2013

Stories of the children of the Great Depression: What I learned from my parents

Ardyth Ann Stull

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Stories of the children of the Great Depression: 
What I learned from my parents

by

Ardyth Ann Stull

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty 
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Family and Consumer Sciences Education

Program of Study Committee:
Kimberly Greder, Co-Major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Donald and Joyce Morrison and my grandparents, Paul and Harriett Turner and Stewart and Roselle Morrison. My parents were children of the Great Depression and my grandparents navigated them safely through those difficult days in such a way that they grew stronger and wiser. They are all my heroes.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background: Conversations about Great Depression Experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Studies during the 1930s</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Study Participants</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Researcher as Participant</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic impact on families</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards of living</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private and public assistance to families</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants' Parents' Occupations in the 1930s</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional workers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Influences on Parents of Participants</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular literature for youth</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scouting</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The thrift movement</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious faith and church life</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Faith and Church Life in the 1930s</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Studies in the 1930s</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Home Economics Association Study</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angell’s Narrative Study</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavan and Ranck’s Study</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland Growth Study</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion.................................................................................................................. 252
   I made up my mind to be happy.............................................................................. 253
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................. 254
APPENDIX A: Boy Scout Law, Oath, and Motto....................................................... 265
APPENDIX B: Institutional Research Board Approval............................................ 267
APPENDIX C: Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire.................................... 268
APPENDIX D: Introductory Letter............................................................................ 269
APPENDIX E: Informational Flyer ......................................................................... 270
APPENDIX F: Participant Questionnaire................................................................. 271
APPENDIX G: Informed Consent Document............................................................. 272
APPENDIX H: Preliminary Interview Questions....................................................... 273
APPENDIX I: Example of Individualized Follow-Up Interview Questions ............. 274
APPENDIX J: Interview Guide ................................................................................... 275
APPENDIX K: Coding Sample .................................................................................... 277
APPENDIX L: Errata Sheet ......................................................................................... 279
APPENDIX M: Letter and Questionnaire Sent to Participants
   Concerning Parent’s Birth Date and Education .................................................... 280
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Themes in Selected Popular Literature for Youth, 1907–1917</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Year of Birth and Highest Grade Completed of Parents of Research Participants</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Adaptation and Integration of Participant Families</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee co-chairs, Kimberly Greder and Robert Bosselman, and my committee members, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Jennifer Margrett, and Betty Trost for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

In addition, I would also like to thank Candace Fox and my colleagues at Mount Vernon Nazarene University for their encouragement as well as Bud and Jane Harbin for their encouragement and assistance. I want to also offer my appreciation to all of this study’s research participants, who shared their life stories with me, without whom, this dissertation would not have been possible.

A very special thank you to my faithful and loving husband, Bob, my children Jennifer, Betsy, and Jonathan, my son-in-law Joshua, my daughter-in-law Katie, and to Abby, Koen, Drew, Will, Clay, and Izzy—such bright and beautiful blessings from God to a grateful grandmother. I truly appreciate your support, patience, and love throughout this process. Thank you also to my church family for their encouragement and prayers.

Most of all, I want to thank the Lord for helping me and guiding me each step of the way with my research journey.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies and skills parents utilized to provide for their family’s basic survival needs, and the beliefs and values they embraced during the Great Depression to provide for the physical and emotional needs of their families in the midst of economic hardship. A qualitative research design utilizing a narrative inquiry approach was used to explore these issues. The research sample was composed of 12 men and women who were born in 1925 or earlier whose families suffered financial hardship during the Depression as evidenced by unemployment or underemployment of the main income provider, loss of home or farm to foreclosure, loss of savings through bank failures or stock market declines, or some other significant experience that seriously decreased their income during some period of the 1930s.

Five qualities were identified as important to the parents of most of the research participants in providing for their families during the 1930s: 1) a strong support network which was typically provided by a comprehensive type of “family relief;” 2) a strong work ethic of all family members of all generations; 3) the practice of thrift; 4) the utilization of a large set of personal skills; and 5) beliefs and values which included religious faith for the majority of participants as well as the importance of family and education. Another belief of the majority of the parents of the research participants was the importance of bearing hardship without complaint or grumbling—at least in front of the children.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background: Conversations about Great Depression Experiences

In 2006, after talking with my parents about their experiences during the 1930s, I asked for volunteers from my church congregation who were 78 years of age and older to take part in an informal research project. I explained that my goal was to interview those with religious faith who had memories of living through the Great Depression and learn how they coped during that time. The 13 people who expressed interest in participating received a letter from me that included information about the date of and process for the group interview and a list of questions for them to think about ahead of time. On the scheduled date the participants stayed after church and sat in a semi-circle and shared their experiences in response to my questions. One person’s memories sparked another’s memories, and their stories surfaced easily. A videotape of the session was distributed to each participant, as well as shown later during a program at the church.

I was surprised to discover the fond memories and good experiences that were shared, despite the fact that all the participants’ families had experienced hardships. The Great Depression was difficult, but not devastating, for most of them. I asked if they realized they were living during the Great Depression when they were children. Several spoke at once and said they did not, stating that “everyone was the same. We didn’t know any different.” Later I mentioned Christmas and birthdays and asked “What was it
like for you during the Depression when it was a gift-giving time?” Several people told about small or refurnished gifts they had received. The discussion moved on to their best memories of those years. Several people commented that their best memories were centered on their families. One person said, “Families were a lot closer.” Another person said, “That [family] was what you had. We all stuck together.” One man said “It was really the imagination of the parents more so than that of the kids to provide certain …gifts or things that the kids could do.” After the interview I pondered their statements about their parents and families. The question that began to form in my mind was, “What did those parents do to keep their family life positive during the prolonged months and often years of economic challenge?” It is with these informal conversations as a background that I approached my research. I was curious to know if the experiences of the group were an oddity, or if there were other families who thrived in the midst of economic hardship during the Depression.

In 1929 the Berkley Guidance Study (Elder, Liker and Jaworski, 1984), a longitudinal study of a sample of 211 middle and working class parents and their children, was initiated. It was coincidental, and not intentional, that the years of this study coincided with the Great Depression. Children were systematically selected from a list of births in Berkley, California, in 1928-1929. Their parents were born in or near 1900 and were observed annually between 1929 and 1945. In 1969-1970, 112 of the parents were interviewed again. Elder et al. (1984) have studied the data from the Berkley study to ascertain the psychological functioning of this group in the face of economic hardship. They found that the very same events can cause suffering or
growth, depending on the people experiencing the events. This finding confirmed Adamic’s assertion (1938) that the effects of the Depression on families could be placed in two categories: 1) Families were broken, either temporarily or permanently, or 2) Families were strengthened.

**Theoretical Framework**

Family systems theory provides the theoretical foundation for this research. This theory states that individual family members interact with and influence one another, producing a “whole—a system—that is greater than the sum of the interdependent” individuals (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991, p. 35). Satir (1972) uses the metaphor of a mobile to explain a family system. She explains:

> In a mobile all the pieces, no matter what size or shape, can be grouped together in balance by shortening or lengthening the strings attached, or rearranging the distance between the pieces. So it is with a family. None of the family members is identical to any other; they are all different and at different levels of growth. As in a mobile, you can’t arrange one without thinking of the other (p. 119).

Just as all the pieces in a mobile must adjust and work together to maintain balance and function effectively, families also need to adjust and work together in times of change or loss to maintain balance or equilibrium. The families in this study experienced many changes and losses during the Great Depression. Inasmuch as they were able to adjust to these changes and losses in a way that maintained the balance of the family unit, they were able to function effectively and emerge stronger as a result.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies and skills parents utilized to provide for their family’s basic survival needs, and the beliefs and values they embraced
during the Great Depression to provide for the physical and emotional needs of their families in the midst of economic hardship. The focus of this study was based on the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

1. What are the most enduring life lessons learned from parents during the years of the 1930s concerning life in general and family life specifically?

2. How did parents who experienced financial hardship provide for the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and intellectual needs of their children and other family members during the 1930s?

**Family Studies during the 1930s**

There were at least four studies that occurred in the 1930s that explored the impact of the economic downturn on families. In addition, there was a study of all aspects of the life of the city of “Middletown,” (a pseudonym for Muncie, Indiana), during this time period which included an exploration of the effect of the economic downturn on families. A brief description of each study as well as its stated purpose follows. These studies will be further discussed in chapter two.

The first study (Morgan, 1939) was especially relevant to those in the field of home economics, an academic discipline that focused on issues affecting the family and the home. Sponsored by the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), Omicron Nu, Phi Upsilon Omicron, and the National Council of Parent Education, this study had a dual purpose. It revisited 331 families studied in 1927 (Lindquist, 1931) whose research population consisted primarily of graduates of home economics bachelor degree
programs and tried “to discover the effects of time and of the Depression on these families” (Morgan, 1939, p. 3).

The second study by Angell (1936), a sociologist, was foundational for the third and fourth studies. Angell had a dual purpose for his study. He desired to learn about the effect of the Depression on family life. Also, as a university professor, he wanted to provide his students with a research experience and contribute to social research theory and methods.

The purpose of the third study (Cavan and Ranck, 1938) was to examine how families adjusted or failed to adjust themselves to the Depression. This adjustment was in regard to the organization of the family, not in regard to the economic crisis that all the families faced (p. 2).

Elder’s study (1974) was based on archival data from the Oakland Growth Study that was collected between 1932 and 1939, and then extended to include further data collection from the original research participants during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The purpose of the study was to investigate the social and psychological effects of the economic downturn on middle and working class families.

The purpose of the Middletown study (Lynd and Lynd, 1937) was to revisit a city where a comprehensive sociological study had taken place in 1924-1925 (Lynd and Lynd, 1929) to see what changes had occurred as a result of the economic downturn. The family was one of many aspects that were studied at that time.

This study examines the thoughts and motivations of the parents of this study’s participants in order to discover the strategies they used to support family members and
endure the financial hardship of America’s longest economic depression while they were rearing children. A qualitative narrative approach was utilized to explore and answer my research questions.

**Organization of the Study**

This study consists of six chapters. Chapter One discusses the genesis of my interest in family life and parenting beliefs during the Great Depression. It states the purpose of the study and compares this study with the stated purposes of previous studies of families during the Great Depression. It outlines the organization of the dissertation and concludes with an introduction of the 12 study participants.

Chapter two focuses on the historical background of the American economy, its impact on families, and offers brief insight into the challenges of the study participants’ parents’ occupations. It discusses previous family studies conducted during the 1930s and closes with cultural influences that may have impacted the parents of the study participants.

Chapter three explains the methodology utilized in this study and the procedures used to collect and analyze the research data.

Chapter four presents the “restoried” narratives of the twelve study participants.

Chapter five reveals and discusses strategies, skills and beliefs that emerged from data analysis that participants’ parents utilized to provide for the physical and emotional needs of family members during economic hardship.

Chapter six presents primary conclusions of this study, and implications for further research.
The Study Participants

This study is a compilation of the life stories of 12 American families during the years of the Great Depression which took place between 1929 and 1941 (Chandler, 1970). The stories are told by children who grew up during this time period. The children share their perspectives of their family’s functioning while experiencing economic hardship during the Great Depression and the impact this experience made on them throughout their lives.

Anna grew up in a family with six children and lived in a small railroad town where her father worked as a railroad dispatcher. Her father was laid off for several years. Her mother, whose grandmother was a full-blooded Mohawk Indian, managed the home and cared for the children.

Betty and her two sisters grew up in a small village where her father was a minister. She came home from school one day to find her mother gone, and later came to understand that she was in a mental hospital for a year. In the most difficult time of the Depression, the parishioners were unable to pay her father in cash and instead brought him gifts of garden produce and milk from their farms as payment.

Carol’s family was very likely the most prosperous of all the study participants during the Depression. Her father was a lawyer, and the family seemed to live well. However, they lost a home to the bank because they were unable to make the payments and were often paid in goods instead of cash for his legal services during this period of time.
Carrie’s parents rented a farm during the Depression. She and her two sisters helped at home. Since her father utilized more modern equipment such as a tractor she and her two sisters did not have to help in the fields. Their immediate family was able to endure drought and financial setbacks with the assistance of their extended family.

Cheryl grew up with her parents and two siblings on a farm. Her parents purchased the farm at the beginning of the Depression and together the family worked to pay the entire mortgage in six years, although this meant sacrificing almost all personal pleasure and living much as the early American pioneers did.

Donald’s father was a railroad switchman in a very large city. He was permanently injured in a railroad accident, and the family consisting of parents, three children, and their 90-year-old grandfather lived on government relief while the father’s legal suit against the railroad was stalled in the courts.

Fred grew up as an only child because two infant brothers died before he was born. His father had worked as a fine furniture maker before the Depression, but was forced to work for a company that built screens for homes when the Depression began. He supported his wife and son and several other family members with his meager earnings from the screen company during the 1930s.

Kathy grew up as an only child in a city where her father worked as a water treatment plant supervisor. The city went bankrupt and used scrip to pay its employees. Their bank closed for lack of funds, and Kathy’s family immediately lost the money in their savings account. Eventually, the bank reopened and they received partial repayment of the money they lost.
Linda also grew up as an only child in a large city. Her mother contracted tuberculosis and was quarantined in a sanitarium for months. Her father lost his job when his factory shut down for several years. When her mother recovered enough to come home, she found part-time work in retail to provide income for the family.

Robert lived comfortably on “the hill” during the early years of the Depression with his parents and two sisters. Robert’s father contracted tuberculosis while working as an insurance salesman and had to be quarantined in a sanitarium. As a result, Robert and his family were uprooted and moved to his grandparent’s farm for six years.

Shirley spent her early years in a coal mining town where her father worked for the mine. He died of tuberculosis when she was six years old. Two years later, in 1928, her mother remarried and the African American family of four children and two parents moved seven times during the Depression, looking for work and a better opportunity.

Walter grew up on a family farm with his parents, three siblings, maternal grandmother, maternal aunt, and paternal grandfather. The family worked together to run the self-sufficient farm and managed on an almost cashless basis.

The Researcher as Participant

In narrative inquiry the researcher and the research participants develop a relationship with one another, and in the process all involved grow and change (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). While this study is the story of 12 people who grew up during the years of the Great Depression, it is also the story of how I as a researcher and human being processed their stories to derive new meaning. Because I am also a participant in this larger narrative, the telling of the story will be in first person when I speak as will
their stories when they are presented verbatim. In the “restorying” of their stories, their experiences will be related in the third person.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In narrative analysis it is important to “situate the story within its place or setting” (Creswell, 2008, p. 516). In order to more fully understand the stories of the research participants, it is important to understand the historical background in which they lived. For this reason, a brief explanation of the issues that society faced in the 1930s will be discussed. In addition, the historical backgrounds of issues that impacted the occupations of the primary income providers will also be discussed.

**Historical Background**

Families during the decade of the 1930s managed all the normal developmental and relational milestones that occur in the lives of families. Children grew, went to school, developed relationships, and learned what it meant to be a member of their family and community. Adults aged, faced physical decline or illness, and much loved members of the family died. For the families of the research participants in this study, these events were accomplished during a time of additional strain from the persistent economic upheaval of the Great Depression. In order to understand the importance of their life decisions, it is helpful to understand something of the historical context in which these families lived.

**Economic impact on families.** The 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression, were difficult years for a great many American families. Especially hard was the fact that so few people recognized the economic warning signs in the late 1920s and were
unprepared for the economic disaster that engulfed them. The relatively sudden
downturn was a shock for both the rich and the poor.

The 1920s had been years of prosperity for most nonfarming Americans.
Families felt some measure of financial security because virtually everyone who wanted
a job was working. Economists estimate a five percent unemployment rate at the time of
Calvin Coolidge’s inauguration in 1923. In 1925 the unemployment rate dropped to 3.2
percent, and then went even lower (Shlaes, 2007). Americans had purchasing power,
and purchase they did. By the mid-1920s the cost of a Model T automobile dropped
over 50 percent to $240, making it affordable for a growing number of citizens (Shlaes, 2007).
Although buying on the “installment plan” was shunned by many thrifty
families, it became a way for millions of others to enjoy the benefit of the newest
products and technological advances without having to wait until they had saved all of
the money. Personal debt rose from $3.1 billion in 1923 to $6.9 billion in 1929 (Evans, 1998).

In the summer of 1929, employment and output began to decline in the United
States (Chandler, 1970). In October of 1929, the stock market took a dramatic dive.
Although most families did not feel an immediate effect from the economic downturn,
they reduced their spending by about 10 percent in 1930 (Evans, 1998). In the spring of
1930, a domino effect began to display itself in the economy. Stock market investors
saw their profits nearly evaporate. From September 1929 to the summer of 1932 the
Dow Jones Industrial average declined by 83 percent (Chandler, 1970). Between 1929
and 1932, over 20 percent of all American banks closed (Chandler, 1970).
Allen (1952) reported that in mid-1932, American industry was operating at less than 50 percent of its maximum 1929 volume (p. 147). Eighty percent of all American companies showed economic losses that same year (Vaile et al, 1933, p. 24). Industrial cities were among the hardest hit and experienced high rates of unemployment (Allen, 1952).

Heads of families often lost their job with little to no warning (Adamic, 1938). At the end of the 1920s, the average family income was slightly in excess of $3,000 a year. By 1932, it was under $2,000 (Elder, 1974, p. 43). The economic crisis caused upheaval for millions of people. Fear penetrated families of the employed and unemployed. Those without jobs feared that they would not be able to provide for their families. Those with jobs feared that they would lose them at a moment’s notice.

The United States did not keep unemployment statistics in the early 1930s, but Elder (1974) estimated that almost one-third of the total workforce was unemployed in 1933. Some large industrial cities estimated a 50 percent unemployment rate. Regardless of the actual figure, there was a devastating jump in unemployment from just a few years earlier. Unskilled workers in the working class had the greatest job and income loss during the Depression and professionals had the least (Elder, 1974). Many others, depending on age, gender, occupation, race and residence, were underemployed with fewer work hours and diminished paychecks.

**Standards of living.** During the 1930s, the standards of living were lowered for nearly everyone. However, at least half of the population did not experience significant deprivation. Elder (1974) explained that this was due to the decrease in the value of the
dollar and a lowered cost of living. Fewer dollars were required in 1933 to purchase the same amount of food in 1929. Food indices showed a drop from a high of 109.9 in October 1929 to 61.1 in March 1933 (Beney, 1936, p. 59, 60). Income indices dropped from 100 in 1929 to 48.8 in 1932 and rose to 65.4 in 1935 (Vaile, 1937, p. 14). The ability of Americans to purchase goods (real income) was cut in 1933 to approximately 75 percent of the 1929 level and rose to 85 percent by 1935 (Vaile, 1937, p. 16).

Wealthy families with yearly incomes over $10,000 and single individuals earning over $5,000 comprised only 2.4 percent of Americans in 1935. The same year, those families and individuals considered at the poverty or subsistence level (incomes under $1,500 and $750 respectively) comprised 41 percent of the population (Vaile & Canoyer, 1938, p. 235).

Families adapted to the reduced standard of living in many ways. They used their entire savings (if it was not lost in bank failures), took out loans, sold possessions, and decreased discretionary expenses. If the male figure in the family lost his job, other family members such as the wife or children often attempted to obtain work. Many families provided their own labor for money-saving ventures such as gardening, canning, and sewing their own clothes (Elder, 1974). Some farm families sold meat door-to-door instead of selling it at market for “pitifully low prices.” They also organized farmers’ markets to sell their goods in town (Riney-Kehrberg, 1994, pp. 113, 115).

**Private and public assistance to families.** President Herbert Hoover believed in volunteerism instead of government intervention and insisted in 1930 that “every citizen should maintain his self reliance… and neighbors should help neighbors”
(Watkins, 1999, p. 83). The February 1932 issue of *The American Home* (a home improvement magazine) stated that it was time for families with income to improve their homes and communities by initiating home improvement projects with labor furnished by the unemployed. As a result, “fix-it-up campaigns” were launched in Portland, Boston, and Washington DC (p. 74). These innovations helped in a small way, but the Depression continued, money ran out, and those with jobs were less and less able to employ their neighbors. In the cities, the Salvation Army, the YWCA, churches, and private agencies provided a variety of programs such as soup kitchens, clubs, shelters, and other types of relief. In Philadelphia, the working class contributed more to relief work than the rich (p. 108). By February 1933, almost 15 percent of all Americans received relief of some sort (p. 157) but it did not turn the economy around.

Home economists analyzed family needs at all economic levels (Bigelow, 1934) and developed programs to provide assistance. For instance, the Bureau of Home Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture studied family dietary needs and developed food budgets for different income levels. For a family of five, an annual cost for a restricted diet for emergency use was determined to be $350. An adequate diet at minimum cost was $500, an adequate diet at moderate cost was $800, and a liberal diet was determined to cost $950 (Leven, Moulton and Warburton, 1934, p. 122). Extension home economists provided nutrition education for those families in the lowest income level with menus, dietary needs, and information on meal planning (Monroe, 1932; Erkel and Wagner, 1937). Marie Wells (1933) at Cornell University developed a plan for growing enough food for a year for a family living in New York. The plan
provided the correct variety and amounts of vegetables, fruits, dairy products, poultry and meat to promote optimum nourishment.

President Hoover established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) in an attempt to relieve the credit difficulties of banks, insurance companies, and industrial firms (Trotter, 2004). He believed that this type of federal assistance would infuse the economy with enough capital to create jobs, stimulate production and increase consumer spending. Unfortunately, it did not produce this desired effect.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, he worked with Congress to initiate federal programs to create jobs for the unemployed. During his administration the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established for young men, aged 18-25 years old. The CCC improved environmental conditions of national forests, wildlife refugees, and other Department of Agriculture lands (Watkins, 1999). In the winter of 1933-34, the Civil Works Administration (CWA) was established to work on highways, bridges, tunnels, libraries, and jails. About 300,000 women were hired to perform nursing and secretarial duties and to work on sewing projects (Watkins, 1993). The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in May, 1935, to build roads, bridges, sewers, and dams. The goal was to move people from relief rolls and employ them in the public or private sector (Watkins, 1999). The National Youth Administration (NYA) was established a month after the WPA to employ 18-25 year olds. It helped thousands of young adults attend college by supplying jobs to earn tuition. The WPA and NYA provided jobs for the working and middle classes, including African Americans and women (Watkins, 1999).
None of the private or public work and relief programs brought the economy back to its 1929 level. It was not until the United States began to build up its military in 1940-41 that American industry revived and unemployment was significantly reduced (McElvaine, 1993, p. 320).

**Participants’ Parents’ Occupations in the 1930s**

In this study, the participants’ parents were employed in various careers. In order to understand their families’ situations during the Depression, it is helpful to better understand some of the occupational challenges they faced.

All of the mothers with the exception of one worked at home full-time. Of those mothers, three were farmers’ wives who had many duties assisting their husbands on the farm, and also performed their responsibilities of managing the home and caring for their children. All the mothers with the exception of one provided full-time care for their children and often other family members as well. One mother worked part-time in retail when her husband was laid off for several years from his factory job. Most mothers cooked and preserved food, and some of them tended their own gardens. They kept the home clean, as well as the family’s laundry. Most of the work was labor-intensive because they did not have many electrical appliances; some did not have electricity at all. Another important component of their daily work was helping their children learn how to complete household tasks, so they would become competent to perform those tasks in adulthood.

Four of the fathers were involved in professional careers and held occupational titles such as lawyer, minister, insurance agent, and water plant supervisor. The other
eight were laborers, working as a miner, railroad workers, a factory worker, a skilled laborer, and farmers. The following section explains what people in those professionals generally encountered during the 1930s.

**Professional workers.** Professional workers were not as likely to lose their positions through layoffs and industrial shutdowns as those in the working class, but they often experienced a decrease in income that was potentially devastating. Eleanor Roosevelt, in *It’s Up to the Women* (1933), contended that the Depression was sometimes more difficult for those women whose families had been accustomed to living with greater wealth than those who had lived more simply with far less income. With a gentle reprimand she writes:

> ... these women, never having learned how to work, are suddenly faced with the fact that they have no idea of how to take care of themselves. The mere thought that their husbands’ earning power is cut down and may vanish entirely and their heretofore assured income may melt into thin air, fills them with apprehension. Instead of being helpful, the woman’s own unhappiness and fear makes her add to the man’s fears, thereby leaving the man less capable of meeting his difficulties. (p. 5)

**Lawyers.** In June of 1931, a young lawyer by the name of Benjamin Roth, from Youngstown, Ohio, began a diary containing his observations of his city and nation in the midst of a financial crisis. In it, he expounded on his economic and political philosophy concerning daily events. He watched his city, a “steel town,” plummet into despair when in 1932 one out of every four citizens relied on charity for survival. His own legal practice struggled for survival during the decade, as did the practices of other professionals such as doctors, dentists, and accountants.
Even when manufacturing and retail had spurts of recovery, he and other legal and medical professionals did not. Roth’s diary was published by his son and gives insight into his thoughts about the economy as well as the experience of lawyers during that time. On August 8, 1931 he wrote:

Professional men have been hard hit by the depression…. Most professional men for the past two years have been living on money borrowed on insurance policies, etc (Roth, 2009b, p. 12).

On October 13, 1936 he wrote:

In spite of all these signs of returned prosperity the law profession lags. It is a curious anomaly. Everybody seems to have money, to buy clothes, cars, etc. yet during the past 3 months I took in hardly enough to pay expenses. It would seem that after recovery people spend their first earnings to buy clothes, cars, furniture and pay off debts. After they do this and accumulate a surplus they will start buying real estate and there will be some worthwhile business for the lawyer. It is a very trying period for our profession and I heartily wish it were over (Roth, 2009c, p. 181).

Ministers. Included in this category of professional workers are ministers. During the Great Depression, many ministers struggled financially as their church members lost income and had little or no ability to help support their church. The mainline church especially struggled, as most “budgets were slashed [and] membership dwindled. … In some cases, ministers were dismissed and the churches closed. It was a difficult, disheartening period, and churches struggled along as best they could, as did their individual members” (Askew & Pierard, 2004, pp. 172-173). Although many conservative churches retained their membership and often had increased membership, they tended to minister to those in the working class who had less money and often were without jobs. Either way, ministers were dependent on the stewardship of their
congregations to pay their salary. Because millions of Americans had diminished income, there was a significant impact on the income of ministers.

**Insurance agents.** Life insurance sales, in general, suffered less than many other financial careers. Large national life insurance companies that were not dependent on income from only one region were more solvent than small insurance companies that serviced a specific area. One of the reasons was that people invested in life insurance to help pay for future expenses and they were averse to letting the policy expire. Those who lost their jobs or were forced to work part-time normally exhausted their savings to survive. Once that money was gone, they often borrowed the maximum amount allowed from the value of their insurance policy or sometimes they cashed in their policy (Chandler, 1970). This diminished the revenue for the insurance company, decreasing the income of the insurance agent. In small towns with family-owned insurance businesses, this caused personal financial challenges for insurance agents.

