Bowl. The dust clouds blew all the way to Chicago where dirt fell like snow. Several days later, the same storm reached cities in the east, such as Buffalo, Boston, New York, and Washington and even sprinkled the decks of ships more than 300 miles offshore.



Rabbit Drives

Along with the drought came the jack rabbits. Western Kansas in the mid-thirties was plagued with hoards of *Lepus californicus* Melanotis, black-tailed jack-rabbits. Reminiscent of the grasshoppers sixty years earlier, the rabbits ate everything in their path, including the roots of plants. The warm weather of the early 1930s coupled with the lack of rainfall eliminated many of the natural conditions that killed young rabbits. It was estimated there were eight million rabbits in thirty western Kansas counties. The rabbits were eating what few crops had survived, depriving cattle of badly needed feed. Drives were held to decrease the number of them.

Hobos

There is a mark on the sidewalk by the Eller House. During the 1930s, many out of work young people took to the trains and traveled around looking for work. They might ask to do some chores for a meal, and would make a mark somewhere on the property to show following hobos the kind of reception they might get. People understood that these men were not just

bums (though some were), but were among the many at that time who were out of work. They would usually help them out.

What would happen today if an unshaven stranger who hadn't had a shower in a while came to your door and asked for food?

Windmill

In a place where surface water was scarce and the drought long, the windmill was very important to the families who stayed. It provided water for the household and garden. Notice the chain on the windmill. During the dust storms, the static electricity would build up and anything metal you touched would give you a nasty shock! The chain served as a ground to prevent this.

Barn Chores

The barn was an important part of the farmstead, housing any animals the farmer might have – horses, milk cows, chickens. Sometimes the dust got so thick that farmers strung a wire from the house to the barn so they could find their way to the barn to do chores and back to the house when they were done. Can you imagine what it would be like to be in windblown dust so thick you couldn't see in front of you in the middle of the day?



The Eller Family

John Eller was born in LaPlata, Mo. in 1861 and moved to Thomas County in 1886 to homestead a piece of land just four miles south of Colby. Here he built a two-room soddy, a dugout and a sod chicken house. His future bride Ida Williams, also born in LaPlata, Mo., moved to the area with her family in 1886. She was hired as a local school teacher and, according to her daughter Doris, was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. John and Ida were married in 1890. They had four children: their eldest son Riley was born in 1892, followed by Dwight in 1896, Eunice in 1898 and Doris in 1914. After they were married, John moved a small two-room frame house to join the soddy for their home. The Ellers spent most of their lives farming the same homestead and adjacent land south of Colby.

The Eller House

The house was originally built by Colby's Presbyterian minister Leonard Keeler in 1903 on the corner of what is today Fourth and Grant Streets and purchased by the Ellers in January of 1906. The floor plan originally consisted of four rooms: the living room, two bedrooms and the dining room which also served as the kitchen. In 1919, the house was moved from Colby to a piece of land that the Ellers had acquired just north of the homestead. John and Ida lived here, farmed and raised their youngest daughter, Doris. When Mr. Eller wanted to move the house to the homestead two miles south of today's interstate Mrs. Eller would only agree if additions were made to the house: an indoor bathroom, new kitchen and bedroom. After the home was moved to the homestead, those additions were made. Doris and Eunice Eller donated their childhood home to the museum in 1981 and it was moved to this site in December of that year.

Prairie Museum of Art + History
Thomas County Historical Society
 1905 S. Franklin
 Colby, KS 67701
 785 460-4590
www.prairiemuseum.org

Local Government Projects

These programs employed as many as seven hundred of the jobless in the county. Some of the projects carried out by these workers included a new viaduct over the railroad on Highway 25, street sanding in communities, graveling of roads in the county, and work at the fair grounds. Despite the depressed conditions many significant building programs were developed during the 1930s. A new Colby High School in 1935, a new City Hall in 1936, and St. Thomas Hospital and the Municipal Swimming Pool in 1941.



City Hall, 1934



High School, 1935, now Intermediate Building



Swimming Pool, 1941

These buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places