**Government employees.** Government employees, even those in supervisory positions such as Kathy’s father, had little job security in the worst years of the Depression. Large cities that experienced the greatest industrial collapse were hardest hit (Kyvig, 2002). Higher unemployment meant decreased tax revenue for cities at the same time that increased funding was necessary for relief assistance. Due to severe cash shortages, some municipalities experimented with alternative forms of paying their employees by issuing wages in the form of scrip (Champ, 2008). Supervisors attempted to keep their workers’ morale up and made sure that necessary work was completed during this time of severe economic insecurity. In some states such as Ohio, many
teachers went months without pay due to severely decreased tax revenue (J. Morrison, personal communication, October 12, 2010). The teachers stayed on the job, thanks in part to the encouragement of their administrators and their sense of duty to their classes.

**Labor.** In March of 1932, a survey of 6,500 companies representing all industries reported that less than 26 percent were operating full-time and 72 percent were operating five or more days a week (Chandler, 1970, p. 34). Of all workers who were still employed, 56 percent worked part-time, often sharing a position with another worker to enable more employees to have at least some income and to retain their job skills. Union membership plummeted in the early 1930s, as workers were laid off or had their hours cut and could no longer pay dues. By 1933 there were a little over three million union workers in the United States, as opposed to about five million in 1920 (Watkins, 1999). Some workers refused to join the union for fear of being fired because of company retaliation for union membership—especially when they could so easily be replaced by the burgeoning pool of unemployed men desperate to jump at a chance for any job.

**Miners.** Watkins (1999) describes the living conditions of miners and their families during the 1930s:

The miners and their families lived in the ugly black piles of company towns that wormed their way through the hollows and narrow river valleys of the region—electricity rare, sanitation primitive at best, coal tips and breakers the tallest structures in sight, the air polluted with coal dust and stinking almost constantly from slag fires that never seemed to die... Wages and piece-rates (sometimes falling as low as thirteen cents for each sixteen-ton car of coal loaded) were regulated and paid entirely at the discretion of the companies, and mostly in company scrip whose value ranged anywhere from forty to eighty cents on the dollar. The shacks the miners lived in were owned by the companies, which deducted the weekly rent from the worker’s pay (p. 213).
In June of 1933, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), giving industrial workers the right “to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 151). A massive membership campaign ensued, resulting in a total United Mine Workers (UMW) membership of 400,000 by the end of the summer. In 1934 after much unrest in the coal fields resulting in bloody strikes and protests, the United Mine Workers, led by John L. Lewis, negotiated national benefits that included a seven-hour day/five-day workweek with base wages of $4.60 to $5.00 a day, depending on the region of the country (Watkins, 1999). This union victory led to transformations in other segments of industrial America.

**Railroad workers.** Railroad employment peaked in the 1920s and declined in the 1930s. Railroad employees worked very long work shifts and were permitted by law to work 16 out of every 24 hours. The work was often unsafe and the turnover rate for railroad workers was high (Railroad workers, n.d.). In November, 1929, President Hoover met with the presidents of all railroad companies and convinced them to continue with their plans for railroad construction, and they agreed to increase their expenditures by a billion new dollars (Shlaes, 2007). By 1931, the railroads were in financial stress and cut workers’ wages by 10 percent (Smiley, 2002). During their peak years, railroad companies throughout the United States purchased an average of 1,300 locomotives a year. As an indication of the reversals in the railroad industry during the early 1930s, not a single locomotive was purchased by any American railroad company in 1932 (Bird, 1967). They were one of the corporations with the highest net loss in the nation in 1932 (Chandler, 1970). As business picked up more in the mid-1930s, railroad
workers took advantage of the opportunity to join unions as did the miners. This
decision increased their pay and safety, and eventually decreased their work expectations
to 40 hours a week.

**Factory workers.** In the 1920s the standards of living for factory workers
improved significantly as their real wages rose by nearly 25 percent (Kennedy, 1999, p.
22). Between the years of 1929 and 1932, the United States national income in
manufacturing plummeted by 67 percent (Chandler, 1970). Industrial production began
leveling off in June of 1929 and showed a decrease as early as September (Bird, 1967).
According to Caroline Bird (1967), investment bankers forced an expansion of
manufacturing in 1928 and 1929, which backfired when it became apparent that they had
overbuilt and could not sustain this higher level of output. Some of the manufacturers
who suffered the largest net losses during 1932 were those who worked in iron and steel,
other metals and metal products, and machinery (Chandler, 1970). Millions of
manufacturing workers either lost their jobs or had their hours cut, causing financial
hardship on millions of American families. Most manufacturing wages were somewhat
meager, making it difficult to save money for emergencies. Typically, these workers
quickly depleted their financial resources and many eventually were forced to seek
assistance from relief agencies.

**Skilled laborers.** Skilled laborers in the building trades were among the first to
feel the financial impact of the Depression. In 1931 new home construction fell by 95
percent from its 1929 level (Kennedy, 1999). During the 1930s, instead of building new
homes, many Americans lost their homes to foreclosure and sometimes moved in with
family members. With so many people unemployed or living on decreased incomes, there was little money to remodel or repair existing housing. In an attempt to jumpstart the economy, states and the federal government allocated funds for public works. As governor of New York, Franklin Roosevelt committed millions of new funding toward public works spending (Shlaes, 2007) and urged President Hoover to do the same. When he became president, Roosevelt pressed Congress to create the Public Works Administration (PWA) in his first 100 days. PWA workers built courthouses, hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, and even aircraft carriers (Kennedy, 1999). The idea was to improve the economy and provide work for skilled laborers. Even though the program helped, many skilled laborers were unable to find steady work for much of the 1930s.

Farmers. Many farm families in the early 1930s faced difficult economic conditions. However, their financial problems were a carry-over from the previous decade. They did not enjoy the general prosperity that many other Americans experienced during the 1920s.

In the years between 1914 and 1920, in order to help feed and clothe America and her European allies during World War I, farmers increased food and fiber production about 70 percent (Chandler, 1970). During those years, the U.S. government encouraged farmers to till every possible piece of land to help with the war effort. Out of patriotism and an anticipation of financial gain, farmers plowed 40 million new acres of land, 30 million of which were in the Great Plains region (Saloutos, 1982). During those years, farm commodity prices increased significantly which increased the incomes of farmers and the values of their land. Many Americans decided to go into farming
when they saw the prosperity possible within such a short time. They purchased land or new equipment at inflated prices. When the war ended farmers did not decrease production, which led to a serious oversupply of farm products and a drastic decrease in commodity prices (Perkins, 1969). Many who had significant debt from their expansions and purchases of farm machinery were caught in the crush of oversupply and falling prices. Small farm owners who did not use more modern equipment were especially impacted.

In the 1920s, approximately 40 percent of all farmers were still paying for their farms and 75 percent utilized credit to produce their crops (Petty, 2004). By 1930, America’s farmers owed approximately nine billion dollars on mortgage debt (Zimmerman, 1936). Prices for crops and livestock fell about 75 percent between 1929 and 1933 (Petty, 2004, p. 320) but the farmers were unable to cut their own expenses at the same rate. As a result they were plunged even further in debt (Vaile et al, 1933). Between 1929 and 1933, one third of all farm families in the United States lost their farms due to foreclosures (Petty, 2004). The great droughts and dust storms of the 1930s further contributed to their economic hardship. Worster (1979) stated that by 1936, farms in the United States lost about $25 million a day, and an excess of two million farm families were on relief (p. 12).

Weather and its impact on farm families. If the distressed economy was not challenging enough for farmers, weather conditions added to the misery. In the 1930s almost every state experienced some measure of serious drought (Worster, 1979). Maine and Vermont were the only two states not experiencing drought conditions from
1930-1936 (p. 11). Along with drought, many states experienced unusually high temperatures. In the summer of 1932 Nebraska reached 118 degrees and Iowa 115. Crops failed in the Great Plains at alarming rates, and in 1936 farm losses reached $25 million a day (Worster, 1979, p. 12). In Kansas, the drought lasted from 1931 until 1939. A “perfect storm” of conditions combined to cause cataclysmic circumstances. The severe drought that killed vegetation in fields for three years, the plowing of new land during World War I which had previously provided natural cover that prevented erosion; the utilization of farming practices that were not well-suited for the Great Plains, and the lowering of the water table all contributed to the enormous and destructive dust storms in an area known as the “Dust Bowl” (Riney-Kehrberg, 1994).

Dust storms of massive proportions destroyed crops and land. In 1934 a huge storm began in Montana and Wyoming and blew dust into Boston, New York, Atlanta and Washington, DC. Dust was found on the decks of ships 300 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean (Worster, p. 13). Dozens of people and many farm animals died from the dust in their lungs and many farmers left the region and gave up farming entirely.

**Cultural Influences on Parents of Participants**

To better understand the parents of this study’s participants, five cultural influences were explored that may have contributed to the formation of their thought patterns and motivations during their younger years. These five influences were:

1) school and especially school curriculum; 2) popular literature for youth in the time period; 3) scouting (particularly Boy Scouts); 4) the thrift movement in the United States especially during World War I; and 5) religious faith and church life. The following
section will briefly consider the messages these five institutions or movements may have communicated to society in general and youth in particular in the late 1890s until the time of World War I.

**School.** My exploration began with the schools since going to school was a common experience for most children in the United States during the years that the parents of this study’s participants’ were children. Of the 11 participants who responded to my request for information on the years of their parents’ birth and the highest grade in school that they completed, only one parent’s birth date and highest grade in school were unknown and one father attended only through first grade. All others attended school through at least sixth grade with all but four parents completing more than sixth grade.

The experiences of students in schools between the years of 1900 and 1910 varied. More than two-thirds of the nation’s schools were rural, one-room schools (The 1900s: Education: Overview, 2001). The average student may have attended school less than four months out of the year (Marshall, 1962). Schools in urban communities generally held school for more than four months and had more standard grades.

One of the commonalities for a great many American students was their reading textbook. Although a variety of readers were utilized, the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* (1879) had the widest usage of all readers. According to Lindberg (cited in Hanks, 1981), “They were America's major schoolbooks for over seventy-five years, appearing in 122,000,000 copies and three major revisions between 1836 and 1920” (p. 200). Mark Sullivan (cited in Mosier, 1947), surveyed the influence of McGuffey’s Readers and estimated that “at least half the school children of America, from 1836 to 1900, drew
inspiration from McGuffey’s Readers” (p. 169). His survey found the influence of these readers “almost universal” in America except for the New England states (p. 169). Hugh Fullerton (cited in Kammen, 1976) wrote in 1927 that "except the Bible, no other book or set of books has influenced the American mind so much” (p. 62). Most other readers taught moral lessons in much the same manner as the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers*.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, teachers had little or no training in teaching methods and therefore relied on the knowledge and information in the textbooks to supply their students with a good education. In order to assure that students “learned” the curriculum, they were expected to memorize and recite passages from their readers. The *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* “provided passages of suitable length to be memorized and of appropriate content to reinforce the values of the expanding Midwestern middle class” (Kammen, 1976, p. 60).

It was believed in the late 1800s and the early years of the 1900s that one of the purposes of education was to train children in character development. Readers were considered to be a prime tool to achieve this goal. Vail (1910) asserted that they were the “proper and indispensable texts for teaching true patriotism, integrity, honesty, industry, temperance, courage, politeness, and all other moral and intellectual virtues” (p. 2). He believed the purpose of every lesson should be to “establish in the pupils high moral principles which are at the foundation of character” (p. 2).

As early as the second reader, students read short stories and memorized poems on topics such as being considerate of others, helping parents, work, thrift, honesty, and a love for God and nature. Readings illustrated the importance of perseverance in the
face of difficulty and demonstrated that success could be achieved with courage and determination. Stories in the fourth, fifth, and sixth readers were often excerpts from a variety of well-known authors such as Defoe, Dickens, and Shakespeare, enticing students to read these authors’ works more widely.

**Popular literature for youth.** Between 1897 and 1926, studies were conducted by librarians attempting to determine the literature American children and youth found most interesting and most often checked out from their public libraries. Educators were interested in helping children become better readers, but they also wanted children to read books that they believed were “socially desirable” (Jordan, 1926, p. 2). Character development was an important theme in literature for children and youth at that time.

In an attempt to discover the messages concerning values and beliefs conveyed to youth in the United States during the early years of the last century, I perused some of the literature that was most popular. In order to make informed choices I studied Jordan’s lists of books that were popular with boys and girls in ages that ranged from 10 ½ to 18 (1926). For my present study, I was most interested in books that were shown to be popular in surveys conducted in 1907 and 1917.

The books of most interest to youth in the early part of the 20th century had some common characteristics. The heroes and heroines in the stories overcame many obstacles. Most of them faced and conquered poverty with hard work, courage, and good humor. If their challenges made them afraid, they acted bravely in spite of their fear and grew brave in the process. Many grew as a result of someone (usually a kind, wise adult) who was emotionally and often physically supportive of them. Most of them
came to realize the importance of living frugally, thus enabling them to save money or improve their financial condition. Many of them exhibited an appreciation for nature that enriched their lives in a way that material possessions could not. The hero or heroine did not whine or complain about his or her difficulties. Many of the leading characters lost family members to death or disease. The children took the good with the bad in life, assumed there would be hardships, and were not coddled or spoiled by their parents. The following table displays the prevalence of these themes in the books I read from Jordan’s (1927) lists of popular books at that time.
Table 1

*Themes in Selected Popular Literature for Youth, 1907 – 1917*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Support Network for Hero</th>
<th>Strong Work Ethic</th>
<th>Practiced Thrifty Lifestyle</th>
<th>Respect for and/or Faith in God</th>
<th>Heroic Without Complaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Freckles</em> by G. S. Porter (1904)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <em>Girl of the Limberlost</em> by G. S. Porter (1909)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. <em>Laddie</em> by G. S. Porter (1913)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm</em> by K. D. Wiggin (1903)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Pollyanna</em> by E. H. Porter (1913)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>Five Little Peppers</em> by M. Sidney (1881)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. <em>Robinson Crusoe</em> by D. Defoe (1719)</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. <em>Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come</em> by J. Fox (1903)</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. <em>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</em> by H. B. Stowe (1852)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. <em>Betty Zane</em> by Z. Grey (1903)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <em>Little Women</em> by L. M. Alcott (1869)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. <em>David Copperfield</em> by C. Dickens (1850)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. <em>Oliver Twist</em> by C. Dickens (1838)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. <em>The Young Trailers</em> by J. A. Altsheler (1907)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Kalish (2007), a child of the Depression, confirmed that at least some of these books had been important to her family when she stated that her grandparents maintained a “library” at their home for their family. She said,

For us children, building character, developing a sense of responsibility, and above all, improving one’s mind constituted the essential focus of our lives. Childhood was generally considered to be a disease, or, at the very least, a disability, to be ignored for the most part, and remedied as quickly as possible. The adults thought of reading as part of the cure. Practically everything we were given to read was for the purpose of supplying examples of how we were to behave (p. 63).

The books included *Little Women, Little Men, Freckles, and A Girl of the Limberlost.*

There were more than 20 books by Horatio Alger. Kalish read them all.

My interest was piqued when I learned that the Boy Scout handbook and the fictional series about the Boy Scouts were so popular in 1917. I wondered if the scouting movement had a cultural influence on the parents of the children of the Depression when they were young, which led me to the next section.

**Scouting.** Although several men are credited with having a part in the founding of the Boy Scouts, Lieut. General Sir Robert S. S. Baden-Powell, an officer in the British Army in the late 1800s, is generally believed to be the leading force behind the movement. He was disappointed in the qualifications of the men who were sent to him from England when he served in South Africa in the 1890s. Murray (1937), in his history of the movement, stated that Baden-Powell discovered his recruits

… lacked fundamental character values, such as dependability, initiative and resourcefulness… They had never been through the experience of pioneering; they did not know woodcraft. They had not been subjected to those necessities of life which bring out the qualities which humans have when given proper opportunity and when stimulated by proper leadership (p. 2).
To help these recruits and others like them, he wrote a book called *Aids to Scouting* which, to his surprise, became very popular in England, with boys more than with the men for whom the book was written.

In the United States, other men were developing organizations for boys. Ernest Thompson Seton formed the Woodcraft Indians and Daniel Carter Beard began an organization called the Sons of Daniel Boone (Bolland, 1993, p. 3). They had many of the same goals as Baden-Powell, especially the goal of teaching boys and youth conservation and outdoor skills. Together they all merged their organizations in 1910 to form the Boy Scouts of America. The first edition of the *Boy Scouts Handbook*, published in 1911, emphasized characteristics of pioneer scouts in American history and the knights of King Arthur’s court (Boy Scouts Handbook, 2005, p. 7). Every scout was required to adhere to the 12 points of the Scout Law, the Scout Oath, and the Scout Motto (see Appendix A). Character development was a pervasive theme throughout the handbook and organization. Jordan (1926) found that the *Boy Scouts Handbook* was the most popular non-fiction book that children enjoyed reading in 1917-1918.

During World War I, the Boy Scouts rendered a high degree of civil service to help with the war effort. Some of their efforts included selling subscriptions for the five Liberty Loan campaigns. Murray (1937) stated that they sold 2,328,308 subscriptions, amounting to $354,859.252 or $936 per boy and they raised a total of $43,043.698 for War Savings Stamps. They collected over 100 carloads of fruit pits to be used for gas masks. They created 12,000 war gardens and war farms to help raise food for citizens in
the United States and for the allies in Europe (p. 135). They also provided service to the Red Cross.

In many ways, the scouting movement embodied the same characteristics of the McGuffey curriculum and other popular literature of the time period. Character development of young people was uppermost in the minds of these writers and organizers. According to the Scout Law (Boy Scout Handbook, 2005, p. 15, 16), scouts were expected to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. Their assistance with promoting Liberty bonds during World War I led me to look more closely at the concept of thrift during the early 1900s, the thrift movement during World War I, and the cultural messages that may have influenced the parents of my research participants.

**The thrift movement.** Thrift was an important concept in America from its earliest days to the end of the 1800s. American children learned its value in their home, church, and school as a moral virtue and “accepted it as a twin to religion, learning thrift maxims almost as corollaries to Bible verses and allegories” (Bell, 1941, pp. 18-19). It lost a measure of importance in the early 1900s as consumer purchasing power increased. Prior to World War I, Straus (1920), president of the American Society for Thrift in 1920, claimed that Americans had developed the reputation throughout the world as “the most wasteful of all people” and as “Thriftless Americans” (p.49) because of their increased spending at the turn of the century and their resultant wastefulness.

Thrift came back in vogue for Americans during the Great War. Harmon (1917) explained the new understanding of the thrift concept saying,
War in Europe has made it both fashionable and patriotic to practice thrift. Thrift nowadays doesn’t mean merely saving pennies, as we used to think. It means instead making the best possible use of all we have—time, money, energy and material—and not trying to spend more of anything than we really have (p. 30).

The importance of thrift for the nation and the world was stressed by President Wilson and embraced by most Americans. Wilson’s first speech after the declaration of war with Germany was about the necessity of thrift (Straus, 1920). He appointed Herbert Hoover as the National Food Administrator to help assure an adequate food supply for the United States as well as the Allies in Europe whose food production decreased due to the war. Hoover called on American women, as the “managers of the food consumption” (Wilhelm, June 9, 1917, p. 459) to do everything in their power to prevent waste and make the most of every resource. Instead of rationing food, he encouraged Americans to “eat plenty, but to eat wisely and without waste” (Wilhelm, June 9, 1917, pp. 459-460). Hoover established the “rule of the clean plate” by encouraging mothers to avoid waste by putting no more than appropriate portions of food on their children’s plates and expecting them to eat every bite. In an interview with Wilhelm (June 9, 1917) just weeks after the declaration of war, he advised Americans to follow his four-point strategy to conserve food:

1. Eliminate household waste and make sure that all Americans “clean their plates.”
2. Reduce unnecessary eating.
3. Use food grown locally and substitute some of the products presently used with foods that cannot be exported to the Allies.
4. Instruct Americans on dietetics and how to preserve summer produce for use in winter.
In addition, Hoover encouraged meatless Tuesdays, wheatless Wednesdays, and porkless Saturdays so the days when families made specific food sacrifices were spread out (Karetzky, 1997). In an act of patriotism, a great many American families enacted his guidelines.

The Department of Agriculture appointed its statisticians to calculate the magnitude that small changes in America’s eating habits could make on the food supply if everyone participated. For instance, if every American home cut back even one-half cup of milk daily, it would “equal the production of 400,000 cows” and by reducing the amount of sugar used in each home daily by one ounce, 285,000 tons of sugar would be saved on an annual basis (Straus, 1920, p. 178). To save fuel, “gasless Sundays” were established, saving about 5,000,000 gallons of gasoline with each occurrence (Straus, 1920, p. 45).

Edward Bok, editor of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, embraced the thrift movement and used his magazine to help homemakers make the best use of their resources. The magazine included multitudes of recipes to increase their ability to prepare new dishes with the most available foods. Not all women were able to stomach recipes highlighting beef melts (spleen), fried pork ears, or such novel combinations as ‘Pork Snouts with Green Peas’” (Karetzky, 1997, p. 74), but they quickly learned that there were more possibilities for food choices than most of them had imagined. In November of 1918, *The Journal* stated,

You are asked this winter by the United States government to conserve your clothes: to make what you have to, and to buy as little as possible, beyond the needful, so as to conserve more power in the manufacturing, selling and delivering, to say nothing of transportation” (p. 125).
The article then illustrated how to remake adult clothes into new clothes for growing children, including how to make socks for little boys from discarded adult socks. It also demonstrated how to make one hat function like three with the addition of an adjustable band (p. 127). Many women heeded this advice or created other ways to remake clothing to help their families and support the war effort.

A much wider campaign was waged to help raise money for the war effort. Three weeks after war was declared on Germany, “Congress authorized the United States treasury department to issue and sell $5,000,000,000 of war securities” (Greenough, 1922, p. 19). In five separate campaigns spanning a three-year period, Americans purchased government-issued stamps and bonds to assist in the financing of the war effort, sometimes at significant sacrifice. Straus (1920) stated,

At the end of the war, substantially 25,000,000 Americans had purchased Liberty Bonds while the number of individual buyers of Thrift Stamps and War Savings Certificates was 36,000,000. It may with safety be stated that, as a direct result of the war, 10,000,000 Americans became money savers for the first time in their lives—a number that is equal to one-half of all the homes in the United States (p. 170).

Children were encouraged to take part in the campaign to raise money for the war effort. The government produced child-friendly literature that was distributed in schools, the post office, and through many businesses. It explained how they could help with the war effort by purchasing Thrift Stamps for 25 cents each. When a person purchased their first Thrift Stamp, they were given a card with enough spaces to attach 15 additional stamps (a $4.00 value). When the card was full, they exchanged it for a War Savings Stamp and earned 4 percent interest. If they added a designated amount of
money to their completed card (which depended on the month the War Savings Stamp was purchased), they would be paid $5.00 at maturity, which would occur on January 1, 1923 (Straus, 1920; Greenough, 1922). The dual idea was that they would help themselves and their country at the same time. Thrift clubs and War Savings societies were formed to promote the campaigns (Greenough, 1922) and posters printed by the government were posted everywhere to encourage full participation in the effort.

Larger amounts of money were made available for the government through Liberty Bonds. Greenough (1922) explained the process:

The denominations ranged from $50 to $100,000. They were to bear interest at the rate of 3 ½ per cent annually. The date of maturity was fixed for June 15, 1947, but the government was authorized to redeem them at any time after June 15, 1932. The Treasury Department announced May 15th as the opening date of the first bond campaign, and June 15, 1917, as the closing (p. 19).

A great many Americans had a general understanding and appreciation for the concept of thrift. This was not a foreign idea to them but was considered to be common sense. Most of them did not purchase goods for which they could not pay. It only made sense to them that the government could not purchase war supplies and assistance for the Allies without having some way to pay for them. The War Savings campaign helped the country and the people. The people loaned their money to the government, and the government promised to pay them back with interest. In Indiana (and probably in other states as well), citizens were asked “to save to the utmost limit of [their] ability, and from these savings to buy, at regular intervals, a specified amount of War Savings stamps until the end of the year [1918]” (Greenough, 1922, p. 212).
The outpouring of support for the thrift movement in order to help finance the war effort made an impression on American culture. Many Americans continued to practice thrift but not as stringently as during the war era. However, Bell (1941) stated that many Americans relaxed their strict savings strategies and spent their money. She said “the people had been induced to save twenty times as much as ordinarily” (p. 25) for the war effort, so it was normal for them to put aside the deprivation they had exercised since the war was over. Thrift education continued in the schools for several years, but the burden of war that had compelled children and youth to save was no longer in place.

Religious faith and church life. Religious faith and church participation was found to be important to most of the participants in this research. The 1930s proved to be difficult years for a great many churches in the United States. Religious people were not exempt from the financial reverses experienced by millions of nonreligious people during that time. The Depression surprised them as much as it did the rest of the population.

Prior to World War I, a theological and social difference of opinion was developing among Christians in the United States. On one side of the controversy were those who called themselves modernists or liberals. The other side called themselves fundamentalists or evangelicals. The disagreement revolved around “the authority and infallibility of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, the personal salvation of the believer through Christ’s substitutionary atonement, and the second coming of Christ” (Askew & Pierard, 2004, p. 168). The fundamentalists believed these
were fundamental issues to which Christians must adhere in order to be true believers. The modernists believed essentially that in this new age of reason, it was important for Christians to take a more scientific approach to their beliefs and adhere only to those parts of the Bible that could be proved or seemed reasonable. They, along with many other Americans who did not profess religious faith, overwhelmingly adopted the belief in “the power of science to solve human problems” (Askew & Pierard, 2004, p. 166), in a similar way that religion had solved problems in earlier days for individuals, families, and society.

Before World War I, denominations often had members of both factions. They worked together on the same goal of presenting the Christian message to the world and prayed together concerning the same issues and concerns. During the war, they united, often with great patriotism, to win the conflict overseas. The moral teachings of the Bible and the church were considered by most to be of value, even if they were not always followed, and many Americans professed to have a personal faith in God. Before the automobile became popular, it was common for Americans to regard Sunday as a day to worship God.

At least some of these five cultural influences are likely to have influenced the parents of the participants in this study. Other cultural influences may have impacted them more, but it is most likely that at least some of these five areas would have been topics of conversation for many people living in that time. They converged into a cultural message concerning the importance of encouraging character development in children and youth.
Religious Faith and Church Life in the 1930s

When peace returned after World War I, the theological disagreements that had been put aside during the war resurfaced and became polarizing. In the United States, denominations that held to more modernist viewpoints tended to reside in northern states. They were typically those in the mainline denominations such as Congregationalists, Methodists, and Episcopalians, although there were conservative remnants in most denominations. The mainline churches tended to have more wealth because they had been established for a longer period of time. By the 1930s, the northern denominations “passed through a ‘religious depression,’ the counterpart to the economic disaster affecting the whole country. Northern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians lost two percent of their membership between 1930 and 1935 (Noll, Hatch, Marsden, Wells, & Woodbridge, 1983, p. 407). Disillusioned, many of their pastors left the ministry.

Many wealthy churches in mainline denominations, such as several churches in Middletown, overextended themselves financially with expensive building projects during the prosperous 1920s (Lynd & Lynd, 1937; Kyvig, 2002). Their building campaigns were meant to provide them with churches of which they could be proud, and the “buy now, pay later” viewpoint extended to their philosophy of stewardship. When the economy met with a reversal, these churches often met with financial disaster. When their parishioners lost their jobs or were forced to take a reduction in pay, the churches were left with a much-diminished stream of income. Askew and Pierard (2004) described the plight of many mainline denominations as financially desperate. Their
“budgets were slashed, membership dwindled, and missionary enterprises were curtailed” (p. 173). In addition, families who had lost income or met with financial decreases often felt embarrassed if their clothes were shabby or if they did not have money to put in the offering plate and they stopped attending (Bird, 1967).

Churches had to deal with more than just financial challenges in the 1920s and 1930s. Sunday became a popular day for taking a drive in the automobile and enjoying family outings. A growing number of people considered Sunday to be a day for leisure and entertainment instead of religious worship (Kyvig, 2002).

In earlier times of financial crisis, religious revival had taken place in the churches. Mainline denominational ministers kept expecting revival to break out, but it never did. However, just as the mainline denominations faced a loss of members, many fundamentalist churches gained members. In the 1930s, the Southern Baptists increased their membership by over a million people. Pentecostal denominations as well as holiness Wesleyan denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene doubled and tripled in size (Noll et al., 1983). The smaller evangelical churches and most black churches drew members from the lower economic classes and those who were financially compromised. Lynd and Lynd (1929) found in their study of Middletown in the 1920s that those in the working class tended to regularly attend church services and have a religious faith that impacted their lives on a more personal level than those of the business class. These conservative churches emphasized biblical belief in heaven and hell more than the business class churches and they also offered more support and encouragement in their community. This was also true when they revisited Middletown
in the mid-1930s. In rural regions, churches in the 1930s continued to provide a “formative role in community, family, and individual life that had been evident in nineteenth-century America” and Judeo-Christian beliefs continued to provide the basis for public and private morality throughout the nation (Askew & Pierard, 2004, p. 167). Roman Catholicism, whose members in urban areas were largely of immigrant families, grew during the 1930s as well.

**Family Studies in the 1930s**

During the 1930s, several studies were conducted to ascertain the effect of the Depression on the family. One study (Morgan, 1939) was first initiated in the 1920s for different research purposes and then revisited in the 1930s. Two separate studies by Angell (1936) and Cavan and Ranck (1938) were conducted solely in the 1930s. The Oakland Growth Study was a longitudinal study that began in 1931-32 by interviewing and researching children in the Oakland, California area. It was coincidental and not intentional that the research took place during an economic downturn. The children were revisited numerous times until the 1960s. Elder (1974) reconceptualized the data from this study to ascertain the impact of the Depression on the lives of the research participants and their families. He wrote the results of his study in *Children of the Great Depression*, which also examined the impact the Depression continued to make on their lives into adulthood. When the Oakland Growth Study is discussed here, it will be from Elder’s perspective from his research of the data. Lynd and Lynd (1929) investigated the culture of “Middletown,” considered to be a typical American city in the 1924-25
and then revisited the same city in 1935. Their research included family life, which will be discussed here.

**American Home Economics Association Study**

In 1927 the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), Omicron Nu, and Phi Upsilon Omicron worked cooperatively to research characteristics of successful homemakers. Questionnaires were sent to several hundred married mothers whose children were still in the home. Three-fourths of the research participants were college graduates in the field of home economics; the other fourth were recommended for the study by the home economics graduates as being successful homemakers. The findings from this early research were based on 331 questionnaires and discussed in Lindquist’s book, *The Family in the Present Social Order* (1931).

In 1932, AHEA revisited those same 331 families to learn how they were managing the financial reversals of the Depression. These families were considered to be excellent representatives of the “normal, happy American family” that would provide “objective information…concerning the influence of the economic situation on families that were above the average in education and occupation” (Morgan, 1939, p. 9). Most of the husbands in these families were college graduates, and even though a few lost their jobs during the early 1930s, they were able to reestablish themselves in other positions. Most, but not all, the families experienced financial reversals during the early 1930s, although some incomes saw a substantial decrease. Almost half of the families indicated that the Depression had either had no effect or a favorable effect on the personal relationships within their homes. The study concluded that this may have been due, at
least in part, to the training in home and family management that the mothers had received. The most common positive effect mentioned was that “the Depression had drawn the family closer together in working out problems” and the most common negative effect mentioned concerned “increased worry and tension in the family” (Morgan, 1939, p. 63). In her concluding remarks, Morgan said the “group was characterized on the whole not so much by the absence of sources of friction as by the presence of positive evidence of satisfaction” (p. 101). This study did not represent typical American homemakers and their families, and the original study was probably conducted, at least in part, to measure the effectiveness of Home Economics programs. It indicated that the women who were considered to be successful homemakers were able to successfully manage their homes in even challenging financial circumstances, giving credence to the importance of the academic home economic programs of that day.

**Angell’s Narrative Study**

Angell (1936) and his college students conducted a narrative study whose two-fold goal was to discover the effect of the Depression on family life and to contribute to social research through theory and methodology. His students interviewed 50 American families with parents and children residing together at the beginning of the Depression whose income suffered at least a 25 percent sustained loss. The researchers identified two major qualities, integration and adaptability, to be significant in determining how members of the family reacted to their decrease in income. These qualities were then categorized into eight different types, based on their degree of family integration and adaptability. For instance, one type was “highly integrated, moderately adaptable.” It
was found that integration (i.e., family unity and interest in one another) is important in cases where there may be a decrease in income but family roles remain the same. However, in cases requiring not only a decrease in income but also role modifications or changes, adaptability is the most important quality. Those who were found to be “unadaptable” had difficulties even if they had a high degree of integration. Those families with both high integration and high adaptability (Type I) reported that “the challenge of the [financial] decrease awakened a greater sense of family unity than originally existed” (Angell, p. 60). Seventy percent of the families in the study believed they had increased their family solidarity as a result of their decreased income (p. 282).

**Cavan and Ranck’s Study**

Cavan and Ranck (1938) studied 100 families in the Chicago area that had at least one child receiving assistance at the Illinois Institute for Juvenile Research between 1927 and 1929. Children were referred to the Institute for Juvenile Research with mental or physical disabilities or social or behavioral maladjustments. Other requirements for participation in the study were that it was a two parent home (either biological or step) who were of Caucasian origin.

The study referred to participants as either organized (adjusted, cooperative, unified) or disorganized (uncooperative and conflicted). Forty families were determined to be very well or fairly well adjusted as evidenced by their family pride and solidarity; satisfying relationships within the family; and complementary roles in the family that enhanced its ability to function well. Results of the study showed that 41 families were determined to be disorganized as evidenced by a high level of conflict that was
pervasive. Cavan and Ranck (1938) contend that when family disorganization meets with a crisis of some sort (such as a loss of job or social status) it tends to resolve itself through either adjustments made in the family or the development of some sort of pathological reaction. They compared their study to Angell’s previous study, stating that there was some overlap between the two, confirming their findings. Angell’s “highly integrated, highly adaptable” families are comparable to Cavan and Ranck’s “well-organized” families. Angell’s “unintegrated/unadaptable” families are comparable to Cavan and Ranck’s “disorganized families” (p. 197). The families in both studies who were able to adapt to new conditions or roles were better able to cope effectively with the challenges and difficulties of sustained financial and/or social losses.

One finding of significance in both studies was that the measure of adaptability or lack thereof that families demonstrated before the Depression tended to become heightened under the stress of their crisis during the Depression. In other words, if families were “disorganized” before the Depression, the stress of the Depression tended to exhibit itself in even greater disorganization, and if they were “organized” before the Depression, the stress of the Depression tended to exhibit itself in greater organization. The stress brought out either the worst or the best of the family’s characteristics. For that reason, well-organized or adaptable families tended to have positive outcomes in spite of their difficulties during the Depression and disorganized or unadaptable families tended to have negative and sometimes disastrous outcomes during the same period of time.
Oakland Growth Study

The Oakland longitudinal study followed a cohort of 167 children born in 1920 or 1921 for about 30 years. They were initially selected from fifth and sixth grades in elementary schools in the Oakland, California, region and were “intensively studied” from 1932 to 1939 until they graduated from high school. They were then revisited every decade after that until the early 1960s. This study sought to understand how children and their parents responded to the socioeconomic changes they encountered during the Depression and its impact on their family unit. The families in this study experienced an average of 40 percent decline in their median income between 1929 and 1933, which was similar to the decline experienced by the average American family (Elder, 1974).

When the fathers in these families lost their jobs during the Depression, the children and/or their mothers often assisted the family by seeking work or other forms of assistance, at least on a temporary basis. It was found that the children became more responsible when their families’ financial resources were diminished and needed their help. This study followed the children through their teenage years and found that boys from deprived families displayed a greater self-knowledge and certainty about what they wanted to pursue in life than the boys who had not experienced deprivation. Elder (1974) suggested that “frustration and misfortune may lead to and perhaps be essential to the growth and strengthening of a person, just as they lead to maladjustive reactions” (p. 37). This confirms the findings of Angell and Cavan and Ranck in their studies who found that families who faced similar challenges experienced differing outcomes.
depending on the degree of adaptability and/or integration or organization or disorganization within the families.

The Oakland study revealed that the children of the deprived middle class were better able than the nondeprived middle class to overcome and learn from their difficulties. In addition, they were able to postpone immediate gratification when working toward a long-range goal. It was found that they tended to make the best use of their personal talents and skills, thereby helping themselves to manage their difficulties. The privileged “nondeprived” research participants were not found to be the most competent, healthy members of the cohort. The most competent and healthy research participants were those who had faced and conquered difficulties squarely while still young. One of the important findings from this study follows:

It seems that a childhood which shelters the young from the hardships of life consequently fails to develop or test adaptive capacities which are called upon in life crises. To engage and manage real life (though not excessive) problems in childhood and adolescence is to participate in a sort of apprenticeship for adult life (Elder, 1974, p. 249).

Middletown Study

In the mid-1920s, Lynd and Lynd (1929) conducted an extensive, multi-aspect study of Muncie, Indiana, (referred to as “Middletown”), a city considered to be representative of other American cities. They investigated all aspects of the life of the city (families, schools, government, religion, and leisure, to name just a few) and compared the culture of the city in 1924-1925 to descriptions of its culture in 1885.

Lynd and Lynd (1937) and their research staff returned to Middletown in 1935 to explore the ways life there had changed since the economic downturn of the Great
Depression. By 1933 industry had decreased by 19% (p. 8), sales in retail stores decreased by 57.1% (p. 533), and the city was struggling to find funding for an “unprecedented problem of relief” for those citizens unable to provide for their financial needs (p. 20). However, it was discovered through interviews of a wide variety of citizens that “Middletown believes, not without some justification, that many families have drawn closer together and ‘found’ themselves in the depression” (p. 202). They believed that this positive outlook and indication of resilience was found in families who sought security and cohesion through internal sources such as personal intimacy with family members as opposed to external sources such as money and/or material possessions.

Each of the studies found that, given similar situations of economic decrease, some families were strengthened in their personal relationships and coping abilities while others were weakened. The response to their challenges seemed to differ according to their attitudes, beliefs, skills, and knowledge.

**Resilience**

The studies conducted during the 1930s did not utilize the word “resilience,” but they provide insight into family resilience and strength during that time. Walsh (1998) stresses the importance of resilience for well-functioning individuals and families and defines it as “the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful. It is an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge” (p. 4). Simon, Murphy and Smith (2005) define *family resilience* as “the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from the
situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful, and more confident than its prior state” (p. 427).

Early studies of resilience centered on personality traits and coping styles that enabled persons to overcome painful life experiences. It was often seen as inborn, a biological hardiness. Walsh (1998) views the family as a potential source of resilience that can help family members develop the qualities and characteristics of those who are more naturally resilient. Seligman’s (1990) concept of “learned optimism” further supports the research concerning family resilience.

Simon et al., (2005) identify three dimensions of family resilience. The first dimension is length of time the family endures the difficulty. Short-term difficulties are termed “challenges” and long-term challenges are considered “crises” (p. 427). During the Depression some families were challenged with economic stress and uncertainty and other families faced genuine crises due to long-term unemployment or underemployment. The second dimension of family resilience is the life stage in which the family experiences the difficulty. Young families with many children at home who still had a mortgage on their house or were making monthly rent payments found themselves in a different situation than older couples who did not have a mortgage on their house and whose children no longer lived with them. The third dimension incorporates internal or external sources of support utilized by the family during the difficulty. Some families are reluctant to seek support from extended family members, neighbors, churches, schools, social service agencies, or other resources in the community.
McCubbin, (1997) in his AAFCS Commemorative Lecture, stressed that resilience in the family involves two processes. The first process is adjustment, which utilizes protective factors that sustain functioning in the face of difficulties. McCubbin identifies protective factors for the family as family celebrations, family hardiness, family time and routines, family traditions, family communication, financial management, personality compatibility, family accord, health, a support network, and shared values concerning the use of leisure time (p. 5).

The second process involved in family resilience is adaptation, which utilizes recovery factors to help the family “bounce back” from crisis situations. In addition to the specific protective and recovery factors listed above, McCubbin (1997) identified 10 general resiliency factors that can help families in times of stress. These 10 factors are family problem-solving, communication, equality, spirituality, flexibility, truthfulness, hope, family hardiness, family time and routine, social support, and health (p. 8, 9).

Walsh (1998) contends that resilience is forged through adversity, not in spite of it. Millions of families in the United States faced significant adversity in the 1930s. During that time, millions of Americans, especially men, lost their jobs. Some of them became immobilized, depressed, and despondent. Some abandoned their wives and/or children and were never heard from again. Others found alternative ways to earn income through self-employment or they helped at home while their wives or children became the primary income providers. The same types of hardship led to different outcomes in different families. This study sought to discover what strategies, skills, and beliefs were
utilized by parents and their families who lived during the difficult years of the Great Depression and emerged strengthened.
Qualitative Research

In this study, I sought to understand how parents provided for their families during the Great Depression. Specifically, I wanted to identify the beliefs held by parents, and the strategies and skills they utilized to meet their families’ needs despite economic hardship they experienced during this time. Merriam (2002b) and Creswell (2008) assert that qualitative researchers are most interested in in-depth understanding of their topic and “want to know how people do things, and what meaning they give to their lives” (Merriam, 2002b, p. 19). Thus, it seemed most appropriate to use qualitative methods to answer the research questions associated with this study.

Qualitative research seeks to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In qualitative inquiry there are no predetermined categories of analysis, allowing the exploration of issues in greater depth (Patton, 2002). Data collection is from a small rather than large number of individuals (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2008; Morgan, 2008) and open-ended questions are utilized, allowing a wide variety of answers as opposed to specific questions with a forced-choice of answers. The data is in the form of words or pictures and the analysis of the findings are often expressed in the form of themes (Creswell, 2008). Data is “richly descriptive” and is
likely to describe “the context, the participants involved, [and] activities of interest” (Merriam, 2002a, p. 5).

**Narrative Research**

Narrative inquiry, a specific method used in qualitative research, was utilized in this study by collecting and analyzing personal narratives and family stories of children who grew up during the Great Depression. Narrative inquiry is focused on “understanding and making meaning of experience” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 80). Examining stories and experiences of individuals can reveal broader cultural and social patterns (Patton, 2002) as narrative research captures the research participants and their social, cultural and institutional settings (Moen, 2006). Stories can help individuals process experiences and find meaning for life, as well as provide a way to transmit that meaning to others. Cortazzi (1993) likens narrative analysis to “opening a window” on the mind and/or culture of research participants (p. 2). In the same way that a good book can give readers insight into the inner thoughts of the characters, de Laine, (2000) asserts that narratives provide “an ‘inside view’ of a people’s customs, rites and ceremonies” (p. 184).

There is power in knowing the stories of real people and how they confronted difficulties. Walsh (1998) states that “storytelling has served in every time and place to transmit cultural and family beliefs that guide personal expectations and actions” (p. 48). Narrative inquiry helps to “engage readers in reflection” (Moss, 2004, p 364). Others can find inspiration by reflecting on the ways people have coped in similar situations. More than just learning facts and figures concerning a period of time, my interests lie
primarily in analyzing people’s thought processes and how they solved problems. As a professional in family and consumer sciences, problem solving in the family is of genuine interest and importance to me.

Walsh (1998) asserts that people come to know themselves more deeply in the process of telling their stories. The personal stories people tell are ways they “create meaning in their lives as well as ways [they] enlist each other’s help in building [their] lives and communities” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44).

In narrative inquiry the researcher and the research participants develop a relationship with one another, one in which all involved grow and change in the process (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The research participants and researcher “develop meaning together” (Riessman, 2002, p. 248). The stories the participants tell are from their direct experience with the central phenomenon. They have, as Patton (2002) suggests, “‘lived experience’ as opposed to secondhand experience (p. 104). In narrative inquiry, the researcher joins the participant in experiencing their “lived experience.” The researchers become “witnesses” (Keats, 2009) to the stories, feeling almost as if they were taking part in the experiences themselves. Keats (2009) asserts that this type of research method is especially useful when attempting to understand retrospective experiences and “focuses primarily on … transcribed interviews to understand participants’ experiences” (p. 182).

Encouraging participants to tell their stories gives voice to the experiences that have shaped their thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that in a narrative study there is a multiplicity of voices to consider. Each
participant will have a different perspective concerning his or her experience, as will the researcher. In narrative studies, it is important to hear and acknowledge the voices of all the participants as well as the researcher and understand that it is not likely that the voices will be “univocal” or “unidimensional” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 147).

**Participant Qualifications**

In order to qualify for this study, participants had to be born in 1925 or earlier, thus they the youngest participants were becoming teenagers before 1940, when the U.S. economy officially moved out of its depression as industry began manufacturing goods for the war effort (McElvaine, 1993). This age was chosen, because I thought the participants would more likely be able to recall stories from their childhood concerning the functioning of their families during the 1930s. I concluded that participants who were older and more mature during the 1930s would be more aware of their home circumstances and behavior in society during the Depression than younger participants might be. The participants for this study were required to be people whom I had not previously interviewed informally.

Additionally, participants had to be part of a family that suffered financial hardship during the Depression as evidenced by unemployment or underemployment of the main income provider, loss of home or farm to foreclosure, loss of savings through bank failures or stock market declines, or some other significant experience that seriously decreased their income during some period of the 1930s. Several participants qualified as they had parents who earned meager incomes during the Great Depression.
(e.g., farmers, a skilled laborer, and a minister) and lived as if they were underemployed even though they worked full-time.

Participants also had to have adequate health to assure stamina for the interview process, have adequate hearing in order to hear the interview questions clearly, and have normal mental functioning. The Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire (SPMSQ) (Pfeiffer, 1975), developed specifically for use with older adults, was used to assess mental functioning of potential participants (See Appendix C). The SPMSQ includes ten questions and has a scoring guide. To avoid offending participants, the SPMSQ was introduced to all study participants after rapport was established as a “basic knowledge” set of questions, indicating that many people know the answers, but others do not.

According to the SPMSQ scoring guide, individuals with normal mental functioning should be able to answer eight or more of the ten questions, unless they had attained less than a grade school education. In that case, a score of seven out of ten would indicate normal mental functioning. Individuals who have attained education beyond high school should be able to answer nine of the ten questions correctly to indicate normal mental functioning (Pfeiffer, 1975).

**Challenge of Accessing Research Participants**

Purposive criterion sampling was used to select a sample population for this research. Purposive sampling purposely selects individuals that researchers believe will be rich sources for the types of information they seek (Patten, 2007; Patton, 2002). Purposive *criterion* sampling adds an additional dimension to purposive sampling, allowing researchers to narrow the sample population by applying a number of
predetermined criteria necessary for the study (Patten, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Additionally, snowball sampling (Patten, 2007) proved to be useful in helping to locate one participant. One participant told another person about the study and the second person was interested and willing to participate because of her confidence in her friend’s judgment.

My plan was to seek participant recommendations from pastors, senior center administrators, directors of area agencies on aging, or other similar professionals with personal, in-depth knowledge of individuals in the designated age range. I was willing to also use word of mouth to locate participants, once people began to learn of the study with the plan that letters would be sent to those people who were recommended (see Appendix D), along with an informational flyer explaining the research project (see Appendix E), and a brief questionnaire concerning the criteria listed above which would provide brief demographic information from their experience in the 1930s (see Appendix F). Participants would be chosen for an initial interview from those whose returned questionnaires fit the purposes of the study. Once a participant was chosen an informed consent agreement (see appendix G) would be mailed to him or her in time to read and sign before the first interview.

To begin to identify a sample population for this study, I contacted the Area Agency on Aging Ohio District 5 to discuss my research and desire to interview senior citizens who met the criteria of my study. The director referred me to senior centers in the county in which I live and a neighboring county where I work. She said that she worked mainly with agencies and not seniors themselves, and she believed the senior
centers would have personal contact with many seniors who potentially would be interested in participating in this study.

I sent letters to introduce myself and the study to the directors of those two centers and then followed up with the directors through phone calls. The director of one center explained the study to her constituents but found no one qualified or interested and felt it would be a waste of my time to come and talk with the people. I went to the other center during lunch, ate with the constituents and was given an opportunity to talk to the group after lunch. The director pointed me in the direction of two women whom she felt would qualify for the study, but they did not seem to have any interest. I gave them information, but they never responded to it.

Next, I sent a letter to a local historian who had written a book about the history of one of the small cities in the county. He responded back with the name of a person to interview. Unfortunately, that person had more memories of the 1920s and 1940s than the 1930s and did not qualify to take part in the study.

In order to inform a greater number of people about my research, I inserted an information sheet in our church’s Sunday bulletin explaining the research and then I made a brief announcement concerning the study. Several people called with possible contacts. I pursued the contacts and, as a result after several weeks, was able to interview four people.

I received a telephone call from a newspaper reporter in a town 20 miles away. An unidentified person had given her a copy of the information sheet I wrote about my research. The reporter had just attended the class reunion of people in that town who
graduated in 1940, and she believed that some of them might be willing to participate in the study. She asked if she could print the information in her newspaper just as I had written it on the “information page.” I gratefully agreed. I interviewed one person as a result of her publicity.

I sent letters to several local pastors but did not gain any interviews from those efforts. After a month of attempting to gain interviews, I had only interviewed two people, one of which did not qualify as a research participant because the interviewee’s family did not have significant financial challenges during the Depression. I was puzzled by the difficulty of identifying people who were willing to talk with me. I gained a possible clue the next month. I met with a gentleman in a neighboring town who had been recommended by a friend of someone in our church. I arrived at his home and began to set up the digital video camera. As I did this, he said he had talked with his lawyer about the consent form that I had sent him in the mail. He had partially read it to him over the phone. The lawyer told him not to sign anything. The gentleman said that people his age were told never to sign anything. I explained to him that I could not interview him without the consent form, but I did not pressure him to sign. I offered to talk with the lawyer or send him a copy of the form. He said the lawyer didn’t want to see it, but that he just did not want him to sign anything.

We talked a little more as I put away my camera. He asked a couple of questions about me. When he learned that my husband was the pastor of a local church, he said he attended the community dinners there once a month and that he liked my husband’s messages. He said he also attended AARP there. His attitude began to change as we
conversed. He said that he had been making his own decisions for over 90 years and he “figured he could still make up his own mind about things.” I told him that he should think it over and talk with his daughter and if he decided he would like to be interviewed, I would be happy to schedule another time. I did not want him to feel any pressure to proceed with the interview if he was not comfortable doing so. However, I began to wonder if that was why so few people were interested in telling me their stories. I wondered if seniors tended to mistrust strangers who asked them for information and signatures. The gentleman called back two days later to reschedule an interview.

I interviewed several more participants, but my pool of potential research participants soon was depleted. A friend of mine suggested I contact a retired local news reporter who wrote a bi-weekly column and a weekly story on World War II and Korean War veterans to see if he knew World War II veterans who might be interested in and qualified for this study. The news reporter came to my home one evening and brought newspaper clippings from the last four years. We sat at the kitchen table and went through about a year’s worth of stories before he tired of the process. Many of the World War II veterans had died, but he gave me the names of eight people he thought might be potential research candidates. Then, to my surprise, he said he was going to put information about my study in his column on Sunday to see if there were others in the area who would be interested. I decided to wait until after his column was published in the newspaper to write to the eight people he suggested, believing that seeing news of the study by a trusted community journalist might help them feel assured that I was a credible person with a legitimate study. From his column I received nine inquiries for
participation in the study which resulted in four interviews, two of which qualified for the research project.

Soon afterward, I contacted the CEOs of two retirement communities that have independent apartments for seniors and sent them information about my research. The administrators of these facilities agreed to the study and referred me to their activity directors. The activity directors spoke with seniors living in independent apartments to see if there were any interested and/or qualified to participate in the study. As a result of these contacts, I interviewed three people who qualified as research participants.

In all, I interviewed 18 people. Of those 18 people, 12 met the requirements to participate in the study. Seven people contacted me by telephone, but they did not qualify for the study. I sent two letters to people that were referred to me, but they did not respond to my letter. There were a variety of reasons why 13 of the people did not qualify for the study. Some people did not meet the age requirement. Several people did not qualify because their family did not face significant financial hardship during the Depression and/or their memories were centered more in the 1920s or 1940s than in the 1930s.

The research participants came from diverse backgrounds, growing up in different types of communities and representing different genders and ethnicities. There were eight women and four men. Five participants grew up in large cities, one grew up in a medium-sized town, three grew up in small towns, and three grew up on family farms. The occupational titles of the main wage earners in the families included farmer, railroad worker, coal miner, insurance agent, factory worker, construction worker,
lawyer, plant supervisor, and minister. One participant was African American and eleven were Caucasian, including one whose grandmother was a full-blooded Mohawk American Indian. Three of the participants’ parents had tuberculosis and one parent suffered with mental illness.

In the beginning of the search for interview participants, my goal was to start with a sample of six to eight people. The final number of participants was determined by the outcomes of the interviews, relying upon what Kvale (1994) calls the “law of diminishing returns” (p. 165). When participants’ stories and themes became repetitive and no new information was gleaned from interviews, the sample size was considered to be complete or “saturated” (Rubinstein, 1994; Patten, 2007).

Preparing for the Interviews

To gain a better understanding of the world in which the research participants lived in during the Depression, I read many books, listened to audio books to engage multiple senses, and jotted down brief reflections on many of these resources. This process helped me to absorb the information in different ways. To assist in my ability to visualize the participants’ environments in which they lived during the 1930s, I perused many photos, either from the participants themselves or from books and/or CDs. I also watched movies and documentaries of the time period.

In order to better understand how families met the nutritional needs of their families and what meals cooked from simple, inexpensive ingredients tasted like, I and my students prepared recipes from the era, thereby engaging the sense of taste as well.
We prepared recipes from Eleanor Roosevelt’s book *It’s Up to the Women* (1933), Clara Cannucciari’s *Clara’s Kitchen: Wisdom, Memories, and Recipes from the Great Depression* (2009), and Rita Van Amber’s four volumes of *Stories and Recipes of the Great Depression of the 1930s* (1986-2001). We noticed some of the differences between foods as they were prepared in the 1930s and as they are often prepared today.

I read widely to enhance my understanding of the culture of the 1930s. In addition to historical works on the time period such as Watkins’ (1993) *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* and Shlaes’ (2007) *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, I read several autobiographies to assist my understanding of family life in the 1930s. Examples of my reading are Kalish’s (2007) *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*, Hastings’ *A Nickel’s Worth of Skim Milk: A Boy’s View of the Great Depression* (1972) and *A Penny’s Worth of Minced Ham: Another Look at the Great Depression* (1986). I also read autobiographies by Croton (2010), Robinson (2009), and Williams (2001). I read a “how-to” book that was very popular in the 1930s called *Orchids on your Budget or: Live Smartly on What You Have* by Hillis (1937) as well as diaries such as Dyck’s *Waiting on the Bounty: the Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (1999) edited by Riney-Kehrberg; and Roth’s *The Great Depression: A Diary* (2009) edited by Ledbetter and Roth. In addition, I read a book highlighting letters written to Eleanor Roosevelt called *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression* (2002), edited by Cohen, and children’s books such as *The Gardener*...

I watched several movies featuring Shirley Temple during the 1930s as well as the 1937 movie, *Make Way for Tomorrow*. I also watched documentaries on the Great Depression such as *The Great Depression and the New Deal* (2003) and *The Great Depression* (2009).

Through the use of multiple types of literature and media, I gained a greater understanding at a deep level of events and cultural influences that had an impact on family life in the 1930s and was better able to join the participants in the midst of their experiences as they shared their stories with me.

**Interview Process**

Before beginning the interview process, I obtained permission from Iowa State’s Institutional Review Board to begin my research. (See Appendix B.) All interviews were conducted in Ohio during the summer and fall of 2011. Dr. Peter Martin, director of the Gerontology Program at Iowa State University and known for his studies of centenarians (Martin, MacDonald, Margrett, Siegler, & Poon, 2013), stated that most people who are 85 years old and older prefer to be interviewed in their homes, however, alternative location options should be identified in case participants preferred to be interviewed elsewhere (P. Martin, personal communication, December 3, 2010). Therefore, participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed either in their home or at a different location that was convenient and familiar to them such as a church, a senior center, or another similar setting of their choice. All participants chose to be
interviewed in their homes or in a conference room if they lived in an independent living
apartment that was connected to a senior care facility. An advantage to interviewing
participants in their homes was that they did not have the inconvenience of traveling to
another location and cope with physical difficulties that sometimes occur among older
adults.

Face to face interviews were conducted and videotaped. Participants were given
a DVD of their individual interviews at the end of the interview process, whether their
stories qualified to be used in the research or not. Several participants or family
members of the participants wrote to thank me for these DVDs when the interviews were
concluded. They said they provided a rich source of family history for their families.

Narrative interview questions can have either a semi-structured or unstructured
format (Ayres, 2008; Patton, 2002). A semi-structured format begins with
predetermined interview questions that serve as a springboard for additional questions
that allow the researcher to probe and “explore unexpected, unusual, or especially
relevant material revealed by the participant” (Patten, 2007, p. 153). An unstructured
interview format utilizes open-ended questions that have not been predetermined
(Patton, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviewer “does not know what he or she
doesn’t know” and relies on the respondent to guide both the questions and answers
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 269). A semi-structured interview format was utilized for
this research project.

Duffy (1988) suggests using simple, direct questions with older persons. If
questions have multiple layers, they should be asked one at a time to avoid confusion
and enhance clarity. Ayres (2008) suggests the use of open-ended questions to encourage research participants to explain themselves more fully. Closed questions (that require a yes or no answer) do not help in the development of stories. As suggested by Rogan and de Kock (2005), participants were encouraged to tell their own stories in their own way to avoid influencing the outcome of the research. Opening questions were provided to the participants ahead of time to give them an opportunity to recall experiences or events that would provide relevant information (see Appendix H). Follow-up questions were then asked. These questions related to specific issues that emerged from the interview and helped provide greater clarity and depth (see Appendix I).

Patton (2007) suggests the use of an interview guide listing issues that the researcher wants to explore with all participants. It “provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (p. 343). See Appendix J for the interview guide that was developed for this study. I used this guide for the first two interviews. However, it became apparent that it was too long and too cumbersome to use in its entirety. After the first two interviews, I used parts of it to help supplement and guide my preliminary interview questions.

In my research proposal I said that I would transcribe all the interviews myself, believing that it would enhance the accuracy of the transcription. I discovered that the transcription of the interviews was the most difficult part of the interview process. The process I followed was to video tape an interview and burn it onto a DVD. I then used a tape recorder to audiotape the DVD. After that, I used an old Dictaphone to transcribe
the conversations from the audiotape onto the computer. Often, the quality of the audio tape was poor, and the voices of some of the participants were difficult to understand on tape. One woman’s voice was very shrill and high-pitched. Another man’s voice was gravelly and a bit slurred. In another instance, the loud fan from an air conditioner made a good transcription from the audiotape impossible. I typically replayed the tapes over and over to try to arrive at an accurate transcription. My intention was to transcribe the interviews either the same day as the interview or the next day, but this proved to be impossible due to the technical difficulties.

A friend who is a court reporter offered to do the first transcription straight from the DVD. After contacting my committee and Iowa State’s Institutional Review Board so see if this was possible, I received permission. I completed the IRB Amendment for Personnel Changes Form and prepared a brief form for my transcriber to complete concerning confidentiality. As a result, the transcriptions were produced more accurately and in greater detail than I could have done myself. The process was still delayed somewhat because she had to work my transcriptions in when she was able, but I believed the end product was of higher quality and worth the additional wait.

As a result of what was shared in the first interview, a second interview often occurred to clarify information or explore different areas. Once the interviews were initially transcribed, they were sent to the participants to assure that they were correct. If corrections or clarifications needed to be made, the participants sent me corrections. The interviews were then “cleaned up” (taking out the “ums” and “you know’s” and other verbal “clutter”) and sent again to the participant to assure that the information was
correct. This process is what Creswell (2008) describes as “member checking” which is taking the findings back to the participants and allowing them to provide feedback. Checking again with the participant concerning the accuracy of the story will help to assure a higher level of trustworthiness concerning the correctness of my interpretation and insights. Finally, each interview was “restoried” (Creswell, 2008), and shared with the research participant to assure that a clear, accurate portrayal had been captured. The story that evolved was what Mishler (1986) terms a “joint production” (p. 82). The restoried interview captured the relevant information from their experience and was told chronologically in story form. Each participant was given a pseudo name for this final story and any identifying information was removed to protect their identity. Interviewing was not begun until individual participants signed informed consent forms. Research participants were assured that there would be strict confidentiality and that their stories would be anonymous (Flick, 2007).

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, the researcher “seeks to analyze the stories by: 1) retelling the individuals’ story; and 2) identifying themes or categories of information. The researcher also seeks to situate the story within its place or setting and analyzes it for chronological information about the individual’s past, present, and future” (Creswell, 2008, p. 516). The researcher searches for themes and seeks the larger meaning of the findings (Creswell, 2008, p. 52). A total of five to seven themes are common.

Narrative research has a component that other qualitative research does not have when it comes to analyzing and interpreting the data: “restorying” (Creswell, 2008, p.
After the interview is recorded and transcribed, the researcher studies the raw data from the literal transcription and “retranscribes” it by drawing out the main elements of the story. Finally, the researcher takes the retranscription and “restories” the account by organizing it into a sequence. There are five elements used in restorying: “the setting, the characters in the story, the actions, the problem and the resolution” (Creswell, 2008, p. 519.). The challenge in this type of research is to restory the data in a way that the story is still the participant’s story and not negatively altered in the “makeover.” Clandinin and Caine (2008) maintain that participants should have the most influential voice as the researcher moves to prepare the final research texts (p. 543). This is what I have attempted to do.

After the first analysis of the data was conducted by restorying the participants’ stories, I reformatted the raw, word for word interviews into three columns in order to look for patterns and themes as Saldana (2013) suggests. The first column contains the verbatim interview. I manually conducted open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in the second column, sentence by sentence, looking for patterns and concepts in each sentence. In the third column I grouped the patterns or concepts from the open coding in the second column into themes. Appendix K provides an illustration of this data analysis.

Even before the formal coding process began, patterns and themes began to emerge from the interviews. The emerging pattern I detected early on that the research participants’ parents complained very little, if at all, informed my interview questions. As the interview process progressed, I changed the way I asked questions about this
issue three different times. I probed more deeply on this topic, not knowing if the participants’ memories of their parents’ attitudes might be more positive in retrospect than they were in actuality.

**Data Triangulation**

One method narrative researchers may utilize to establish trustworthiness is data triangulation. In this technique, data for the study is utilized from multiple sources on the research topic (Patten, 2007). “To the extent that the various sources provide similar information, the data can be said to be corroborated through data triangulation” (p. 157). In this study, data triangulation was achieved by personal interviews, “restorying” the interview information and submitting them to participants for them to have an opportunity to revise or clarify information, and through use of artifacts that participants shared at the time of the interview to further support their stories.

Once the interviews were initially transcribed verbatim, either by me in the first few interviews or by my friend who is a court reporter, a copy was sent to the participant with an errata sheet and a self-addressed stamped envelope. (See Appendix L.) The format for this errata sheet was provided by my friend. This is used in the courts to make sure that court reporters have not made factual errors in their transcriptions. The research participants returned the errata sheets to me listing spelling errors or any other type of error. (These were very minimal.) Corrections were then made to the original manuscripts. I then worked with the manuscripts to clean them up a bit and make them more readable by removing “umms” and sentence fragments. (The participants all wanted a copy of the “cleaned up” interviews.) Finally, I rewrote the interviews and put
them in story form to produce the “restoried” narratives. A copy of each participant’s restoried narrative was also sent to the participant for their evaluation to assure the accuracy of my rewriting of their story. Each participant ended up with a type-written copy of the original, verbatim interview, a “cleaned up” copy of the interview, the restoried narrative, and a DVD of the interview.

Some participants showed me photos of their homes or farms during the 1930s. I saw photos of family members, valued horses, and cars (usually their first car). I was disappointed that some of the participants did not have artifacts to share. Because some participants were now living in small apartments and had scaled down their belongings, they may no longer have had access to photos from earlier days. Or, perhaps photos were “in a box somewhere” and they were too difficult to access. I wonder now if some of them might have felt reluctant to bring out artifacts because they were unsure of what I would do with them. I am unsure. Long after the interviews had been completed I read of a researcher who took photographs of participant artifacts. Perhaps if I had offered to do this I would have received a 100 percent response rate for this form of data collection.

**Rapport**

In order to create trust with research participants so they feel safe sharing their stories, it is important to build rapport with them. By “rapport” Patton (2002) means that they understand that I respect them for who they are. It is important that they are confident that their “knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important. Yet, I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me” (p. 365-366). I established rapport with this study’s research participants by listening carefully to what they said,
thanking them for their contributions to the study, and showing a genuine interest in their families. At the beginning of our second session, I thanked Kathy for her willingness to talk with me a second time. She said, “It’s my pleasure. I feel like we’re old friends at this point.”

I learned early on the importance of gaining trust and rapport with potential participants through the experience with Walter and his hesitancy to sign the consent form on advice from his lawyer. However, once he knew who I and my husband were, he gladly welcomed me in his home and was happy to share his experiences.

**Neutrality**

When establishing rapport with participants, it must be done in such a way that neutrality is not compromised. To Patton (2002), that means that the content of what the participant says cannot shock, anger, embarrass, or sadden me. In other words, “nothing the person tells me will make me think more or less” of him or her (p. 365). I maintained a nonjudgmental attitude regarding the content of anything participants said to me.

**Ethical Concerns**

One of the main ethical concerns qualitative researchers face is not to interject personal bias into the stories of their interviewees. During the interview process, care was taken to avoid influencing the participants’ responses by encouraging them to tell their own stories in their own way (Rogan & de Kock, 2005). The participants’ stories themselves determined the learning. If I had bias in this study, it was due to the fact that I entered each interview experience believing that the participant had something of
importance to say to me that would prove valuable for my research. Perhaps my bias in this direction was influenced by my conversations with my parents and other family members who were in the age range to qualify for participation. I did not consider any of the participants or their families as perfect human beings who always made wise decisions, but I believed I could learn about their worldviews and beliefs through the sharing of their stories. I also believed that their stories could expand my thinking of options concerning how to live and make life choices.
Research Participant Stories

This chapter contains the 12 “restoried” narratives of this study’s research participants. The stories are centered primarily on their families’ experiences during the years of the Great Depression, 1929-1941. To protect their identities, each participant was given a pseudo name, as were all the characters in their stories.

Anna

Anna grew up in a small railroad town in the Mideast region of the United States. Her father worked in the office as a railroad dispatcher while her mother stayed at home and took care of the family’s six children (four girls and two boys). Anna was second from the youngest among the children. The family lived in a “very plain,” six room, wood framed house with linoleum floors. The four girls slept in one bedroom, sharing beds; the two boys slept in another bedroom; and her parents in another. There was a small wood stove in the dining room and a wood stove used for cooking in the kitchen. They had no furnace, no electricity, and no heat upstairs or in the living room. Coal oil lamps provided light in the evenings. The living room was scantily furnished with a hand-me-down couch and a couple of chairs. That room was used only for special occasions such as Christmas or when company came to visit.

The railroad company was the main industry in town. There was a sizeable rail interchange there and locomotives were manufactured in one of the plants; steel was manufactured in another. Early in the 1930s, (Anna is not quite sure when), the railroad
shut down. The steel mill and the locomotive plant closed as well. The majority of workers in town were immediately and indefinitely laid off, Anna’s father included. There were no jobs available, and no one knew when or if the railroad would recall any workers.

Anna’s parents’ firm philosophy of working for everything they had and not relying on anyone else (not even the government) to provide charity or relief put the family in a precarious financial position. They did not have a large bank account to see them through the severe crisis that struck their town. Anna did not know if the house was debt free when her father became unemployed, but she did remember that the neighbors across the street lost their house to the bank when they were unable to make their mortgage payments. Unemployment was pervasive with the majority of men in town out of work. Eventually, the New Deal WPA program (Works Progress Administration) hired men from her neighborhood to work on a large project not too far from town. Anna’s father did not work for the WPA.

Anna’s parents decided to wait it out. The back yard was entirely spaded up for a garden, and Anna’s mother canned everything she could. Anna said, “I never ate so much soup in my life!” She made her own bread and noodles, and the family ate a lot of beans. Their mainstay meal was meatless gravy that was served over bread. Meat had become a rarity, except occasionally on Sunday or a holiday. Her father sometimes hunted and fished, which provided meat for some meals. Her maternal uncle also helped to supplement their meat supply as he was especially adept at hunting and fishing and sold pelts and meat. Anna’s father’s sister lived on a farm with an orchard. The family
was invited to share in the fruit if they would come and pick their own. Anna can’t remember ever being really hungry, but some of their meals were “a bit skimpy.” The children were leaner than many American children today, but they were not emaciated and were generally healthy. No one in the family snacked between meals. She said the children ate whatever was put before them and “were not picky.”

Anna’s family was generous with their time and resources. Anna’s paternal grandmother lived alone in town after the death of her husband. Anna and her sisters took turns going down to stay with her to assure she was safe and well. Their grandmother reciprocated the kindness by baking cookies for them as a treat. Even with very limited food for the family, when hobos (bops, they called them) came by, Anna’s mother always tried to give them something to eat. She would say, “Have a seat on the porch, and I’ll bring you something.”

Anna’s mother made all their clothes on an old treadle sewing machine. Anna’s clothes were homemade and previously worn by her sisters. In a matter-of-fact way she said, “We had clothes. They weren’t store bought and fancy, but they covered us.” However, as a girl, she swore to herself that she was not going to wear hand-me-downs when she grew up. All the children wore long underwear to protect them from the constant cold of the winter. Everyone had one good “church outfit.” When the children came home from school, their shoes came off and the children went barefoot to save their shoes from further wear. Only when their shoes were either totally worn out or no longer fit, their father took them to the shoe store for new shoes. Anna cannot remember her mother ever going shopping—ever. That chore was left to her father.
Anna’s mother was “a manager” and kept the family fed and clothed in spite of the almost total lack of money. Her maternal grandmother was a “full-blooded Mohawk Indian,” whose family had lived in a dirt floor shack by the railroad when Anna’s father met her mother. As a young girl, Anna’s mother learned how to make do with very few resources. Her trademark was that she was quiet and “easygoing.” She had many miscarriages over the years. One of her daughters said that if she had as many live births as pregnancies, the number of children in the family would have more than doubled. Even with all her losses, she kept her composure and was even-tempered.

Anna, her siblings, and the children of the neighborhood spent countless hours playing outside. Every evening the swing on their front porch was the favorite gathering place for the children in the neighborhood. The three girls shared a pair of roller skates and played hopscotch and “Crack the Whip.” One time their younger brother was at the end of the line while playing “Crack the Whip”. The older children went faster and faster and his short legs could not keep up. He let go and flew into the curb, breaking his nose. No one went to the hospital in those days, so the doctor came to the house and put a splint on his nose. (When asked how they paid the doctor, Anna said she could remember her mother giving him canned goods.) In the winter they played Monopoly and card games. Anna insisted, “We weren’t entertained; we made our own fun.”

School was important to Anna and the other children in the town. The school was a mile and a half from Anna’s house, and she walked there in all kinds of weather. In Anna’s state, the schools provided the students’ textbooks. When school let out for the summer, the children were encouraged to continue reading and then write book
reports. The school gave them a list of approved books that could be checked out from the public library for this purpose. A certain number of book reports were required during the next school year and it was common for students to either get a head start on the book report project or to complete all the reports entirely in the summer. Anna always completed the reading project in the summer. When asked why she did all that reading in the summer instead of when school started, she said it gave her more time to study during the school year. In a class of 110 students, she graduated in the top ten.

At Christmas every child received one gift or toy. They were “tickled to death” with them. The Christmas tree was in the living room, and there was always a special meal that included meat. Often, the family got together with her father’s brother and his family who lived in town. They had a large family, and all the children went to school together. Sunday afternoons were also spent playing games and having fun with the cousins. During the Depression, birthdays were not highlighted in her family. “Happy Birthday” was always sung to the birthday child, and their mother would make a cake if she had the ingredients, “but that didn’t always happen.”

Anna and her sisters played musical instruments. One of her sisters played the piano and another played the banjo. Anna wanted to play the piano, but her father said she had to learn to play the violin. She is not sure how they got the violin, but the family had one. She neither liked playing the violin nor her teacher, but she played all through high school. Even though it was not her preference, she told herself, “This will pass.” If her father said he wanted her to do something, she did it. She said, “We weren’t like present teenagers. We weren’t rebellious.”
Discipline in the house was not questioned. Anna cannot remember ever “getting a licking,” but her younger brother did once. She did not “talk back” to her parents. When asked what happened if any of the children talked back, she said they were sent to bed without any supper. When they woke up hungry the next day they realized, “Hmm, I better not do that again.”

When Anna’s oldest sister was getting ready to graduate from high school, she asked for a new dress. There was no money for a new dress at that time. One morning, without her mother knowing it, she slipped on her mother’s one good dress under her own clothes and left. Later, her aunt who lived in a city about 15 miles away called and said Anna’s sister and her husband were there. Her mother cried, “Her husband?” She had been seeing him without her parents’ knowledge, so the marriage was quite a surprise to the family. Anna’s mother said, “Oh no. What am I going to wear to church now?” Anna was not sure if her mother ever retrieved her good dress.

Anna’s father was the treasurer for the Elks Lodge in town and was the person who collected dues from the members. One day in the midst of the Depression, her father went duck hunting to help provide food for the family. When the family went to bed that night, the ducks were soaking in cold water in the kitchen sink with the window above the sink opened.

In the middle of the night while the family was sleeping upstairs, they were awakened by a noise downstairs. Anna’s father jumped out of bed and without a second thought grabbed his gun and ran to the top of the stairs. He shot his rifle down the stairs into the dark. The bullet, meant to warn and scare, went through a door and down into
the basement. They could hear the terrified intruder scrambling out the window and running down the street. Anna’s mother leaned out the upstairs window, trying to make out who the person was, but her father insisted that she come back inside. He was concerned that the intruder might have a gun and shoot at her.

Her father believed the intruder knew about the Elks money and was desperate enough to break in and try to steal it. What that person did not know was that Anna’s brother had taken all the Elks money down to the office that very day, so there was no money in the house. In their town, people protected their own homes. Although there must have been some type of law enforcement in town, Anna cannot remember ever seeing a policeman the entire time she lived there. There was little crime in her town in those days, and most people did not lock the doors to their homes. Anna said her mother did lock their doors, causing the thief to use the open window to gain entrance to their home.

In the years that her family lived without steady employment Anna cannot remember either of her parents ever uttering a word of complaint or speaking negatively about anyone. They simply worked as hard as they could and tried to look on the bright side of things. There was a rhythm to life that carried them from day to day.

After a couple of years of serious scrimping, the family decided to pack up and try their luck in Florida. With the housing market flooded, making it impossible to sell their home, they stuffed some of their belongings into the old family car and headed south. (Anna said they always seemed to have “an old wreck of a car.”) In Florida Anna’s father worked at a Sunoco station for almost six months. In August they left
Florida and headed back north to their home. The doctor said Anna’s mother had to get out of the heat because it was making her sick.

After the experience working at the gas station in Florida, Anna’s father got a job in town at another gas station. One of Anna’s brothers worked there as well. That continued for two or three years until the railroad reopened and her father was able to go back to work there. Life improved considerably with the increased and steady income. Electricity was installed in the house, and they purchased a radio. Even so, the family continued to live carefully and frugally.

Anna graduated from high school in 1938 and earned a scholarship to college. Her father did not allow her to go because “it was a waste of time for a woman to go to college.” When asked if she felt bitter about that, she replied that she did not. She had met a boy named Tom a few years earlier. He lived in the same town as her sister in a neighboring state. She had spent quite a bit of time at her sister’s home over the years and had developed a close friendship with Tom. She decided she would rather marry him than go to college.

Tom had been working at a factory for six months in a city one state over, about 140 miles from Anna. They wanted to be married but in Anna’s state there was a three-day waiting period to obtain a marriage license. Tom could not take off work long enough to get married there. Anna’s father suggested that they go to a different state that was about 300 miles south because there was no three-day restriction there. He planned the route and Tom’s brother and his wife drove them down on a weekend and located a minister. In short order, they were married and headed back north to the city where Tom
was working. They had no honeymoon or elaborate wedding. Anna did wear a new
dress that she purchased with money she earned from ironing, cleaning, and cooking for
another family. The family had a small get-together with a meal and gifts and that was
the extent of her wedding and celebration.

Anna’s wedding was typical of the way her family did almost everything. They
were not concerned with outward appearances but invested their time and energy in
doing those things necessary for survival. Anna said that her parents’ greatest desire was
that their children become men and women who believed in and trusted God, and they
also desired that their children become “good citizens.” They were not caught up in
“money and stuff” but they loved their family and took care of one another.

Betty

Betty and her two sisters were born in a small town in a south-central state.
When she was two years old, the family moved north to a “sleepy little tree-lined town.”
The town consisted mainly of a few houses, a one-room schoolhouse, a general store, a
former church building that was converted into a community center, and the church
where her father was the minister. Betty liked the town and was glad her family was
able to stay there for 18 years, an unusually long time for a minister to stay in one church
at that time.

The one-room school had tall, narrow windows that admitted natural sunlight
into the room, three light bulbs hanging down from the ceiling that were used when it
was cloudy, and a wood-burning furnace that had to be stoked occasionally during the
day. Betty, small for her age, was the only child in her grade, and the teacher favored
her quite a bit, since she had no children of her own. There was no water in the building, so the boys had to go across the road to a neighbor’s pump and bring water back to the school. Betty said that she learned “from osmosis”—learning by heart all the lessons that the other students recited.

Another building was the community hall, which was formerly a church. The community hall was used by the Grange and was where church suppers and other events took place. The church where her father was a minister was the fourth main building in town. Betty spent many hours in the church and the community hall during her childhood—as did many of the other children in the town.

The family lived in the church parsonage, a big older house. While living in the parsonage Betty learned that water was “precious.” The house had a cistern that captured the water that ran off the roof. If the weather was dry for a while, the cistern was empty. The parsonage did not have a well but most of the neighbors had outside pumps. Less than half of them had indoor bathrooms. The only way for Betty and her family to have drinking water or water for any purpose when the cistern was empty was to take a bucket to a neighbor’s well for water. With five people in the family, this happened quite often. “They didn’t take kindly to us using up their well water.” It was a real problem. The church said they could not afford to drill a well.

Betty grew up thinking that there was not very much water in the world. The only day of the week that the family took a bath was on Saturday in preparation for Sunday. Her parents bathed first, and then her oldest sister “got first dibs on the water for the kids.” Then her middle sister used that same water, and finally it was Betty’s
turn. By then the water was tepid, gray-looking, and very unappealing. She normally took sponge baths instead.

Betty’s biggest challenge as a child was her mother. She and her sisters believed that “she wasn’t a good mother.” Her mother seemed more interested in the children in the neighborhood and church than she was in her daughters. One day they came home from school and she was not there. When they asked their father where she was, he said she was away for a little while but she would come back. For a year, they had no idea where their mother had gone. They finally surmised that she was in an institution for the mentally ill because she had been acting strangely for a while. Her father never talked about where she was or why, and they never asked. At that time “if you had a little problem like that, nobody talked about it.” Because they did not know where she was, it was not possible to write to her or have any communication at all. It was unsettling to Betty and her sisters.

During the time of her mother’s absence, a young woman came to stay with them during the day while her father worked. She was hired to prepare meals for the girls and take care of them. She said that the only way she would come and work for them would be if Betty’s father installed a potbellied stove in the dining room. During the day the babysitter sat with her feet up on the chrome ring of the potbellied stove, reading a stack of magazines and books. She paid no attention to the girls whatsoever, so they had to find whatever they could to eat. When her father came home the woman always had a meal prepared for the two of them. Every day he would ask her if the children were okay and he was always told that she had taken care of them.
A year after her mother’s disappearance, the children came home from school one day to find their mother sitting on the porch swing. The girls were excited to see her and ran to her, but her reaction shocked them. She said, “You be careful. You will mess my dress.” Once again they felt rejected. Her mother’s condition improved somewhat, but “she never did act too much like a mother.” If one of the girls became sick and had to stay in bed, it was their father who took care of her. Their mother had some measure of mental instability all of her life. She was able to do some things to help in the church, but she was not as active as most ministers’ wives were in that day. Somehow the church members understood that she was not well because “they did not make any demands of her.”

For Betty, her mother’s lack of warmth and nurturing was the worst thing she had to live with during the Depression. Her mother’s illness affected Betty and her sisters in different ways. The middle daughter “just went wild.” She was “boy crazy” and ended up pregnant and had to marry at age 16. The oldest daughter spent her life striving for respect. Her main dream was to have a large house that would make other people take notice of her and respect her. Betty is not sure how her mother’s illness affected her, but she was always “sickly.” Betty’s teachers thought her mother was not taking proper care of her because she was very thin and quite often ill. She had little appetite and every joint in her body hurt. The country doctor who came to the house to examine her thought her problem was bad tonsils. Her tonsils were removed but the physical problems continued. She sometimes fainted and when that happened her father picked
her up and carried her to bed. She never did go to the hospital for any clinical testing. Hospitals were dreaded because people “only went to the hospital to die.”

Betty’s father was very busy with his work at the church. He prepared sermons and Bible studies, visited his parishioners, and attended committee meetings. The church was well attended during the Depression, because “everybody wanted help from God.” Her father also wrote religious plays that were performed at the church at different times of the year. The missionary society made draw curtains to stretch across the front of the church on a wire for the performances. Betty was always the angel in the Christmas play because she was small enough to be hoisted up by a pulley so she could hover over the manger scene. Betty’s father sent the scripts of the plays to various publishing companies, and a Roman Catholic publishing company agreed to publish them. However, Betty’s mother “threw a fit” and would not let them be published by a Catholic publishing company. They were never published.

The church did not always have money to pay Betty’s father his salary. During those times, people from the congregation brought produce from their gardens such as a basket of beans or a farmer would bring milk. These offerings were placed on the step at the front of the church by the pulpit and there they stayed throughout the worship service. After church, the people helped carry the produce to the parsonage, and her mother “had to can it.” With such a severe shortage of water, this was a considerable chore.

While Betty’s mother was away, her father sometimes attempted to do some cooking. He kept his eye on whatever ham happened to be hanging from the rafters at
the general store at the time. When he thought the ham was getting so old that it was almost to the point that the owner would have to throw it out, he would ask if he could have it. He then took his prize home and cooked it in a large kettle with enough water to make a good broth. With the addition of macaroni or noodles, it made a tasty meal.

Betty’s father was born in a log cabin in the South and had 15 siblings. His father had a succession of three wives who all died during childbirth or shortly after giving birth. Betty’s father was a survivor who tried to look on the bright side of life. Of her two parents, he was the one who was kind and nurturing. If the church board met in the front room of the parsonage, she sometimes quietly stood by him, merely to be close to him. He trusted other people and was very engrossed in his work. He did not want to disrupt the peace or appear demanding by asking for anything, such as a well, for his family. In spite of all the family’s financial difficulties and the illness of his wife, her father did not complain. He “loved [Betty’s mother] dearly and showed great affection for her.” Sometimes she showed affection back; sometimes she didn’t. “No matter, he loved her.”

When he wasn’t preaching or visiting parishioners, mowing the lawn in the summer or shoveling snow in the winter, her father normally withdrew to his little home office to study. When he was studying, the children knew they were not to disturb him. Little by little he took college courses while working full-time and trying to hold together his little family. In 1939 the family proudly watched him graduate from seminary.
The girls helped with their backyard garden. However, when it came to canning the produce, their mother did not want them underfoot in the kitchen. For one reason or another “she wanted to do it by herself.” Betty’s mother and some other women in town canned special pickles to sell at the general store. There was quite a competition among the ladies to see who could produce the prettiest canned products. One of her specialties was pickled green tomatoes. Betty said they tasted like olives and were delicious. Perhaps having other people in the kitchen made her mother nervous or uneasy, or perhaps she wanted the canning to be done according to her high standards, but excluding the girls from the kitchen created another scenario where they felt they were not wanted or needed by their mother.

Most of the other families in town had financial difficulties and many of them were on relief. Betty did not feel that her life was worse than the other children. There were about 25 children from town who gathered together and played all sorts of games in the yard and in the road. (Not many cars were on the road at that time.) Betty had very few toys or clothes. The one doll she had she did not play with very often because she wanted to save it. When she became a little older and was not home as much, her mother gave that doll to a little girl she hardly knew who had come to visit and liked it, which was devastating to Betty. No one in the family had very many clothes, but as most of the people in the community were in the same situation no one was teased for wearing the same clothes over and over. Betty and the other children in the community “did not miss what we never had” and made the best of what they did have. At Christmas the children in Betty’s family did not receive a present unless it was an item
of clothing. At church, they always received one orange and a little box of animal crackers. That was a real treat for them all. The community tried to help each other by leaving baskets of extra food or produce on the doorsteps of those who seemed to have the most need. During the 1930s, “there was a lot of that,” and the giving of food baskets was done in such a way as not to embarrass or demean anyone.

Betty learned to do many things at school or on her own. In high school she took home economics classes which taught her to cook and to manage things at home. When she was 16 she began baby-sitting in the summer for a neighboring town’s mayor and his wife. She had never babysat in her life, but she learned to take care of a baby and toddler very well. She lived with the mayor’s family for the summer and said she would have done it for free because they had a shower and a bathtub, and she was permitted to use all the water she wanted. It was like heaven!

Betty’s challenges served to make her more independent. She learned to take whatever life handed her and attempted to make the best of it. As she said, “If you are given a lemon, make lemonade.” In spite of the difficulties, she has many memories from the years of the Depression that are good ones that she still cherishes to this day.

Carol

Carol and her family lived in a major city in the Midwest. In 1923 Carol’s maternal grandparents needed housing so they came to live with them in their single family home. In 1925, when her mother was expecting Carol’s younger sister, her parents purchased a duplex for their expanding family. The duplex was in a middle class neighborhood where everyone took pride in their houses and kept them looking neat.
Her grandparents lived in the upstairs apartment, and Carol, her younger sister, and her parents lived downstairs.

Her grandparents often babysat the two girls while her parents attended church meetings or lodge functions. Carol remembers that sometimes her glands became swollen and her grandfather rubbed them with goose grease and tied a rag around them. She loved her grandfather, in spite of his smelly remedy. Her grandparents were in good health so the stairs to their second floor apartment did not seem to bother them. In fact, her grandfather worked until he was 75 years old.

Her father was a trial attorney for a legal firm downtown. His office was on the ninth floor of a building that overlooked the public square. He was hard-working, a leader in his church, and a member of the Masons. Carol’s mother was a caring, energetic woman who was “very meticulous.” Her hair was always done and make-up in place before she prepared breakfast. She had nice clothes, including a mink stole that she wore to church and civic functions. She was a member of Eastern Star and was a leader in her church and community, serving as “president of this or president of that” for years.

In the early 1930s, Carol’s uncle (her mother’s oldest brother) and aunt came to live with them in the duplex. They moved into the upstairs apartment, and the attic was remodeled for her grandparent’s living space. They lived there for a couple years until her uncle could find a job and home of his own. Carol never knew if her uncle and aunt paid her parents for their apartment although they may have helped with some of her uncle’s expenses.
During several years of the Depression Carol’s father’s clients were often unable to pay for his services in cash. Instead, they paid him in goods such as women’s clothing or hand-painted porcelain lamps or whatever they had. He normally was able to sell these items and garner some cash for them. Once he was paid with an Opera Grand Steck Duo-Art player piano. The piano was kept and enjoyed instead of being sold, and it remains in the family to this day.

In 1932 when Carol reached the age of 12, she became the designated shopper for her mother’s and grandmother’s clothing. She rode the streetcar 10 miles downtown to a large department store and went to the basement where the clothes were on sale or on clearance. They gave her instructions on what color and type of clothing they preferred and she purchased what she could find. She remained their designated shopper until she went to college. Later she was able to resume shopping at the smaller dress shops closer to their home where her mother had shopped before the Depression.

In 1936 Carol’s parents had a larger, nicer home built to replace their duplex. It was in a new development in a smaller community outside of the city. Her father did some legal work for the housing developer there and was paid for his services with a lot on which to build. However, once the house was built, her parents found that they could not pay for it and it was repossessed by the bank. Nothing more was said to Carol or her sister about the house. Carol said, “I don’t know why they couldn’t swing that one.”

In that same year Carol and 99 other students from her city went to Germany for three months with a student exchange program called “Youth for Understanding”. She assumes her parents paid for her transportation to and from Germany. Once there her
host family paid for her expenses. After she returned home a German teen came to the United States and stayed with her family for three months as well. While in Germany Carol saw Adolf Hitler outside an opera house in Nuremberg. Later when the United States entered the war, her parents sent care packages to the family of a German girl she had met there. This girl married a British military officer who had been stationed in Germany. They sent care packages to her in England as well.

Carol’s father’s nickname was “Easy Mark” because if someone needed help in some way, he or she would come to her father. He took care of his in-laws, brothers and sisters on both sides of the family, and nieces and nephews. His kindness was not always reciprocated. His sister and her family came to their house for dinner every Sunday after church. One day when Carol was young she asked her aunt why they were never invited to her house, causing embarrassment for all of them.

Carol’s father knew financial success and purchased a new Oldsmobile almost every year. Her mother always hired a woman one day a week to help her with housework. Carol and her sister had advantages that were unknown to many children during the 1920s and 1930s. They both took piano lessons for a while, and her sister also took ballet lessons downtown. Their mother bought Carol Hawaiian guitar lessons from a door-to-door salesman. The lessons came with a free guitar. Her father doted on his daughters when they were young, giving Carol a nickel every day so she could purchase candy after school. She always bought bull’s eyes: caramel candy with white confectionery sugar in the middle.
Carol never knew what caused her parents to lose the house that they built or why she was asked to shop in the basement of one of her city’s most famous department stores 10 miles from their home. Was it the fact that business was slow, as it was for many lawyers at that time, or that her father was too often paid in goods instead of cash? Did they spend beyond their means to keep up appearances or to help care for family members? Did they give it up in order to help Carol go to Germany? She never knew because her parents never discussed their finances in front of her. Even though Carol enjoyed more financial advantages than many children of that time, her family did experience financial loss and temporarily cut back on their standard of living. Carol, with her effervescent attitude, recently said of those years, “I had a ball!”

Carrie

Carrie’s parents married right after World War I. They did not have the money to purchase a farm, so they rented one. In the early years, they moved from one farm to another in the Midwest. The farm Carrie remembers from the 1930s had three bedrooms, a combined kitchen/dining room, living room, and a bathroom on the second floor. There was no water on the second floor, so water had to be carried up the stairs to the bathtub. This farm was only a mile or two from her mother’s family farm. Her father’s family lived on a farm in the same state, but a little further away.

During the worst years of the Depression, Carrie’s father did most of the work on the farm himself because they were “pretty well strapped for income” and could not hire help. Carrie and her two sisters were not required to help with the heavy farm work. “Many, many girls helped on the farm, but my dad did not think that we should work. It
was not that we weren’t capable; he just didn’t want us to be farmhands.” Later, when the economy improved, he hired someone to help with the planting and harvesting.

Carrie and her sisters helped on the farm in other ways. They fed the chickens and gathered eggs. They helped with the gardening and the canning, and sometimes they helped feed the hogs. There was always a lot of work to do on the farm, especially since they did not have electricity or energy saving appliances. Carrie said, “We kept busy.” Their home was a place of order, and “we were expected to help maintain the order.”

Carrie’s parents had a little bit of income from her mother’s family farm where two of her mother’s brothers and her unmarried sister lived. Every year her mother received a check—“a small amount, I’m sure”—from the profits of the family farm. Her mother also raised chickens and sold both eggs and cream. At some point, her father traveled to the bank in a town not too far away to ask for a loan. He was embarrassed to have to ask for help, and then felt humiliated when the bank refused his request. He had no collateral to put up against the loan. When one of Carrie’s uncles heard what happened, he loaned him money that “helped them through some of those hard times.”

Most of the farms around them were owned by the families who farmed them. They were well-established and were probably loan free, because Carrie cannot remember any families in her area losing farms to foreclosure during the Depression years when many other farmers lost their farms. Carrie’s parents did not fear being evicted from the farm because they had an unusual agreement with the owners. The owners “were wonderful people” who lived in a major city in another state. They were
“forever fearful” that her father would go somewhere else or purchase a farm of his own. The agreement that they had with Carrie’s father was that whatever he grew, the owners would be given a share of the crop. Whether it was oats, soybeans, or corn, they were given a share of the crop as the rental payment. Boom or bust, they were given a share of the crop. The rest of the crop belonged to Carrie’s family and was used mainly to feed the cattle and hogs.

Most holidays were still celebrated in Carrie’s family during the worst years of the Depression. However, Thanksgiving was often ignored because if they had not finished husking corn they had to work as if it were any other day. (It was important to complete the work before celebrating. The corn had to be husked before winter, and they were not a family to “play” when there was work to do.) If the husking was completed, they celebrated Thanksgiving as it is traditionally celebrated today, with one exception. Carrie’s parents watched for a wild turkey’s nest and then snatched some eggs from the nest. The chickens hatched the eggs and, in this way, they raised their own turkeys for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner. At Christmas, if there was a lot of snow, they went to town in a sleigh to midnight Mass. Carrie still remembers the stillness and penetrating cold of the moonlit night. They also celebrated Easter as a special holiday. “We were a Christian family, you know.” They did not celebrate Halloween with parties or costumes, but she remembers some boys turning over outhouses and doing tricks but there were no treats.

“Close family ties,” which included the extended family, was one thing that Carrie listed as a way her family coped with some of the challenges they faced during
the 1930s. Their concern and care for each other helped them through the worst of the Depression. Carrie’s mother and her unmarried aunt who lived on the family farm enjoyed canning certain fruits together. Butchering was done together, for everyone’s benefit. They shared a meat locker in town, where there was electricity, which was a common practice among many farmers in the area. Carrie had another aunt who was a nurse in an Eastern state who had very nice clothes. She passed her discarded clothes down to Carrie’s mother, who altered them to fit Carrie and her sisters. Carrie’s aunt on the family farm doted on Carrie and her sisters. As opposed to their sometimes negative attitude about working at home, work for their aunt was fun because “she might give us a quarter or something.” She made sure they had clothes before school started and always gave them something for Christmas and their birthdays.

For most birthday celebrations, their unmarried aunt baked an angel food cake from scratch, iced it, and decorated it with candy corn. It did not matter what time of year it was, her aunt saved candy corn from the fall and used it to decorate the birthday cakes. With a little pizzazz, a fun attitude, and very little money, she had a way of making special days extra special.

The extended family took care of one another on her father’s side of the family as well. Her widowed paternal grandmother, a single aunt, a married aunt and uncle with no children, a widowed uncle and his three children all lived together in a large house. Every person in every generation provided supported and served as a support in their living arrangements. Carrie remembers the fun times they had when they got together.
The family’s “strong religious faith” topped the list of the way the family successfully met their challenges during the Depression. They attended church in town every Sunday unless the weather made the roads impassable. They also enjoyed fellowship with their church members at church dinners and church picnics in the summer.

Another strong influence for good in their community was the school system. Until junior high, Carrie attended a one room school a little over a mile from her home. It was across the road from the family farm where her aunt and uncles lived. If the weather was inclement, she stopped there after school. She attended junior high in the small town closest to their home. It was too far to walk, so the school system hired someone to drive a “hack”—essentially a horse-drawn wagon with benches along the sides. It was covered to keep out the rain and snow, but there was no heat. The dirt roads were a challenge for the driver during a large part of the school year. Even so, Carrie remembers the drive to and from school as being “a lot of fun.” After Carrie graduated from high school in 1940, the school was able to purchase a bus to replace the hack.

Most of the teachers in the combined junior and senior high school were nuns. She attended a public school, not parochial, but the community was predominately Roman Catholic, and the nuns had some sort of a permit to teach in the school. They were not allowed to wear their rosary beads or to teach religion, but they taught most of the classes. Carrie remembers them as being “wonderful, exceptional” teachers.
Carrie’s parents learned to do a great many things for themselves instead of paying others to do them. Carrie’s mother dry cleaned their garments herself. She put the garments into a bowl of naphtha gas and hung them on the clothesline. It was “kind of hard on her hands,” but she did it. Other washable clothing was washed for many years by hand until the family had access to electricity. She put it in a tub and “pounded it with something that got things clean,” but it was very hard work. She also cut her girls’ hair for years. On the farm, her father learned to do most of the repairs necessary himself. He was not a skilled carpenter, but he developed his skills to the point that he could fix almost anything that broke.

Friendships also bolstered the family’s ability to meet the challenges of the 1930s. Carrie especially remembers Saturday nights. The family took turns taking baths and cleaning up and then they all went to town. The men gathered to visit and the women got together in their group to visit and “the children would walk around and around and have a great time or go to the movie.” Sometimes a neighbor called on their party-line telephone and invited them over for homemade ice cream. In the winter, a neighbor occasionally invited everyone over for a dance. Life was not easy, but friends got together and did inexpensive things together. The fun was in the fellowship, not in showy or extravagant entertainment.

Carrie said her father was “patience personified… He just never complained.” In fact, she cannot remember her parents complaining, ever. They were sometimes disappointed and concerned if the wind blew down the oats and ruined them at the critical stage or they wished that it wasn’t so hot when the scorching summer days
became oppressive. As far as complaining that life was not fair, or work was too hard, or their muscles or backs ached or that they wished they had more money—she never heard it.

Carrie does not remember her parents speaking with alarm concerning their own personal financial condition or the problems in the rest of the country. In fact, Carrie and her sisters did not realize that a depression was taking place and that many people were suffering until they became adults. She wonders if her parents protected them from hearing those things so that they would not worry. Her parents did not participate in any of the federal government’s agricultural programs intended to assist farmers. Although they sometimes lost crops due to hail or flooding, they were not far enough West to have been impacted by the dust storms that devastated parts of Kansas.

Carrie loved to read, but she did not remember reading about the challenges many were facing. There was no public library in the little town where Carrie and her family went to church and school. Her father was always interested in current news and they made their newspaper subscription a financial priority. If snow made the roads too treacherous to deliver the newspaper, he bundled up and walked to town to purchase one. There must have been news of financial and political upheaval, but her parents did not talk about those things—at least, not in front of the children. Her mother subscribed to a magazine called *The Extension*, which Carrie and her mother read from cover to cover.

Carrie’s parents stayed on this last farm until her father died decades later. With frugal living and wise management, they were able to save money and eventually did
well financially. Carrie never asked for much and she did not have expectations concerning material things. She and her sisters knew that their parents could not afford to give them material things so they did not ask. All three sisters married men who lived in other states and all moved away from what had been “home.” Carrie said it “had to kill” her parents for all of the girls to move so far away, but they never complained. They had a quiet acceptance of life, and, to the end, made the best of whatever came their way.

**Cheryl**

Cheryl grew up on a farm in the Midwest with her parents and older brother and sister. In 1931, Cheryl’s parents moved and purchased a 112-acre farm, taking out a loan for $6,000.00. Paying off the farm loan became the all-consuming priority of her parents, as economic uncertainty struck many segments of American life.

Life on the farm was not easy. There was no electricity until 1939 and no running water from a well until after that. Because most of the money they scraped together was channeled into paying off their debt, modern equipment was not purchased. Cheryl’s father owned a team of dapple gray horses and a stallion that he used for all the heavy farm and field work. He farmed this way for many years. It was not until sometime after the loan on his property was paid in full that he purchased a tractor.

The whole family helped on the farm, even the girls. Cheryl and her mother were often in the barn helping milk the dozen cows they owned. All milking was done by hand, and lanterns provided their light in the early morning. After the milking all the buckets had to be thoroughly cleaned, which was often her mother’s chore. Cheryl was
in 4-H as a girl (and later led a 4-H club for 25 years as an adult). The lessons she learned in 4-H provided her with skills to use in her home and on the farm.

Cheryl did not help with the plowing, but she did help when it was time to put up hay. The horses were used to rake the hay into windrows, and then her father would drive his old truck up the windrows and pick up the hay. The hay was loaded loosely into the back of the truck since they did not have a baler, and then it was forked up to the hay mow in the barn. It was very hard and usually very hot work.

They grew corn and grain for their livestock, which included cows, horses, hogs, and chickens. They butchered their own meat and her mother canned a lot of it, except for the hams which were cured and smoked. She even canned sausage patties, browning them first. The canning process then completed the cooking.

The farm provided food for the family and a little extra. Cheryl’s father had beehives which were a source of enjoyment for him and garnered enough honey for the family’s use and some to sell as well. Some of Cheryl’s relatives traveled from a city an hour away to purchase their honey. They did not sell their milk, but they sold cream and a few eggs. If a cow was not doing well, they would sell the cow for meat. Hogs and veal were sometimes sold. Sometimes grain was sold, but most of it was used for the farm’s own livestock. Both of her parents enjoyed gardening so they decided to try to bring in more income with the produce from their garden. Cheryl’s father drove to the county seat, about 15 miles away and peddled sweet corn, lima beans, and other produce door to door on a route he established. He normally came home with a pocket full of change from his sales and Cheryl counted it. Little by little they paid down their loan.
Cheryl’s parents had no steady income on which they could count, only the sporadic income from the farm. Besides bringing in some revenue from the sale of farm products and produce, they had to slash costs as much as possible. They did not have electric, telephone, natural gas, or water bills to pay. They did need to purchase kerosene for their lamps and lanterns and gasoline for the old truck. They delayed digging a well until the farm debt was paid in full. Water was carried from the milk house to the house for drinking and cooking. Cistern water was used at the house to wash dishes or bathe. They either did without a variety of things they wanted or they waited until they had the money in hand to purchase those things that they needed.

The economic philosophy her parents practiced was not to go overboard on anything but to try to have “enough.” Cheryl did not have many clothes growing up, but she had “enough.” She had two pairs of shoes, one for special use and one for everyday use, which was all she needed and therefore “enough.” At Christmas they had a nice meal and “not a lot” of presents, but they were “enough.” She had few toys as a child: a wagon, an old baby buggy, a doll. There were not many, but as she did not have a lot of time for fun, they were “enough” and Cheryl “was satisfied.” In the summer sometimes she went swimming with some friends at the creek, which was fun and free.

When Cheryl was about 12 or 13, her parents had a lamb that had been rejected by its mother. They allowed her to care for the lamb and raise it as a pet. When it was grown, she was permitted to sell it and use the money to purchase something she had wanted for a while—a new bicycle. That was the first and only bicycle she ever owned. She rode down the lane to the mailbox which was about a quarter of a mile, and she rode
it on the country roads sometimes with the neighbors who had a used bicycle. Instead of simply giving Cheryl the bicycle, her parents provided her with a means to earn the money to purchase it. She was so proud and happy to have that bicycle and still has it today in her garage.

Although Cheryl knew other farm children who were in somewhat similar economic situations with similar lifestyles, she had other friends and acquaintances that lived very differently from her and her immediate family. Her school mates who lived in the small town where her high school was located all had electricity and indoor bathrooms. In her own family, Cheryl’s maternal grandparents had a telephone and electricity on their farm long before Cheryl’s parents did. They had a generator that produced their own electricity, and they also had water piped into their indoor bathroom. Their standard of living was better than most other people around because they had a gas well that provided free natural gas. Her grandparents still did not have a lot of money because they had eight children, but they had some of the more modern conveniences that made life a little easier.

Her parents never verbally said to their children that their family was going to live in what seems today to be a hyper-frugal way; it was simply the way they lived. Cheryl and her siblings grew up believing that living frugally and waiting for those things they wanted or needed was the way to live. The lesson of waiting for those “wanted” things was learned well by Cheryl. When she and her husband purchased their 216-acre farm for $25,000.00, the owner told them he thought they would never pay it
off. Together they practiced the same determination, resource management, and self-sacrifice that Cheryl saw in her parents and completed the payments in 16 years.

Cheryl’s parents did not complain about the inconveniences and difficulties of living on their farm or having to deny themselves some of the new products or apparel that were on the market in the 1930s. Their treasure was in people, their work ethic, and their strong Christian faith. Against all odds, they paid their farm off in 1937, six years after they first took out the loan. While others lost farms or homes during that same time period, the competent management of their resources, the assistance of all five members of the family, and their determination to find ways to cut costs helped them to accomplish their goal.

**Donald**

Donald and his family lived in a six-room bungalow in a working class neighborhood in one of the largest cities in the Midwest. His father worked for the railroad after he was married and during the time his four children were born. His hourly and overtime wages from the railroad provided the family with enough money to purchase their home and automobile with cash. Although they had to be careful with their expenditures, the family had everything they needed plus the benefit of some extra perks as well. For instance, in 1926 they took a train to Niagara Falls and Buffalo, New York for a family vacation. The railroad paid for the train ride for the entire family. Another perk was that Donald, his older brother, and his father picked up spilled wood or corn from the boxcars and took them home. The cars were so full that as they rumbled along the track or made sudden stops, some of the cargo spilled out on the
ground. None of the cargo was sacked or bundled, and no one cleaned up the goods that fell to the ground. Donald’s family took advantage of the fallen firewood and food by gathering and hauling it home.

His father was on top of the world and felt like an important employee. There seemed to be no end to the great things he was going to be able to do for his family with the income he was making. He was the head switchman at the railroad yard, which gave him a sense of prestige with his peers and his family. He was a “self-made man” and was in control—until the accident.

In 1929 Donald’s father jumped off a railcar after breaking the cars loose. In the jump, his foot turned and his ankle was badly broken in the fall. He was hospitalized in a local hospital and his income came abruptly to an end. While in the hospital an infection set in and his condition was complicated further by severe symptoms of rheumatism. His knees swelled with fluid and his legs would not bend. After about two years of treatment his condition did not improve, and he was eventually considered by the medical profession to be significantly and permanently handicapped.

The railroad paid for his initial hospitalization after the accident but nothing else. Even though Donald’s mother pleaded with her husband not to sue the railroad for the damages his work accident had caused the family, he proceeded to seek legal counsel. The lawyer for the railroad refused to work with his father’s lawyer, therefore, the lawsuit drug through the court system. The railroad was fighting to keep a union from forming and they were not willing to help at all. By the time a judge heard their case, it was determined that too much time had elapsed so the suit could no longer be pursued.
Donald’s mother came to refer to her husband’s lawyer as a “shyster” because he took the little money that they had left and did not do anything to help the family gain financial assistance from the railroad.

After the legal fight over his father’s attempt to recover money to pay for the living costs associated with the accident, the railroad refused to permit him to do any work for the railroad even at a position he could have handled such as operating the gates at one of the many railroad crossings. That position entailed leaving a railroad shack at the crossing and holding up a sign to stop traffic. Even with his mobility disability, he could have performed that function, but they wanted to have nothing to do with him.

Donald’s parents were forced to apply for relief from the city during the years they were fighting their legal battle with the railroad. At first the city officials refused to give them assistance, maintaining they did not need it. Before the accident, his father had purchased a new 1929 Ford with his overtime pay. With their home and new car free of debt, the city at first did not believe they were truly in need. They told Donald’s parents that they needed to sell the house in order to qualify for relief assistance. His parents refused to sell the house. They asked where they would go if they sold the house. His father “gave” their new car to his brother-in-law to temporarily keep for them in his garage until the issue with the relief office was settled. The car was hidden and was not used again until sometime later when his father obtained another job. Eventually, the family was permitted to receive assistance from the relief agency but only for the years that lapsed while the court was reaching a decision in their legal case.
Donald and his brother rode with their father by streetcar to the Aid Office 10 miles away to sign up for the aid.

Donald’s family received limited food staples such as flour, oats, and cornmeal, which arrived by truck and were left on the street in front of their house. About half of the people in Donald’s neighborhood were also on relief. Many had room in their yards for a garden to help supplement what they received from the government. However, there was not enough room at Donald’s house for a garden. When asked if he was hungry during that time, Donald said that he was and that his family “ate a lot of oatmeal.” He and his family learned to eat less than they had before their financial difficulties began. Vouchers were given to the family to purchase clothes at thrift stores such as the Salvation Army or Goodwill. The government relief was not enough to provide for all their needs, but they survived.

Someone in the neighborhood told Donald’s father what a lot of people were doing to have access to free electricity. He learned how to bend a few wires and jump electricity from the poles outside into the house. The meter reader from the electric company often came to the door and announced himself by shouting out “Electric.” At those times, Donald or his brother jumped into action and pulled the wires before anyone was allowed to unlock and open the front door. The meter reader asked, “Do you sit in the dark all the time?” His father justified their actions to himself and the family by reminding them that they did not have enough land to raise fruits and vegetables as some of their neighbors did. Donald’s parent’s constant worry was how they were going to survive.
The relief office brought them a load of coal for their Sears & Roebuck coal furnace. The office rationed the coal that was distributed to needy families and did not deliver it to homes until after the weather had become frigid. During the time when the house was cold and their coal had not been delivered, Donald and his brother took gunny sacks in their red wagon to the railroad tracks about eight blocks from their home. As the coal cars shook and rolled from side to side moving down the track, chunks of coal rolled off the top of the load and fell to the ground below. The two boys picked up chunks of coal and stuffed them into their gunny sacks. They loaded the sacks into the wagon and hauled them home. Most of that coal was used in the cooking stove which also provided warmth for the kitchen. The doors were closed to the rest of the rooms so the warm air would stay in the kitchen and provide at least one warm room where the family could congregate.

In 1930, when Donald was nine years old, he began working one day a week at a local drugstore that was half a block from his home. He mopped the store and earned a few cents for his efforts. His older brother worked at a different drugstore that was two blocks from their home. All the money that either boy earned was turned over to their parents to help with expenses for the family.

At school the children had a brief reprieve from the food deprivation at home. The school provided free lunches to children on relief. They had milk and a sandwich which was enough to get them through the second half of the school day. In elementary school, books, paper, and pencils were provided free of charge as well.
During the years when the family had no actual income and the legal battle stalled in court, some of their neighbors helped them as much as they could. Two different families in the neighborhood took turns providing food for a nice meal at Christmas and Easter. One neighbor, the only one who had a car in working order, took Donald and his brother each week to Sunday school about ten blocks away. A cousin and her husband also gave them a little bit of money which was hidden away in the basement and used sparingly. Many of the people who lived around them were in dire economic circumstances themselves and could not do much to help anyone. Some of his neighbors worked for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and a few others worked in the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps).

Donald’s mother, a small, frail, and somewhat shy woman managed the home to the best of her ability. Her parents were born in Germany, but she was born in the United States. She attended school through eighth grade, but her husband rarely attended school after the first grade. With her husband disabled and three children to raise (her youngest son died when he was about 18 months old), she tried to keep life moving at an even keel and stayed as far away from conflict as she possibly could. She had a daily routine of housework that was faithfully followed regardless of other circumstances. She took great pride in her washing and on Monday morning had her laundry out on the line before anyone else in the neighborhood. She was known as “a worrier” and constantly worried about her family making it financially.

Like his mother’s parents, Donald’s paternal grandparents were also born in Germany and his father was born in the United States. Before the accident, his father
was highly athletic. He was a member of their city’s Turner German-American gymnastic club and performed occasionally with a team of gymnasts at vaudeville theaters throughout the region. His strength and athleticism provided a great source of pride and self-confidence for him because his academic skills were not strong. Donald and his siblings also performed with young gymnastic teams before their father’s accident.

In the months following his accident, Donald’s father’s health further deteriorated as the infection in his legs took hold and rheumatism set in. The large city hospital downtown tried everything they could think of to help reduce his pain and restore his ability to walk. The medical procedure available at that time for someone in his condition was to drain the fluid from his knees to reduce the swelling but this would leave his legs stiff. To pursue that route would prevent him from ever being able to bend his knees. Another option was to amputate his legs but no one wanted to do that. Finally, he was sent to the Mayo Clinic for a consultation with specialists. Doctors at the Mayo Clinic determined that his left leg was in worse shape than his right. They constructed leather braces for him that ran the full length of his legs. Each brace had a pin that he could pull to allow his knee to bend. The braces, in combination with crutches, allowed him to have a limited degree of mobility.

With the braces and a large amount of determination, Donald’s father attempted to earn enough income for the family because they were unable to receive any more relief. He took a job selling Watkins products door to door in 1933. The family car, a Studebaker, was put back in service and Donald, age 12, drove his father door to door.
His father did like being so dependent on his young son so the car was adapted so that the clutch was moved from the left to the right side of the floorboard since he had the least use of his left leg. Donald said the car had an early version of an automatic clutch. Even so, driving the car was difficult for his father, and getting in and out of the car and walking up to houses was painful and challenging for him. Very few people had money to purchase his wares, so after six months of attempting to sell Watkins he looked for another way to earn income for his family.

Less than a mile from home Donald’s father found a milk store that he could manage nearly rent free. This store sold milk and milk products, and the owner was anxious to have someone take over the management of it in order to keep the building from being vandalized. Donald and his mother both helped manage the store. By this time, his older brother and sister had jobs of their own and could not help at the store. Once again, they found that this line of work was too difficult and not profitable for the family.

Donald’s father saw an advertisement for someone to manage a Sinclair gas station about 12 miles from their home. He took the job, which included both renting and running the station. He paid the rent and gasoline and related expenses and had some money left over to support the family. Donald drove his father to the gas station and spent many evenings there with him until it got dark and the station was closed for the day.

By the time Donald became a teenager, things were getting a little better financially and emotionally for the family. Donald and a friend hopped on the tailgate of
a watermelon truck and hitched a ride to the World’s Fair. When they arrived at the fair, they grabbed a watermelon and jumped off the truck. At the side of the road, Donald pulled out his brother’s Boy Scout knife, cut into the melon, and they ate as much watermelon as they could hold. Then they hopped over a fence and got into the World’s Fair free. They were not able to ride the rides because they did not have any money for tickets. They also tried to sneak into the tent where Sally Rand was dancing, but they were unable to do that. Instead, they walked around and saw the exhibits and stayed for the day.

Donald’s older brother had a route delivering advertisements from all the stores downtown. Soon Donald joined him and together they delivered a thousand free advertising papers on the weekend in an assigned section of the city near their home. The papers came to them in large bundles and had to be individually rolled and banded with a rubber band. Their father helped them roll the bundles. At first they used carrying bags and their red wagon to hold the papers when they made their deliveries.

The company who printed the advertisements decided to have a cart-building contest. Donald’s father helped build a cart, which they painted orange and wrote “Downtown Shopping” on the side in big, black letters. They won the cart-building contest for their area, which made the whole family proud. The bundles all fit in the big cart, stacked three levels high. Donald’s father sometimes helped push the cart while Donald and his brother delivered the papers. He was stiff-legged, but the handle on the cart provided stability so he could walk behind it, like pushing a baby buggy or shopping
All of the money earned through this venture was given to help provide for the family’s needs.

Following their parent’s example, all the children learned to be hard workers. As the economy improved, life improved for their family. Donald and his older siblings all graduated from high school and were able to earn good incomes as adults. Donald and his sister married and had families of their own, and their older brother stayed with his parents until they died. Then he married. The three children supported their parents for the rest of their lives.

Fred grew up in a blue collar section of a large city in the Midwest. He and his parents lived in one side of a rented double house. Most of the neighborhood lacked indoor plumbing for bath facilities so they used outhouses. His family was fortunate because they had running water and an indoor bathroom.

Fred’s father was a skilled carpenter who had worked as a cabinet maker and constructed fine furniture before the Depression. In the 1930s he worked for a company that specialized in screens, storm doors, windows, and insulation. He covered the state, going from job to job. His wages varied according to the job load, but his typical salary during that time was $7.00 to $8.00 a week. Sometimes it would be as little as $2.00 to $3.00 or if he was working on a big job it might be $15.00 a week. Every Friday evening he sat at the kitchen table and filled out a time sheet, accounting for the hours he worked and jobs he completed. Fred’s father was a heavy smoker, smoking about 20 cigarettes a day. As a boy, Fred was regularly sent to the store to purchase a package of
Bugler tobacco for 5¢. While his father worked on his weekly paperwork to calculate his hours, Fred rolled cigarettes for him. Fred said, “That was one of my jobs.”

Fred grew up as an only child because two brothers who were born before him died in infancy. His father financially supported their little family of three, as well as his paternal grandmother, aunts, and uncles. Fred’s grandfather died, leaving his grandmother with very little money and a mortgage on her house. Fred’s father and uncles and aunts got together and decided to each chip in a dollar a week to help with the mortgage so the house could be saved. This was done even though a considerable sacrifice was required by all. One of his uncles worked for a picture frame company which closed during the Depression. Another uncle worked at a factory but made very little money. One of his aunts, along with two of his cousins, lived with his grandmother, taking care of her. The other aunt was married to a man who sold furniture. They were barely able to get by during the Depression. Fred’s father dipped into his meager income to try to help them all. Even so, Fred insisted that “we were all happy.”

Every Saturday night Fred’s immediate family went to a downtown outdoor market that was open year-round to purchase inexpensive produce for their immediate and extended family. Fred’s father took him hunting for wild game to supplement their food supply. If their hunting trip was successful they shared the wild game with the extended family. His father was very intentional about trying to help other family members who had less than they had.
People came to the door regularly attempting to sell anything from buttons and needles to pencils or apples. Fred often asked his mother to buy something because he felt sorry for the door-to-door salespeople. At one point, Fred’s mother decided she would sell blankets to add to the family’s income. When his father, a fiercely independent and proud man, heard about it he refused to allow her to do so. He said, “My wife is not going to go door to door selling. I am the head of the family, and I am going to make a living. And I’m not going to turn to the government for help.” When her selling career abruptly ended, she asked Fred why he didn’t try selling something. Together, they gathered bittersweet in the fall and she tied it in little bundles for Fred to sell door to door. Later he was able to obtain a *Grit* paper route and sold the newspapers in the neighborhood.

The owner of the double house where they lived occupied the other side of the house with his wife and son. He worked as an independent contractor, doing the same kind of work as Fred’s father. The two families were friends, and the owner cut a hole in the wall between the two sides of the house and created a boxed in space for a telephone. If the owner or his wife were not home, Fred’s mother or father answered the telephone for them. In that way, someone was always there to take business phone calls so he did not miss any work opportunities. Because of this telephone answering arrangement, the owner charged Fred’s family only $8.00 a month for rent, which was considered an inexpensive price for their neighborhood at that time. (The hole in the wall was also used to pass food and other things back and forth.)
In the early years of the Depression Fred’s family had a gas heater and later a coal stove to heat their side of the double house. There was no basement under the house, so after a few years Fred’s father helped the owner of the house dig out a basement so two furnaces could be installed, one for each side. Every winter after that his father ordered five tons of coal to stoke the furnace. The man delivering the coal just dumped it in the street so Fred’s father hired him and a neighbor boy to shovel the great mound of coal into wheel barrows and dump the loads into the basement. Once the coal was in the basement it then had to be shoveled back into the coal bin. It was dirty, hard work, but it heated their house through the winter.

Fred’s mother and the woman in the other side of the house spent weeks in the summer and early fall canning all sorts of produce together. They purchased the produce at the open market downtown because their yard was not large enough to raise a garden. His mother and her friend took great pride in their pantries. Just as some women enjoy displaying a new piece of furniture or some other treasure, these women delighted in showing others their pantries and all the food they had canned.

The boy next door was two years older than Fred. Money was rarely spent on clothing for anyone in the family, so Fred’s mother and the woman next door worked together in the late summer before school started to alter the older boy’s clothes to fit Fred. The only articles of clothing that were purchased new were shoes and high-top boots. The family scrimped and then splurged to go to a huge shoe store downtown with a sign out front that said “10,000 pairs of shoes.” The rage for boys at that time was a certain brand of high-top boots that came with a pen knife in a little pocket on the side of
the boot. All the boys in the neighborhood wore the boots with the pen knife in the pocket to school. Fred’s parents worked hard to save in other areas of their budget so they could purchase a pair of these much coveted boots for Fred.

Fred’s father made it a point to hustle when storms came by. After a storm, he drove downtown past restaurants and other businesses to see if there was damage to any of the buildings. If he saw something broken or a sign blown down at a restaurant he offered to fix the damage for a free meal for his family as payment. In this way Fred and his parents were occasionally able to enjoy going to a restaurant at a time when it would not have been possible to do so otherwise, and in Fred’s mind “that was like a paradise!”

Sometimes, even with all their money-saving ventures, there was just not enough money to pay the bills. At those times, his mother would go to a finance company and obtain a loan so they could pay all their bills at once. They had excellent credit and always paid back their loans. They would have been in a real pinch without that financial boost on occasion.

Fred was in the basement one day pounding and sawing away on a construction project. His father became quite upset and rushed downstairs, demanding that Fred put down the hammer and saw and go upstairs to read a book or write something. He said, “I am not going to have you trying to make a living working with your hands. You are going to make a living working with your mind.” Fred was stunned. It was the only time he could recall his father speaking with bitterness or harshness. Other than that, he cannot remember his father complaining about their lot in life. He also cannot remember his mother ever complaining. Even though Fred’s father helped other people in the
family with extra food or a little bit of financial support, no one offered to help him. His parents took life as it was and made the most of it.

Fred and six or seven of his friends decided that they wanted to become Boy Scouts. They went to a church nearby and obtained permission to use it as a meeting place for their troop. They located a retired policeman to serve as their scout master and asked Fred’s father to be the assistant scout master. One of the “rules” for the troop was that everyone had to wear a scout uniform; no scout was permitted to attend meetings in street clothes. This was a severe difficulty because the uniforms were somewhat expensive and the boys did not have extra money. Somehow, Fred’s father saw to it that each boy was able to obtain a uniform. And, new boys who joined the troop were also outfitted with a uniform. There was a big sign downtown for Heinz ketchup with a large “57” on the roof. Their Boy Scott motto became: Troop 57, the Heinz troop.

Fred’s father also found a way to take the troop camping. They did not have tents, so they constructed make-shift tents out of tarpaulins and gathered rocks to build a safe pit for their fires. They used a fish trap to catch fish for their meals. These fish traps were square boxes covered with mesh. There was an opening that allowed the fish to swim into the box but then trapped them so they could not swim out. Fred sheepishly said they were illegal to use, but the retired policeman who was their scout master and Fred’s father used them anyway. Fred’s mother and another woman fried potatoes and the fish they caught for their meals. He and the other boys learned to swim and camp on those camping trips.
Fred’s family lived 10 or 15 blocks from the railroad. Nearly every day a hobo came down the alley next to their house. (Their garage behind their house was marked with a message in chalk that told hoboes they could get something to eat at this house.) They went to the back door and asked for a sandwich or bread or whatever might be available. Fred’s mother always found a way to give them something to eat.

In the early 1930s, Fred developed a serious earache. His doctor sent him to an ear specialist who told his parents that he had a severe mastoid infection. There were no antibiotics at that time to cure the infection, so the surgeon removed part of the skull behind his ear to clean out the mastoid. Fred survived the surgery but the family was left with a large medical bill. The hospital stay cost three or four hundred dollars and the surgeon’s bill was another three or four hundred dollars. To pay the hospital bill, Fred’s father sold many of his tools and most of his guns at a pawn shop in the city. Then he went to the surgeon who lived in a very nice home in a more exclusive part of the city and asked if he could work for him to pay off his bill. The surgeon accepted this offer, and Fred’s father went to the surgeon’s home every Saturday for several months to fix or paint or construct whatever was needed until the bill was paid in full.

Fred’s maternal grandfather was a game warden. He gave Fred two guns when he was eight or nine years old, taught him to shoot and took him hunting. At times his grandfather came upon hunters who were hunting illegally. When they saw the warden coming, they threw their guns aside, claimed they were having a nice walk in the woods, and were not hunting. His grandfather would ask Fred to walk around to see if he could find the guns. Several times when he found the guns his grandfather kept them.
Every fall his grandfather went to a neighboring farmer who raised a pig for him. He took Fred with him, and after Fred had learned to shoot at age eight or nine his grandfather taught him how to shoot the pig so it could be butchered. He told him exactly where to shoot—between the eyes—and handed him the rifle. For several years it was Fred’s job to kill the pig, and then the pig would be slaughtered. His grandfather had a cellar that was cold, and after the meat was butchered and salted, it was stored there. Fred’s parents took small packages of the pork home, but only as much as would fit around the ice in their ice box.

Fred desperately wanted a bicycle, but his parents could not afford one. However, at one point when Fred’s father was working for the screen company, he had a job doing some construction work at a very nice house in the city and he built rapport with the homeowner. He noticed an old bicycle in the owner’s garage and asked him if he would sell it to him. The owner liked him and told him to just take it. He took the bicycle home, installed new tires, and gave it a fresh coat of paint. Fred was “in seventh heaven.” Several years later Fred shared a paper route with a friend. They divided the income from the route, and Fred saved up his share of the profits and proudly purchased a new bicycle.

As a child, Fred and his friends spent all available time playing outdoors, unless it was raining. As soon as he came home from school he changed his clothes and went outside to play. His parents did not have money for toys, so Fred and his friends made their own fun. They played hide and seek. They created their own playthings, such as bows and arrows. They dug foxholes to play war. There was very little traffic, so they
played in the street. They wanted a ball, but no one had a ball or enough money to buy one. Four or five of the boys each chipped in 20¢ to purchase a ball for them all to use. There was a baseball stadium right beside the cemetery. He and his friends sometimes snuck into the cemetery and climbed the trees that were close to the baseball park. They had a great view of the games from their perch in the trees.

Every year the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus came to town. Fred and some of his friends raced on their bikes to the train station to watch the handlers unload the elephants and other animals from the trains. The elephants were marched through the streets to the stadium where the circus was held. Fred and his friends offered to help put up the tents and earned free passes to the circus this way, year after year.

The federal government had several programs that provided unemployed people with work, but Fred’s father was not interested in government assistance. His family considered the WPA (Works Progress Administration) to be “a big joke.” Fred said, “You would see a group of men standing around with a shovel talking, never working; but the government was paying them money.” Even though they thought little of the WPA, they admired the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps). One of Fred’s cousins who was four or five years older than Fred was in the CCC and lived in barracks. His job was to clean the streams and build bridges. The family was very proud of him and felt he was learning useful skills and making an important contribution to society at the same time.
Fred’s parents encouraged him to save the money he earned from the variety of jobs he had. After the U.S. banking crisis was resolved and the government backed citizen’s savings, his mother took him to the bank and helped him open a savings account. Every time he earned a dollar or two, she took him to the bank to deposit his money. By the time he went into the army, he had several hundred dollars saved.

Fred joined the service in 1942. At the same time, his father obtained a more promising position with a different company. Although he lost this position when the owner was killed in an airplane accident, Fred’s parents continued to make do and work hard for their livelihood. They did not speak of their financial difficulties or of the unfairness of life. Fred did not realize that they had been “poor” until he became an adult. His life had been enriched by the relationships he had with family and friends, and he remembers his boyhood as one of the best times of his life.

Kathy

Kathy’s father grew up on a ranch in a western state. His family raised cattle and “did all the things you see in the movies” with cattle ranching: going out and bringing in the cattle “and rustlers and everything.” Her father dropped out of high school and enlisted in the service when the United States entered World War I. Her mother left her teaching job to work for the federal government during the war. After visiting their respective families, her mother and father met on a train on their way east where her father was stationed. The train did not have a dining car, so her grandmother had prepared a large lunch for her mother to eat on the train. Her mother noticed a
serviceman on the train who did not have anything to eat and offered him a sandwich. That was the beginning of their relationship.

After the war they married and moved to the edge of a medium-sized city in the Midwest where Kathy’s father was the superintendent of the water filter plant. They lived in a four-bedroom brick home that had a large backyard. Her father loved flowers and wanted a property large enough to allow him to build greenhouses. He wanted to develop a wilt-free hydrangea. Although both her mother and father had come from relatively large families, they decided that their family was complete after their first child, Kathy, was born.

The family had a comfortable life until the early 1930s, when they met with difficulty. Every two weeks when her father was paid, it was his normal custom to stop by the house and pick up her mother. Together they drove to the bank to deposit his check, saving out only as much as they needed for the next two weeks. After stopping at the bank, they normally went shopping. One payday her father picked up her mother and dropped her off at the bank to deposit his check while he drove around the block. Her mother noticed that there was an unusually large crowd of people, and she told her husband that she had to wait in line for quite a while. She finally made it up to the cashier and deposited the entire check for the two weeks. At home, later that day, they heard that the bank had closed and all their money was gone. They never spoke with bitterness concerning the bank closure. Kathy said they were “worried, concerned, and wondered how they were going to manage,” but she never knew them to complain or speak bitterly about losing their money.
Kathy’s parents had a little box that contained gold coins. When she was a child, her father allowed her to dump the coins on the bed and play with them under his watchful supervision. She made little piles of the coins, stacking ones of the same sizes together and playing imaginary games before putting them back in the box. Kathy remembers the day her father said that the coins had to be turned in because the government was going off the gold standard and everyone had to turn in their gold or face the penalty of arrest. She said he commented that he would like to save a little bit, “just for the heck of it,” but he didn’t. Ever honest, he turned in all the gold coins.

Not too long after that, the city ran out of money to pay its employees. Her father and other city workers were paid in “scrip,” which, according to Kathy, was not worth as much as regular currency. Most stores in the city accepted scrip as payment for goods because they were encouraged to do so “for the good of all.” That year was one of economic uncertainty for Kathy’s family. Her father retained his job, but lost their savings through the bank closure. (The savings were eventually at least partially restored.) With about a fourth of all Americans unemployed and the city out of money, they could not be sure of their economic future.

Kathy’s father did what he could to help himself and the others at the water plant. There was a lot of land surrounding the plant, and he encouraged every worker to have a garden to raise some of their own food. A farmer came in and plowed the land, and marked good-sized individual plots for the employees. All the plant workers took advantage of the opportunity to grow a garden. Kathy helped with the weeding of her
family’s plot, and in the fall, the floor to ceiling shelves her father built in their fruit cellar were filled with canned produce from their garden at the water plant.

Kathy’s family ate quite well during the worst of the Depression, even when her father was paid in scrip. The garden kept them in fresh and home canned vegetables, plus her father knew a butcher who had a shop close to their home. The butcher had difficulty due to the fact that he could not sell his best cuts of meat anymore; people simply did not have money for higher priced meat. He found himself with an overabundance of steaks and prime rib and other more expensive cuts. He could not afford to lower the prices for the more expensive meat to the general public because then he would have to lower the prices for the lower-priced meats as well. He knew some people, including Kathy’s parents, who were willing to buy this better meat, and he secretly sold it to them at very little cost simply so he could move it. He was willing to be paid in scrip, which made the deal possible. Kathy said, “I never had so many steaks in my life, and I didn’t like steaks when I was that age.” Although her parents were “thrilled to death” to have such nice meat, Kathy complained that there was too much meat to eat!

Making the most of every opportunity to provide for her family and not waste anything, Kathy’s mother preserved fruit from an abandoned orchard next to their house. They gathered cherries, apples, crab apples, and quince and she canned them all. Kathy remembers dipping the cherries in boiling water and removing the pits with hairpins. Her mother always canned some of the cherries with the pits in them because she said they had better flavor. One time she got mixed up and made a pie from a jar of cherries
that still had the pits. Kathy and her father teased her long afterward about the pie that they ate and had to spit out the pits.

For a while during the early years of the 1930s, Kathy’s mother suffered with debilitating headaches. Kathy did not know if they were caused from stress or some other reason, but she remembers sometimes coming home from school to find her mother lying down in severe pain, unable to eat. The headaches lasted all day and persisted until Kathy was 10 or 12 (sometime between 1932 and 1934); then they simply went away.

As a child, Kathy did not realize that her family was having financial difficulty because her parents did not complain about anything, let alone money. She noticed that some things changed, however. For instance, she could no longer purchase a five-cent ice cream cone from the ice cream man who drove through the neighborhood. They often went on picnics, but her parents always went to the park that was closest to home. Sometimes Kathy asked to go to one of the parks farther up the river, but her parents commented about how nice the park was closest to home and said that they would go there. As an adult, Kathy realized that they were probably focused on having a nice family outing in a way that used the least amount of gasoline possible.

Holidays were always special occasions at Kathy’s house. Her family took turns getting together with her aunt and uncle and cousins who lived in the same city. Whatever food they had, it was prepared in a way that seemed more special than normal. Certain foods were eaten only on the holidays. Turkey was prepared only at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Her mother made a cranberry and cream cheese molded
salad only on those holidays. They were always with family for the holidays, and birthdays, and Valentine’s Day: “You name it.” Family was very important.

Housing prices decreased during the early 1930s so Kathy’s parents purchased their house when it was only a little more than a shell. They moved in, and her father did much of the finish work himself. He constructed his own screen windows, a few at a time as he had the money. It was a slow process to put in the baseboards, finish the windows, paint the walls, and complete other finish work. They made do with what they had and worked on finishing the house as they had the funds to do so. Kathy’s parents were very cautious with their money and were not about to risk losing their home because of impatience to have everything completed and furnished before they had the money available.

Kathy’s parents taught her to work for the things that she wanted. When she wanted a bicycle, her father agreed to purchase one through a wholesale company that cost less than many other bicycles. She had in mind exactly the bicycle she wanted, a Roadmaster, and nothing else would fill the bill. She and her parents discussed the situation in detail before the decision was made, making sure that she really wanted one, that she really was going to use it, and that it was not just a whim. She wanted a Roadmaster bicycle so badly that it was “practically her life” at that point. Her parents decided that if she wanted the more expensive bicycle, she should work to help cover the extra cost. She promised that she would work. She watered and fertilized the flowers in the greenhouse and was finally able to purchase it.
She was so excited about her Roadmaster that she named it “Hannibal” because she remembered reading that Hannibal went over the Alps. She thought, “That’s what I want with my bicycle. I’ll go all over.” She and her friend rode their bikes into the country and all over the area. When she got home, she cared for it meticulously. There were two steps from the outside down into her basement. She brought the bicycle into the house, down the two steps, and wiped it off. That way, the next time she wanted to take it out to ride, it was as shiny and nice as it was when it was new. She does not remember anyone telling her to take care of her bicycle this way. She was so thrilled to have her Roadmaster that she wanted to take good care of it.

The same philosophy was utilized later when she wanted a radio/record player combination for her room. The wholesale company with which her father had connections had a combination radio and record player that would cost less money, but she had a certain brand in mind that she wanted. Once again, she had greenhouse duties to make up for the extra expense of the name brand bicycle she wanted.

Kathy’s parents did what they could to help other people. Her father helped a man, “Mr. R”, who worked at the plant, whom she thinks was on the verge of losing his home. Although she is not sure of exactly what her father did to help Mr. R, over the years Mr. R said many times that “he owed everything” to her father. If her father had not been there he would have lost everything. Kathy’s house was about a half mile from the railroad tracks. Sometimes a man (never a woman) came to the door and asked if he could do some type of work in exchange for food. Her father would find some work for him to do in the yard, and Kathy’s mother would fix a sandwich or a plate of food to
take out to him. They had a genuine sense of compassion for those who were less fortunate than themselves.

Kathy’s parents tried to impress upon Kathy the importance of giving to those who were less fortunate. Mr. R had four children and his family had very little money. When Kathy outgrew her clothes, they were given to Mr. R’s children. Then, when Kathy was old enough that she was not riding her bicycle very much, her father suggested it be given to Mr. R’s children. He said Mr. R’s children had never had a bicycle and would appreciate having a nice bicycle. (It was especially nice because Kathy had taken such good care of it.) She reluctantly agreed to give up the bicycle for Mr. R’s children.

Mr. R had a friend, “Jim,” whom he tried to help. Mr. R brought Jim to Kathy’s father to see if he had any work that could be done. Jim spoke in broken English and was difficult to understand, which Kathy assumes was one reason he had trouble obtaining a job. Kathy’s father hired him to do some work, for which both Jim and Mr. R were grateful.

After the money crisis of the early 1930s, Kathy’s parents continued to be cautious with their money. They always had a garden, although it was now in their backyard instead of the water plant. They continued to “watch their pennies” and encouraged Kathy to do so as well. When she was old enough to understand, they encouraged her to “be careful about everything.” By this they meant to take care of all property and resources. They said that it was not possible to know when something could happen that could become a hardship and that it was important to be cautious and
to live within one’s income. They encouraged her to put aside money for a “rainy day” and to think about the future.

Kathy’s mother had grown up on a farm in a rural part of an eastern state. Her maternal grandmother had a very hard life when her husband died at a young age, suddenly leaving her in charge of everything. The cows needed to be milked and the crops needed care. She had to hire in help, which put a strain on her scarce resources, but her mother and her sisters were not able to take care of the farm on their own. Her maternal grandmother seemed severe and critical to Kathy, and she did not feel close to her.

Her mother did not inherit those more severe traits. Kathy cannot remember her parents ever shouting at one another or anyone else. She has no memories whatsoever of them being angry, instead they had a pleasant demeanor at all times. Kathy’s children remember them the same way. They tried to “put on a happy face” at all times and believed that things would get better in the future. She cannot remember either her mother or father ever saying an unpleasant thing about anyone else. If she heard Kathy on the telephone when she was a girl, gossiping or talking in a mean way about others, she would say “Kathy, if you cannot say something nice about somebody, then do not say anything at all. It is not nice to gossip or speak that way.” That was a principle that Kathy’s mother lived by and Kathy learned to do the same.

Kathy helped her parents around the house and in the greenhouse. Kathy’s mother did not drive, so when Kathy was 16 she obtained her driver’s license. From then on, she shopped for her mother. When she graduated from high school and had a
job, she began paying her mother $5.00 a week to help contribute to the family income. She did not realize that her mother put that money in the bank. When Kathy married, her parents gave all the money back to her that she had given them. This helped pay for some of her first purchases. It was an unexpected act of kindness that she never forgot.

Kathy took on the frugal traits of her parents. She said, “They never really talked about [financial] difficulties, they just lived in such a way that I grew up being very thrifty myself, about everything. I saw the things that they did and I just started doing the same things. I don’t even know how to explain it because it was just something they did, and I guess I learned by example.” Laughing, she said, “My children think I’m too thrifty, but I don’t think they’re thrifty at all!” Although Kathy’s husband made a comfortable income, she has maintained the frugal lifestyle that she learned from her parents, continuing to “watch her pennies.”

Linda

Linda grew up the in a Midwest city where rubber was a booming industry. Her father worked on a farm all his life until he entered the Army during World War I where he became a medic. After the war he went back to the farm. Her mother, raised by her grandmother on a farm, was desperate to leave that life behind. Linda has a strong hunch that the only reason her mother married her father (twelve years her senior) was to leave the farm. After they married they moved to the city. Neither parent went to high school.

Linda’s father acquired a factory position with the rubber company in 1923. It was easy to get a job at that time. It looked as if there was no end to the prosperity of the
rubber industry at that point. Linda was born that year, and life was good for her family. However, at the end of the decade, before the onset of the Depression, things began to unravel for Linda’s family.

First, the rubber industry in their city had a major downturn. Many workers, including Linda’s father, were laid off and were out of work for a few years. This was unanticipated because so many people thought life would become more and more prosperous. The family had saved to purchase a house, but now their savings had to be spent on living expenses. Her father did anything he could to earn a little money. Once, when a new home in the neighborhood was being constructed, he helped to dig the basement—with a spade.

The family rented one side of a double house. They had two bedrooms, and her mother took in renters. Linda, an only child, moved into her parents’ bedroom. Their first renter was a man from Germany who was in the States researching rubber companies. He rented only the room and did not need meals. The next people who rented the room were a mother and her daughter, who was a little younger than Linda. They paid for both room and board.

Money became so scarce that the woman who owned the double house that they rented essentially carried the family during the years that Linda’s father was out of work. Without money to purchase food, the corner grocer also carried them for a good while. Her parents did not receive government relief during this time, making their situation desperate.
To add to the misery, Linda’s mother contracted tuberculosis. She was required to stay at a sanatorium in the city for a few months. Linda does not know who paid for these services, but it was a government regulation that TB patients had to be isolated from the general public. At the sanatorium the patients had to stay outside all the time, even while sleeping. There were no effective medications at the time for curing tuberculosis. Linda remembers visiting the sanatorium on Sunday afternoons. She and her father walked to a certain place on the grounds, looked down onto a porch, and saw her mother. They waved to each other, and that was the only contact they had during those months.

One of Linda’s mother’s cousins traveled hundreds of miles to come and stay with Linda and her father during the time her mother had tuberculosis. She took care of Linda until her mother was strong enough to return home. The cousin stayed after her mother returned home and married one of her father’s friends. As her mother grew stronger, she decided to look for a job downtown to provide some income. She found one in a large, family-owned department store where she worked a few days a week. Eventually, Linda’s father was called back to work. It took quite a while, but they were able to pay back the landlord and the grocer all that they owed in back rent and groceries. Later, she worked for a cemetery company, making phone calls for the salespeople who sold burial lots. She did this for three hours every morning and became quite proficient at the task.

As a World War I veteran, Linda’s father was eligible to receive the bonus that had been promised to them by Congress. He was not among those veterans who
marched on Washington, D.C. to demand their bonus money early, but when it became available he gladly accepted it. He received more than $900.00. With that windfall they purchased bedroom furniture for Linda and the family traveled to Washington D.C. for a family vacation.

One value of great importance to Linda’s parents was honesty. They exhibited this value when they paid back every penny that they had borrowed during the years of scarcity when her father was unemployed. When he went back to work, he had to join the rubber union, and he was elected as the representative from his department to attend the union meetings. That lasted only a few months, and then he declared that he would not go back. He said, “You have to get somebody else because I’m not going there. They protect people who won’t do their job.” He believed that people who were hired to do a job should give an honest day’s work for their wage.

Her father had two “vices.” One of them was smoking. He was a heavy smoker and he used to say that smoking was the only fault he had. The public did not realize the negative health implications of smoking in those years. He later developed emphysema and died at age 70. His second “vice” was gambling. He belonged to the American Legion where, every Sunday afternoon, men gathered to play poker. He often won a dollar or a little more. If he lost, he would not go back the next Sunday. He would stay away for a couple weeks and then would go back and try again. If he lost again, he would wait a couple more weeks. Linda said he was “a pretty good player” and he usually won money.
Linda’s family lived “in a poor section of town, but the neighborhood was very nice.” Her neighbors came from many ethnic backgrounds. There were four families whose primary language was English. The others came from Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Germany, and elsewhere. All the way up the street, on both sides, were families who came to the United States after World War I. Their houses were “absolutely perfect, clean, and neat.” Their yards were well groomed, and they all had gardens and raised vegetables. The German woman next door was a “fantastic cook.” Neighbors spoke in broken English, but they made the neighborhood interesting and enjoyable. Most of her neighbors had a difficult time during the early part of the Depression, so they were all having the same experiences.

Linda’s mother was not well during much of Linda’s childhood. Later in life her mother went back to the sanatorium three times. Linda is not sure how much of her mother’s problems were physical and how much were emotional. She thinks that her mother was a very unhappy woman. She sewed beautifully, giving her both a creative and useful outlet for her frustrations. As far as her father was concerned, her mother could do no wrong. “He thought she was the most wonderful person alive, and anything she did or said was all right” in his eyes.

As a child, Linda did quite a bit of the cooking and housecleaning. She always prepared her own breakfast. Her elementary school was four blocks away from their house, and she always walked home for lunch. She prepared her own lunch, whether or not her mother was home. She came to realize that this was not the case in other homes when she began walking to and from school with one of her friends. When they stopped
at her friend’s house, her friend’s mother would be bustling around, doing housework or washing dishes “and my mother didn’t do things like that.” She and her father cleaned up after themselves. Her father arose and went to work and Linda arose and went to school. She yearned for a more normal home life. She said, “You understand that when I was married, I got up every morning and cooked breakfast for my family.” She provided her family with the type of care and attention that she had longed for as a child.

Linda loved books and read everything she could find. Life changed when she realized that her school had a library where she could check out books. Later, she discovered that her city had a public library with even more books. Reading opened up a whole new world for her. Through books, she escaped the difficulties and frustrations of her present life. Her father read the newspaper, but her mother was not very interested in reading. Linda’s love for books and for learning helped her to excel in school.

Linda’s mother had a sister in a state hours away from where they lived who died while having a miscarriage, leaving a husband and five children, the oldest child being Linda’s age. They lived out in the country with no running water or electricity. Her sister’s husband left home for days at a time, leaving the children to fend for themselves. This was very upsetting to Linda’s mother, so she took Linda and they traveled there by bus to try to help. When her mother saw the terrible conditions in which the children were living, she reported the situation to a social service agency that went to investigate. The children were taken from the father and removed from the home. The four younger children went to an orphanage and the oldest child, Mary, was sent to a foster home.
Linda’s mother was still not happy with the way things had turned out for the children. Eventually, Mary came to live with them and Linda’s parents made sure she had proper clothes to enter high school. Her parents’ generosity with Mary left a strong, positive impression on Linda, one that she never forgot.

Robert

Robert and his family lived in a “comfortable” little town in an eastern state with a population of about five or six thousand. It was a steel town with a steel mill and several other steel-related businesses at the close of the 1920s. His town was best known for the coke mill that produced the coke that fired the steel mills. During the 1920s it was a thriving town with booming industry, three or four banks, and every downtown storefront filled.

Robert’s family lived in a nice brick house with a big front porch up on “the hill,” as that part of town was called. It was the nicer section of town, where most of the houses were owned by business or professional people. Robert’s maternal grandfather owned a successful real estate and insurance company, and Robert’s father and maternal aunt rounded out the workforce. His grandfather was highly regarded in town and knew nearly everyone. When he died in 1931 or 1932, Robert’s father and his aunt took over the business. His father specialized more on the insurance part of the business and his aunt worked more with real estate. His insurance clients were both in and out of town and included farmers living within a 50 mile radius of town.

Robert looked for an opportunity to “pick up a few pennies” as a boy and started a Liberty magazine route. Liberty magazine was a popular magazine at the time, similar
to *The Saturday Evening Post*. He canvassed his neighborhood and ended up with 30 to 40 customers who subscribed to the magazine. He normally delivered the magazines in the evening, especially in the summer. People typically sat on their large front porches, with the radio playing in the background. As he traversed up and down the street he heard the news with Lowell Thomas and the “Amos and Andy Show.” He earned about 45¢ each week on his route, which was “pretty good money” for a young boy at that time.

Robert describes himself as “a little dickens” growing up. He teased his sisters, especially his younger sister, incessantly. Occasionally he crossed the line and took his teasing too far. At those times, his mother told him that he was going to have to answer to his father when he came home from work. More than once, Robert’s father returned home from work and heard from his mother about the most recent offense he had committed. One example was that he tied up his sister in the coal bin and left her in the basement. “Nothing bad there!” said Robert. His mother said, “You’ve got to take him down.” His father took him to the basement and told him to cry out when he hit something with the paddle. “With great fervor,” Robert yelled out “Ouch, ouch, no!” while his father hit the paddle against something else. Upstairs it sounded as if he were being paddled, so his mother was satisfied that he had been appropriately chastised for his misdeeds. He cannot remember that his father ever gave him a spanking, but he gave him what was supposed to be a spanking.

Socially, Robert remembers “pretty much growing up in the church.” His family was very active in a small United Presbyterian church, attending several times a week.
His parents had very close friends who lived across the street from their house on the hill. Mr. Cook was the director of the local YMCA and on Friday nights Robert’s parents got together with the Cooks to play cards or some other kind of game and to drink coffee. Life seemed pleasant and secure.

Everything in this industrial town changed drastically during the Depression. In the early 1930s the steel mills all closed, never to reopen. The town’s economy was flattened. It had the reputation of being one of the hardest hit towns in the country during that time period. Robert remembers that he would sometimes ride with his father to make calls on farmers who held insurance with his father’s company. During the early 1930s, his father’s visits to the farms became very difficult. He somehow learned which farms the bank planned to foreclose and would drive out to tell the farmers personally what was happening. Telling people that they had to give up something for which they had worked so hard was distressing for his father. Robert said “It was mostly farms that I remember him talking about.” He came home from those trips drained and disheartened.

Although the real estate business took a severe hit during those years, and many people had to give up their insurance policies because they could no longer pay the premiums, Robert’s father still seemed to prosper, at least from the appearance of things. Living in such a severely depressed town was challenging, but life became considerably more difficult when in the mid-1930s Robert’s father became completely incapacitated with tuberculosis, requiring him to enter a sanatorium over 100 miles away. He had to give up his job and never recovered his health enough to be able to work again or to
permanently return home. For a while Robert’s aunt tried to run the business herself, but she finally had to give it up. Since his mother could not keep up the house payments, they lost their house on the hill.

Everything changed quickly. Robert and his sisters went “from being pretty much oblivious to what was going on around us” and thinking that life was great on the hill to the stark reality of financial need. With her husband many miles away and no income to care for her son and two daughters, Robert’s mother was in a desperate situation. Robert’s paternal grandfather invited her and the children to come to live with him and his wife on the farm and they gratefully accepted the invitation. Being a “city girl” who never lived on a farm, Robert’s mother was “devastated.” She missed her husband and her former way of life. However, she tried to look on the positive side and adapted to living on the farm. She had a good relationship with her mother-in-law, but Robert’s grandmother was definitely still the woman of the house, ruling the kitchen and doing most of the cooking.

Their new home was spacious but not at all modern like their house in town. In town the family had been accustomed to indoor plumbing, central heat, and a functioning bathroom. On the farm, there was no indoor bathroom and only a pump in the kitchen. There was no heat at all in the upstairs bedrooms except for the heat that rose from the first floor. Walking to the outhouse in the wintertime, which was quite a distance from the house, was probably the biggest change for them. Whereas Robert and his sisters had always walked to a school not far from their house in town, now they had to walk a mile down the gravel lane in all types of weather to wait for the school bus and
then they walked back up the lane after school. The walk was “pretty nasty” in the
winter. Before their father’s illness, they had enjoyed a measure of affluence and
societal respect. Now they were “farm kids,” living on the generosity of their
grandparents.

During his eighth-grade year, Robert developed a kidney condition, chronic
nephritis. He missed a year of school and could not help on the farm for a long time. A
woman from his hometown tutored him during that year, and he was able to make up all
the school work that he missed. The family continued to adapt to unanticipated
setbacks.

As the years wore on, his mother did all she could to keep in contact with
Robert’s father. She wrote to him almost every day. His father was often not able to
respond. Sometimes the family visited him and he seemed so well that Robert wondered
why he was in the sanitarium. At other times, he seemed considerably worse. His
mother was not able to call him because there were no telephones in the rooms at the
sanitarium. Before the family moved to the farm, his mother had to give up their car, but
she tried to travel to see her husband about once a month when a family member or a
friend from church could take her. Robert remembers one of his uncles taking them all
to see his father and driving on the newly opened turnpike through the mountains. The
family continued to hope that research would find a cure for the type of tuberculosis his
father had. They prayed and waited for that to happen.

Robert’s grandfather was a pretty even-tempered man. One day when Robert
was learning to drive, he drove his grandfather’s car into the garage door. He was close
to the garage door and his foot slipped off the brake pedal and hit the accelerator. His grandfather heard “this ruckus” from the barn and came to investigate. There was no major damage to the car or the doors, but there could have been. The only thing his grandfather said was, “You need to learn how to drive.”

Before his father’s illness, Robert spent his summers with his grandfather because he loved being on the farm. Now, Robert helped his grandfather in a variety of ways on the farm year round, rising at five o’clock in the morning to help milk cows and pull weeds in the garden. His grandfather farmed 100 acres using horses. Other farmers around him had tractors and milking machines, but not his grandfather. Robert does not know if his grandfather could not afford the latest equipment or if he felt that the old way was the best way, but he chose to farm the “old-fashioned way.”

There was definitely a fun side to living on the farm for the children. Many family members on Robert’s father’s side of family lived within easy driving distance to the farm. On most Sundays after church the family gathered together at the farm. Everyone brought dishes of food to share at a large family dinner. In the summertime, Robert’s grandfather always made a freezer of hand-churned ice cream. Robert romped and played with his cousins in the barn, jumping off the hay mow. Sunday was a fun day for the family and “you waited until next Sunday to do it all over again.”

Robert’s family stayed on the farm until 1942 when his father was moved to another sanitarium farther away and his mother moved the family to be closer to him. At that point, the Depression was over and the country was at war. She obtained a position as the manager of a college bookstore in a town with two colleges and a population of
20,000. By this time Robert’s older sister had graduated from high school and his mother was better able to manage on her own.

**Shirley**

Shirley’s earliest memories are of a three room company house at the end of the street in a coal mining village in the Appalachian Mountains. There was a kitchen on the first floor and a front room with a sofa that could fold out as a bed. Upstairs was a single bedroom. She, her two sisters, and her mother slept downstairs. Her father, ill with tuberculosis, slept upstairs as did her older brother. There was a hearth with a coal stove, but no running water or inside toilet.

This house was an unusual coal company house because it had a large fenced-in backyard. Her mother grew both flowers and vegetables, and there were chickens, two hogs, and a milk cow named Lanky. The house was small for a family of six, so they spent a lot of time outdoors and on the front porch. Shirley described her first home as “a pretty good place.” It was always clean, even though cramped for space. Money was taken out of her father’s earnings at the coal company to pay for their rent.

Shirley’s parents were hard working. Before his tuberculosis became debilitating, her father continued to work for the coal company. (Her father did not go to a sanitarium to recover from his tuberculosis. There was only one sanitarium in their state for African Americans, and they could not afford the expense.) Captain Smith, his supervisor, favored him for his work ethic and allowed him to work outside on the tipple where he could breathe more easily. (The tipple is where the coal comes down the chute from the mountain top.) Captain Smith also gave her older brother a part-time job when
he was 15 or 16 to help supplement the family income. Her mother made the most of every resource she had. She seldom purchased goods from the store except for flour, sugar, and salt. She cooked the produce from their garden, meat from the animals they raised, and baked bread and cakes from scratch. Neighbors shared what they had as well. It was an “interchangeable generosity.” If neighbors had something to give or share with another, they did so. Her mother did not believe in wasting anything. If a man came by selling watermelons, the family would feast on the fruit then she would make pickles from the rinds. They did not have much actual money except for the compensation they received from a cousin who came to live with them who paid room and board.

Shirley’s mother grew up in the South. Her mother died when she was about four years old. Her father never remarried because he did not want anyone mistreating his five children, Shirley’s mother being the youngest. Her aunt stayed with them for a while and taught Shirley’s mother to cook. She was a quick learner and soon was cooking for the family. She made biscuits all the time, thinning a quart of buttermilk with water to make it last longer. She also frequently made salt pork and gravy. When Shirley was a child, the family ate a lot of pinto beans, potatoes, cornbread and fried wild apples.

In 1926, when Shirley was six years old, her father died. Their family was allowed to continue living in the house for a while. When a cold day in November arrived and the rest of the community butchered hogs, men from the village came and helped them with the heavy labor of hog butchering. Their family had the necessities of
life provided as long as they lived in that house. There were no pensions in those days, but her father had been a member of the Masons and they gave her mother $500.00 when he died, which she deposited in the bank.

In 1928 Shirley’s mother married a man who worked for the same coal company. The family moved into her stepfather’s four-room company house down the street. At this house there were no cows, no chickens, and no yard for a garden. There was free electricity but no running water. The outdoor toilet emptied into the creek behind the house and they could see the mines, right beyond the railroad tracks. Food quickly became scarce and the family knew hunger. Whereas her mother was industrious, her stepfather was often lazy.

Shirley and her family were African Americans. Although there was segregation in almost every aspect of life, it was possible for African Americans to make a living at the coal company. Company policy based a man’s wages (regardless of race) on how many railroad cars he could fill with coal. If he worked hard, he could earn scrip at the company store to purchase food and other goods. Some men worked hard, going into the mines before daylight and not emerging until after dark, five days a week. It was a hard life, but some men determinedly worked to provide for their families.

A defining moment for Shirley occurred one November in 1930 or 1931, right before Thanksgiving. Shirley and her mother, shopping bag on her arm, walked to the company store to purchase a turkey and all the fixings for their Thanksgiving dinner. Shirley was eager to go to the store, since this was a rare treat. When they arrived at the store, there was no scrip to pay for the purchases. Her stepfather had not worked hard
enough to earn scrip at the company store. It was shocking and embarrassing to have to turn around and walk home with an empty bag. Shirley promised herself that this would never happen to her mother again. She does not remember what they ate for Thanksgiving that year, but they “made out okay.”

Her family moved to the Northeast coast to be close to her stepfather’s relatives. Perhaps in the city, he could find a job that suited him better. Out of her savings, her mother purchased tickets for the family to travel by train. Day after day her stepfather looked for a job, but he never found one. Her brother left school at age 17 to look for a job and became an elevator operator in a tall apartment building. His salary paid for their rent and food and other necessities.

After a year passed, they moved back to another coal mining town close to where they had lived before. Her stepfather went back to the mines and her brother and sisters and she went back to school. Again they lived in a company house with nothing to call their own. They had little money and could not afford fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, or fresh milk. They moved again and again to other coal mining towns. They moved a total of eight times during the Depression, always looking for a better job or better circumstance.

Shirley had an unquenchable desire to learn to read. There was no school library, and there was not a public library close that would allow black children to take out books. She read everything her brother and sisters brought home in the form of textbooks. As a young child, she memorized some of their early readers that she can recite to this day: “Baby Ray had a little dog. Baby Ray loved the little dog, and the
little dog loved Baby Ray.” Families had to purchase their own textbooks at that time, which was a problem for Shirley because there was no money for that type of expense. Once she entered school she found a way to have textbooks by borrowing them from a friend who had little interest in school.

Black schools did not have all the advantages of the white schools in the area. The white schools were larger and better constructed, had more and better equipment, and had libraries with a variety of reading materials. Shirley and her siblings rode the school bus past the white school to go to their school. However, the State Board of Education recommended a set curriculum, which was followed in all schools. She studied the same subjects and textbooks as every other child in her state.

Shirley excelled in school and graduated from eighth grade as valedictorian. Her older brother was so proud and pleased that he challenged her to continue her academic excellence with the promise that if she graduated from high school at the top of her class he would pay for her college education. In 1938 she graduated from high school as salutatorian, and her brother kept his promise. He worked to pay for her college education at an historic Black college.

In spite of what were sometimes dire circumstances, Shirley’s mother kept the family together and focused on meeting every day’s needs. When Shirley’s father died relatives who had been unable to have children, asked to take one of the four children to rear. Her mother adamantly refused. She said, “If I just have a crust of bread, I am keeping my kids.” She knew what it was like to lose a child to a family member and would never do it again. Shirley’s mother married her first husband when she was a
teen. Soon she had baby, a little boy. Her husband died in a coal mining accident, leaving her a very young widow with a baby. Shirley’s mother then married again and moved with her husband to another state, to the coal mining village where her husband worked. When she became pregnant with Shirley’s brother, her aunt convinced her to leave her first child with her “for a while because she wasn’t strong enough to take care of the baby just then.” The aunt promised to bring him back when Shirley’s mother was stronger. She never did. Shirley’s mother grieved the loss of raising her firstborn for a great many years.

Shirley’s mother did not believe in accepting charity. Her philosophy became the children’s philosophy, which was “Work for what you need. Don’t beg.” Although there were some in the neighborhood who gained money illegally by stealing, playing the numbers racket, or selling bootleg liquor, her mother insisted that her family would never do anything illegal to earn money. They were a “Bible-believing, God-fearing family” and they would work hard and trust God to meet their needs. She could “take a very small amount of anything and make a delicious meal.” Hand-me-down clothes were the rule of the day, going from the oldest to the youngest. Shirley was taller than her sisters, so she had to wear shoes that never quite fit. As a result she has foot problems to this day. When her mother could afford fabric and thread, she sewed clothes on her sewing machine for the girls.

During the Depression, any celebrations that happened took place at church. There were church picnics in the summer. One of the best things about those picnics was the homemade ice cream. That was the only time and place where the children
could eat as much ice cream as they wanted. At Christmas, there was a special program on Christmas Eve, and afterwards all the children received an orange and some nuts. With no Christmas tree at home, Shirley’s mother tried to keep the Christmas spirit alive by decorating the front room with red and green crepe paper streamers. The streamers ran from one end of the room to the other, with a big bell right in the center. Other celebration treats like birthday parties and new Easter outfits were out of the question.

After one of their family moves, there were no jobs to be found. Shirley’s mother and stepfather fasted and prayed for a job. Her stepfather then went out to look for a job at the hospital and came home with a job. The man who had been responsible for stoking the hospital furnace was found drunk when the hospital became cold and had no heat. At that moment, her stepfather came and asked if they had any jobs available. They fired the irresponsible man and hired her stepfather on the spot. The family was ecstatic. They were able to move out of the coal company house to a two-family house within walking distance to the town where the hospital was located. There were times when they were unable to meet the $11.00 a month rental fee, but they managed to stay there until Shirley graduated from high school. At one point, her older brother was hired as an orderly at the hospital which helped the family.

Things changed for the better for Shirley’s family when John L. Lewis brought the union to the coal mines. The men were paid in cash in their envelopes instead of scrip that had to be used at the company store. Their wages increased, and they were able to enjoy better food and some of the pleasures of life. Her brother and many other young men went to work in the mines.
Her older brother and sisters all went to work after high school to help the family. They were also able to purchase some things that they had missed growing up. In one town, Shirley’s older sister had a job ironing clothes for a white family. She was paid 75¢ to iron a basket of clothes. She saved up and was eventually able to buy a new dress for herself for 98¢. The whole family rejoiced. She also bought a new dress for Shirley for 39¢, the only new dress she can remember as a young girl.

Help from the federal government was gladly accepted and not considered “charity.” Shirley’s half-brother worked in a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp. Shirley earned a small monthly salary when she was a senior in high school working for the NYA (National Youth Administration) helping her math teacher grade papers. Her family considered President Roosevelt and his New Deal programs a godsend.

Through all the years of the Depression, Shirley cannot remember her mother ever complaining that life was unfair. She would have liked better cuts of meat or nicer clothes for her children, but she maintained a thankful spirit for everything they did have. She had grown up in an environment with “deep, slavery-type prejudice.” Whereas she had gone to a very poor school with unqualified teachers and was not permitted to attend past eighth grade, her children were able to go to schools with licensed teachers and a standardized, academically appropriate curriculum through high school. Whereas black men had no opportunity to earn the same amount of money as white men when her mother was growing up, a standard payment was made to all coal miners in the region where they lived, regardless of race, according to how quickly they could fill a coal car. Hard work and motivation were the keys to success in both the
mines and school—which only made sense to her mother. No matter how difficult things might be, it was better than her mother’s experiences as a child.

Shirley’s mother had high expectations for her children; therefore, her children all had high expectations for themselves. All of the children graduated from high school. Both boys served in the military in World War II. The oldest son (Shirley’s half-brother) graduated from college and became the first black postman in his city. (A college education was not required for white postal workers, but it was for those who were black.) This brother fought to integrate the high school in that city, and his children were among the first black students to attend there.

Her second brother, the one who paid her way through college, eventually graduated from college and became a Methodist pastor. One of her sisters earned an associate’s degree and became a licensed practical nurse. The other sister married and did not pursue higher education.

After Shirley graduated from college, she saved enough money for a down payment on her mother’s first house. “She finally had a home of her own with a bathroom and running water and sinks.” In her later years she moved to the city where Shirley lived. Shirley, a teacher, and her sister, a nurse at one of the local hospitals, took care of their mother. Life has not been easy, but at the age of 92, Shirley considers herself “content and thankful.”

**Walter**

Walter grew up on a family farm in the Midwest. The ten room brick house was home to Walter, his parents, his two brothers and one sister, his maternal grandmother,
his aunt, and for nine years, his paternal grandfather. The farm was owned by his mother and aunt, but his father and the three boys did most of the farm work. The house was well-constructed, but it did not have any “conveniences” in it. There were three wood stoves on the first floor and no heat in the five bedrooms upstairs except for gravity heat. There were no bathrooms and no running water. The house was not wired for electricity until the start of World War II. Kerosene lamps provided light for the family, including one Aladdin lamp which had a more efficient, bright light. His grandmother and aunt slept in one bedroom, his parents in another, his sister in the third bedroom, and he and his two brothers slept in the fourth. After his paternal grandmother died, his grandfather came to live with them in the fifth bedroom.

Everyone in the family worked to assure that the farm and home ran smoothly. Horses were used to do the heavy work of plowing and hauling. They had sheep, cattle, horses, goats, hogs, and all kinds of poultry like chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and guineas. This was typical for farms in the area where Walter grew up. A majority of their field crops were consumed by their livestock, and the family was mostly self-sufficient. While the men took the main responsibility for the farming, the women took care of running the home and preserving food. Monday was wash day. Tuesday was ironing and bread baking day. Saturday was pastry baking day. Every day had set household chores that were completed like clockwork. His grandmother was in charge of mending clothes. Even his grandfather who was advanced in years did what he could to help.
One of his brothers was mechanically inclined and rigged up an old kerosene engine to run the washing machine. He also took the generator from the Model T Ford and rigged up an electric light in the basement. His father took old farm machinery pieces and made a huller for hulling walnuts. He put a crank on the huller and either ran it with an engine or jacked up the Model T Ford, put a belt on it and ran it that way. He also ran a buzz saw from the Model T Ford by jacking up the back end and putting a belt over a rear wheel. They did not have tractors or other modern equipment, but with their ingenuity they were able to find ways to accomplish the work that needed to be done.

The closest community was about two miles from the farm. They often walked the two miles to church. In the 1920s, most people in their area went to church using horse and buggy. In the 1930s, more people were able to buy and use automobiles. However, their first car, a 1927 Oakland Touring, had to be jacked up in the winter and stored in the wagon shed. The battery was removed and kept in the basement so it would not freeze. During the winter, the country roads would freeze and thaw and often became impassable. Around Decoration Day (now called Memorial Day), they started using the car again. Because of the poor road conditions in the winter, it was common for the family to walk to church. The days were shorter so the services took place in the afternoon. The revised winter schedule gave all the farmers in the community time to take care of their chores in the morning, go to church, and then arrive home before it was time to do the evening chores.

The cold did not deter the family from doing most things. Walter had a warm and comfortable Mackinaw coat that he wore to school and church. His boots were
worn over his high top shoes and he loved to wade through the snow and mud. Once, his father took him to town to purchase a new pair of four-buckle boots. When he arrived home, the first place he went was into the muddy cornfield to try them out.

The family’s goal was to harvest all the crops by Thanksgiving. Then, in the winter months, Walter’s father and the boys went to the woods once a week to chop wood for the stoves. Walter and his brother hunted and trapped in the swamp in the winter, daily tramping out to check their muskrat trap lines before school. One morning there was a raccoon which required a different kind of care. Because Walter wanted to keep it alive, he went back to the house to bring a different container for it. That morning he was late for school.

In the spring, the family helped with maple syrup production in their sugar camp. They had “a beautiful sugar camp.” It was so clean that it looked like a park. The sugar water was boiled in the open since they did not have a shelter. The children’s job was to gather limbs and broken trees and keep a steady supply of wood for the fire. The camp was open for four or five weeks, until the tree sap stopped flowing. On the last night of boiling the sugar water, they had a special get-together with the neighbors and cooked chicken peoli. Someone plucked and cleaned the chickens, put them in large kettles and cooked them. All the neighbors came, ate chicken and the people had an enjoyable time visiting together in the sugar camp.

Some of the syrup was allowed to turn into rock candy. Walter’s family never purchased candy at the store; therefore rock candy was the only candy they had. It was
sweet and hard, and the longer they kept it the harder it became. Even so, Walter “got so
tired of that rock candy.” Sweets were not commonly eaten by his family.

One of the neighboring families had an orchard with apples and peaches but they
were unable to take care of it. Walter’s family volunteered to take care of the trees and
the harvesting of the fruit, and then they shared the fruit with the owners. Their work
benefited both their family and the family who owned the orchard. At home they had a
Montmorency cherry tree and Blue Damson plum trees. In addition to the fruit trees,
they grew blackberries, raspberries, elderberries, and grapes. A lot of the fruit was eaten
fresh, but much of it was preserved for the winter.

A river was close to the farm, so Walter and his brother kept the family in fish.
His brother, especially, loved to fish. His mother said, “Whoever catches the fish has to
clean them.” Walter learned to clean fish at an early age.

The children in the family were taught to work hard and to become self-
sufficient. In order to purchase a rifle for hunting, Walter’s brother sold 80 pelts from
muskrats he had trapped and was then able to purchase his rifle. In the autumn Walter
and his brothers gathered chestnuts to sell at the grocery store. They received 25¢ for a
quart of chestnuts. They picked enough chestnuts to purchase their overalls for school,
which sold for 98¢ at JC Penney. In high school Walter had to have some dental work
done that cost $9.00. He worked for another farmer to earn the money to pay for his
dental work. When asked if he felt badly that he had to pay for his medical expenses as
a teenager, he said, “Not at all.” His father taught them that if they wanted something,
they had to work for it.
The children were allowed to bear the consequences of their behavior, in order to teach them to behave differently next time. For instance, Walter’s grandfather kept a stash of chewing tobacco in the back of the buggy. One day Walter and his brother found the tobacco and tried it out. When their grandfather found out he said, “That’s pretty good, isn’t it?” They agreed and he told them they could use all the tobacco they wanted. They chewed and chewed, and after about a half an hour they were both horribly sick. At noon their mother asked them if they weren’t hungry. They didn’t know how to answer. Their mother knew what had happened because their grandfather told her. Neither of them ever used tobacco again.

Walter’s family had very little actual money. His mother traded eggs at the grocery for coffee and sugar. He remembers that his mother went to the bank in town one time to withdraw money from their savings account. She withdrew $3.00. “Three dollars was a lot of money in those days.” Occasionally, a man would come from a city about two hours away to purchase a few of their animals.

The family never had the means to go on vacations but one of the highlights of the year was when they went to the county fair. His mother would pack a basket with their lunch, and they would spend the day there. There were no tables or places to sit, so they always found a place under a tree on the grass and ate their lunch there. For entertainment, a nearby town showed movies on a large screen out in the open air. The movies were free of charge so the whole family gladly attended. There were no folding chairs, so unless someone brought a straight-backed wooden chair, there was no place to sit. Generally, most of the people in the crowd stood to watch the movie.
In Walter’s family personal days like birthdays were not celebrated and were treated as “just another day.” “You were lucky to even have it recognized.” However, the farming families in Walter’s community did other things for fun and fellowship. Once a month, especially in the winter, there were community meetings at the school that always offered some sort of entertainment. The people brought sandwiches to eat and there was coffee to drink. The church also had many activities such as church socials, ice cream socials, and church dinners, along with other programs at Christmas and on Children’s Day. A neighboring farmer was the first in the community to purchase a radio. In the winter, Walter’s family and other farm families were invited over to listen to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night. The men played cards, the women visited, and the children played board games. Another farmer walked from farm to farm to invite neighbors to his home for oyster stew on New Year’s Eve. These fun times of community fellowship provided welcome relief from all the hard work of the farm.

Some of the neighboring farmers lost their farms in the 1930s. One neighbor attempted to buy his farm on terms. He raised hogs and largely depended on the profit from the sale of them to make his payments. He also relied on being able to sell some of his crops, but one year the crops did not produce well enough to have surplus after feeding the hogs to sell on the market. The owner of the farm was a steel maker who owned several farms, and he foreclosed on Walter’s neighbor and other farmers as well when they had difficult times and were unable to make their payments. Many farmers in the community lost their farms. Some might have been able to keep their farms if they
could have borrowed money from the bank, but the local banks “just didn’t have any money to loan.” Walter’s family would have liked to help those farmers, but they did not have enough money to make the payments for them.

Walter said his family never considered bootlegging—even if they were desperate for the money—but he knew others in that rural community who did. One man, who owned a fur company and purchased all the sheep’s wool and furs from Walter’s family, also had a hog farm. He had a basement under his hog pen where he set up a still and made his whiskey. The smell of the hogs overpowered the fumes of the still, and the county sheriff was never able to catch him.

Walter’s family supported some of the New Deal farm support programs and they disliked others. They did not agree with the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act) that offered payments to farmers for destroying some of their crops or livestock and taking some of their land out of farming by not planting crops. Walter said, “This made a lot of lazy farmers. They would lay back and wait until their subsidy checks came in.” A program they did support was the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) that helped improve home and farm life by bringing electricity to rural farms. It helped farmers put in electric pumps and refrigeration. He said that some of the New Deal programs helped farmers get out of debt. His oldest brother was able to benefit from another New Deal program. He took a job with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) digging ditches and cleaning brush and worked all over the country. It helped him purchase his first car, a Model A Ford roadster.
When asked how his parents coped with the pressure of such a heavy, relentless workload with little financial compensation, Walter said, “If they had problems, they were discussed between the two of them, but they stuck together and they lived by the Bible.” He cannot recall hearing any of the members of his family (parents, grandmother, aunt, etc.) complain about the work or the lack of resources or anything else for that matter. When referring to his father he said, “I never heard Dad complain. I would hear him talk about some things he’d have to do, and he’d say, ‘Well, I’ve got to get out there and get to that.’” The children were taught to be responsible, energetic, and to work. “Work was a very important thing. You worked or you didn’t exist.” They were also taught to be responsible, to have compassion for others, and to be polite. Today, at 94, Walter still embraces those values and attempts to pass them on to his children and grandchildren.
CHAPTER FIVE

Strategies, Skills, and Beliefs

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies, skills, and beliefs parents, used during the years of the Great Depression to help them provide for the physical and emotional needs of their children and families in the midst of economic hardship. In what ways did these strategies, skills, and beliefs meet the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and intellectual needs of the children and other family members during this period of time and what enduring life lessons can be learned from the way these parents and families lived out their lives? These concepts will be explored by a very small segment of the American population during the Depression years, namely the families of my 12 research participants. Their stories provide insight into family life during a unique time of our nation’s history.

Strategies

What strategies or methods did the parents and/or families of this study’s research participants use to survive their difficulty and still meet their family’s’ needs and help their children grow in positive ways? Four main strategies emerged from the data: 1) a variety of support networks, 2) a rigorous work ethic, 3) living without complaint, and 4) thrift.

**Support networks.** The immediate physical and emotional needs of families were commonly met by some form of support network. The families of my research participants were involved in various support networks—either providing support or
receiving support and sometimes both—while living through their years of personal
difficulty in the Great Depression. Most of the research participants were members of
families who shared a high degree of family support for family members. Several
families experienced significant support in their communities. Two families received
government support either from city relief or a federal government program.

**Family support.** By far the largest and most effective support network for these
12 families was the family unit itself. At times, the research participants’ parents
provided support for other family members. At other times, family members outside the
immediate family provided support for these parents and their children. Often, the aunts
and uncles or grandparents of the research participants stepped in to help. Almost
always emotional and/or psychological support was given and received as families
encouraged and cared for one another through a decade of persistent financial strain.
Often physical support was offered and/or accepted from various family members.

In these 12 families, since the parents, including a step-father, were living, they
seemed to be expected by society to care for their children in every way possible. The
assistance provided by the extended family was supplemental. All but one mother
stayed home full-time to raise the children. Mothers managed the home, the meals, the
family clothing, and often the family finances. Fathers did everything they could to
provide money or goods to support the family. Even if unemployed, as was the case
with Anna’s and Linda’s fathers, they worked at odd jobs or attempted to supply the
family with more food by hunting, fishing, or spading up and growing a large garden to
grow more of their food. After repeated attempts to find steady employment failed,
Linda’s father helped with work at home while her mother worked part-time outside the home. When the parents had done all they knew to do, other family members would often provide supplemental support for their basic necessities.

**Parents provided support.** Some parents of the research participants provided more support to other family members than they received themselves. Sometimes this was due to the lack of resources from other family members, and sometimes it was because of their desire to conceal their financial needs from others, including their children. Such was the case with Carol’s parents.

When I was three, my grandparents came to live with my father and mother in our single family home. When I was five, my dad purchased a duplex. When we got the duplex, they were able to live upstairs where they had their own quarters. That lasted for a couple years until my uncle and aunt came to live with us. They were my mother's oldest brother and his wife. They moved into Grandpa and Grandma's apartment, and my grandparents moved up to the attic, which was remodeled for them with a lavatory and everything. That went on for a couple years until my uncle could find a [job].

Carol’s mother was the youngest of six children. Although it is unknown whether Carol’s grandparents paid rent to her father, they probably at least took care of the rest of their living expenses and prepared their own meals with the income her grandfather earned since he continued working until he was 75 years old. They provided support to Carol’s parents by babysitting when her mother and father went to meetings at their church or lodge. More financial support was probably provided for her aunt and uncle since they had no income with the loss of her uncle’s job in 1930. Carol’s grandparents may have provided financial assistance to their son and daughter-in-law, since they all lived in the same house. In addition, Carol’s paternal aunt and uncle always came to dinner at their house on Sundays after church. This was one-sided
support, although it may have been mutually emotionally supportive, because as a child Carol once asked her aunt why her family was never invited to their house. Laughing, Carol said, “We were surrounded by family.” Carol remembers that her father looked out for her cousins as well. He earned the image of being the one capable of caring for the family and did not request help from others, even if his own financial situation may, at times, have been precarious.

Another research participant whose parents were largely on the providing end of support for their family was Fred. Even though his income as a carpenter who made screens was often sparse, earning an average of $7.00 to 8.00 a week, Fred’s father did what he could to take care of his widowed mother, as well as his sister and unemployed brother-in-law who lived with her. Fred said,

There was an outdoor market downtown, open all year. We would go to market every Saturday night, and he [his father] got to know all of the vendors down there. They would say, "What are you going to buy this week?" We would buy maybe a bushel of potatoes. Then we would take them to my grandmother's house and to my uncle's house and we would share our food with them. Then, every fall, when it was hunting season, we would go rabbit hunting. There was no limit on rabbits or pheasants at that time so we could shoot maybe 15 or 20 rabbits, a couple pheasants, take them home and clean them, then take them to Grandma and my uncle and aunt's house. That was the only meat we had during the Depression.

[Grandma] lost her husband. She was married twice, but she had bought a home downtown and still had a mortgage on it. So my dad had two brothers and two sisters, and they got together and decided if they could chip in a dollar a week, Grandma could keep her house. They did that and saved the house for the family.

Fred’s father helped most of the family at one time or another and he said, “Everybody shared everything, and we got along.”
Although the network of support for Linda’s family was very limited, Linda is most proud of the way her parents provided a supportive network for her mother’s relatives during the Depression. After Linda’s maternal aunt, her mother’s only sibling, died around 1933 or 1934, Linda and her mother traveled by bus to her aunt’s house. There, they discovered she had lived in miserable conditions out in the country with no running water or electricity in a “terrible farmhouse.” Her husband was gone for days at a time and she bled to death when she suffered a miscarriage with no one to help during one of his absences. She left five children without a mother. One of Linda’s paternal aunts lived nearby and took the children food and tried to help but the situation was dire.

She [her mother] took me, and we went out there. Well, Mother went to somebody, and there was some sort of aid. I don't know what it was. But they got interested and they went down there and took the children away from the father. The one who was my age was put into a foster home, but the other four were younger, and they went into a Baptist orphanage. So what eventually happened was my father was made guardian of all of the children.

You had to leave the orphanage when you finished eighth grade… so Mary was in a foster home, and Mother was unhappy with that, so she came to live with us. And that was late in the year ’37. And so we were in school together then. Then, as each child … graduated from grade school, Daddy brought him [or her] to live with us… My father was the legal guardian for all the children until they were 21. And, now, the war had started, and Mary got married, and so she had her own home and [her brother] could go and live with her. Then when the others came, they lived with her, too. Well, the girls, they didn't get along with her. They would come and stay with Mother and Daddy, you know.

When Mary came, she had boots. It was very stylish there for a while when Sonja Henie first came to this country, to have boots, white boots that looked like skating boots, and when Mary got to our house, that's what she had on. She didn't have any shoes. In fact, she didn't have much of anything. She was going to be going to high school with me. My father had $75 that he had saved; and so Mother took Mary downtown and bought her shoes and enough clothing for her to go to school. That was really something. It is one of the things that stands out.
Linda’s mother had been raised in poverty by her grandmother and did not want her sister’s children to have to endure a similar life. She was often emotionally distant with Linda and her father, but with her sister’s children, her nieces and nephews, she was warm and caring. Linda says she was not envious of her mother’s attention toward her cousins or her father’s gift of money to Mary. She was proud of both her parents for providing sacrificial support to her cousins.

**Support from other family members.** Sometimes families supported one another in a very comprehensive way that assured care for the young, the old, single adults, as well as those family members who worked to provide much of the income. In the families of some the research participants, extended family, especially aunts and uncles—those of the same generation as the parents—helped take care of the family’s children and older members. Carrie’s family exemplified this.

Carrie’s parents rented a farm that was not too far from the family farm where her mother had grown up. At the time of the Depression, her mother’s unmarried sister stayed on the family farm to take care of her widowed father after the other girls moved away, and her two unmarried brothers lived there as well and ran the farm. This aunt loved to buy clothes for Carrie and her sisters before school started in the fall, a gift that Carrie’s parents accepted without constraint.

My aunt was a savior for us in lots of ways… She was a wonderful maiden aunt. … [At Christmas], fortunately, my unmarried aunt on the family farm, helped with gifts. We didn’t expect a lot…. Birthdays were celebrated, probably a Sunday closest to the birthday. My aunt made wonderful angel food cakes from scratch, and they were decorated with candy corn. That was the decoration plus candles. She was very special.
Another aunt helped provide the fabric for Carrie’s mother to sew clothing for Carrie and her sisters by sending them her discarded, used clothes. The fabric was of good quality so the new outfits for the three girls were durable and attractive. This was a significant help in providing needed clothing when there was no money for such an expense. Carrie said,

Mother’s younger sister lived in New York; she was a nurse, and she had very nice clothes. She would pass them down to my mother, and Mother would alter them to fit us. It was painstaking to stand on a chair while my mother tried to figure out how she was going to alter these things to fit us, but they turned out very well. They were very good material.

At one point during a difficult time in the 1930s, her father went to a local bank and applied for a loan. His request was refused, and the humiliation and embarrassment “just about killed him.” One of his brothers-in-law who lived on the family farm came to his aid and loaned him the needed amount, which was repaid as soon as he was able.

Another aunt provided support for Carrie’s family. A paternal aunt and uncle and their six children lived in the town where Carrie’s high school was located. They had very limited means since her uncle’s only income was as the constable of the small town. When the roads were too muddy or the weather was too bad for the horse-drawn hack to carry the children to and from school, Carrie and her sisters stayed with this aunt and uncle.

I don’t know how they managed. I don’t think he got much money, and they had these six children, but she baked wonderful bread, she had wonderful jam. Their kids were a lot of fun, and I guess we were probably jammed into beds together. It was fun so we didn’t mind when we couldn’t make it home.

Carrie’s aunt’s ability to make delicious food from the ingredients she could afford, the positive attitude of the family, and the warm hospitality given to Carrie and her sisters
made the experience “fun” in spite of the cramped space. Reflecting on this family, she said,

I think I was aware that [they] had it worse than we did because they had six children and they didn’t have a farm. Other than that, I realized that they didn’t have [an aunt like their aunt on the family farm]. They did have one aunt who actually sent the girls through nursing school when they got out of high school; three of them… I’m sure they paid it back, but they had an aunt, who did that, so they were fortunate.

For Carrie, her sisters, and her cousins, their aunts and uncles provided support—both physically and emotionally.

The practice of family support was widespread in Carrie’s family. It occurred on her father’s side of the family as well. She said,

My [paternal grandmother] lived on a farm not too far from us. My grandfather was dead, and they sold the farm and moved to [a city], and her two sons got work there. The wife of one of the sons had died and there were three children. So it was my grandmother, my [aunt who was married to the other son], and [another aunt] who had not married, and my [two uncles] and the three children. The three children were about my age… My grandmother and my two aunts raised those children and they all lived in the house… My two uncles were working, and they supported them. That was through the 30s. And it was a lot of fun when we got together with them. My mother and dad would maybe take eggs and cream to them, which you know was a treat for them having been on the farm… There was a lot of laughing and fun when we all got together.

All three generations which included her widowed grandmother, her unmarried aunt, her widowed uncle with the three children, and her other uncle and his wife—eight family members in all—lived together in a large house. They all did their part to help care for the others members of the family.

Carrie’s extended family, on both her mother’s and father’s sides, provided significant financial and emotional support for one another. No one worried that the children would be left to fend for themselves with no one to watch after them or that any
of the family members would become ill or old and be left with no one to care for them. Their form of “family relief” left egos intact by providing significant and needed work for everyone and was nurturing to all involved instead of humiliating.

Another research participant, Anna, also had aunts and uncles who provided support for her family when her father was laid off from his position as a railroad dispatcher. In addition to the food they were able to raise in their large garden in the backyard, Anna’s father also hunted to provide some meat for the family. Anna’s maternal uncle, who was “half Indian [Mohawk]” helped the family by hunting and fishing and bringing them meat to eat as well.

Other aunts and uncles provided physical and emotional support.

My father's sister had a farm [outside of Anna’s town], and they had fruit trees. That is where we would get fruit from... We would pick it and Mom would can it, or we would just eat it fresh, you know.

Anna’s parents did not feel that they were imposing on her aunt or were accepting charity because they worked to pick the fruit themselves and then canned the fruit themselves. They were given access to the food and they did the work to obtain it. An uncle and his family provided emotional support.

My dad had a brother that lived in town. He had a big family. We were very close to them. We [children] went to the same school, and we would get together on Sunday afternoon and play games and stuff.

Their get-togethers always happened after dinner, so they were not in any way a financial burden to either family, and no one was embarrassed by a humble meal before their visits. No one had money to share with Anna’s family when her father was laid off
(and it is uncertain as to whether or not he would have accepted money), but they provided fun and encouragement and emotional support for one another.

Anna’s widowed paternal grandmother still lived in her own home and the family watched out for her.

[We] always took care of her. We would take turns going down and staying with her, us girls—just to be with her and make sure she was all right. She used to make the best cookies—sugar cookies. Anna and her sisters took turns going to their grandmother’s house to stay with her and make sure she was well. She reciprocated by baking “the best” cookies for them. Her grandmother did what she could to help the family and felt that she was contributing to the well-being of her grandchildren.

Another family who used their family farm to provide significant support to their extended family was Walter’s family. Walter’s mother and maternal aunt inherited the farm when his grandfather died. The inheritance was set up so that everyone in the family, including Walter’s grandmother and his unmarried aunt, would be taken care of. His aunt and grandmother slept in one bedroom at one end of the second floor, and Walter’s widowed paternal grandfather slept in another bedroom. Walter’s parents occupied the third bedroom, his sister had the fourth bedroom, and Walter and his two brothers slept in the fifth bedroom. Nine people from three generations filled the house. Walter’s father and his sons did all the farming. The rest of the family, including the elder members, did everything they could to help.

All three generations living on the farm worked hard and everyone helped in the raising of the children. One day Walter’s grandfather caught young Walter and his
brother with his chewing tobacco. Instead of sending them to their parents to deal with the situation, he handled it and Walter’s mother supported his actions. Physical and emotional support was offered to all and Walter said, “We got along real good.”

Before his father became ill, Robert spent a lot of time in the summer with his paternal grandparents because he loved being on their farm.

I went out and spent a lot of time with my grandfather. My grandfather and grandmother used to always go to [town] on Saturday night in the summertime. The stores were always open on Saturday night; that was the big night. He would park along the street and she would sit in the car and greet people that she knew as they came by, because she knew so many. He would do the shopping and would go into the hardware store. I would sort of tag along with him, but Saturday night was a big night.

His grandfather let him “tag along” when he went shopping in the hardware or other stores and Robert would listen to his conversations with other men who had also come to town. During that same period of time, Robert’s father sometimes allowed him to ride along when he drove to farms on business.

Dad had a lot of insurance with a lot of people who had farms within an area of probably 50 miles. I used to ride with him when he would go and call on some of these people. I can remember very well. Dad was a fine gentleman, and he used to come back from one of those trips where he had to tell somebody that the bank was going to foreclose. For some reason he knew this ahead of time and he went and told them, and for him, that was a really tough thing to do: to go and tell somebody that something they worked so hard for, you are going to have to give it up. I'm not aware of what really happened to those people when they lost their farms. It was mostly farms that I remember him talking about.

Both his father and grandfather spent a lot of time with Robert, inviting him to be a part of their lives and modeling how men in his family interacted with others and faced challenges. They included him in their everyday lives, providing significant emotional support.
When his father became ill with tuberculosis and had to leave home to be quarantined in a sanitarium, this same grandfather invited Robert’s mother and the three children to come to the farm and live with them. No one knew how long they would be there or what the future held. They lived there six years. Four extra mouths to feed must have been a challenge for his grandparents. They also helped provide clothing for the children. When Robert’s parents lived on the hill, they purchased clothing for the children when they needed it. Now, clothing was purchased less often and it was normally “too big and worn until it was too small.” Although his mother had been accustomed to living in a modern home with electricity, a furnace, and an indoor bathroom, she gratefully accepted the support offered by her in-laws to live in a home that had none of these conveniences.

Every Sunday after church the extended family came for dinner at the farm. Everyone brought something for the dinner so the expense and workload were shared. The grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins shared a meal and spent time reconnecting with one another. They supported one another as they lived through the very lean years of the 1930s. Robert’s mother had to sell the family car when her husband was no longer able to work and therefore she had no way to make her monthly visit to him in the sanitarium. After that one of the uncles often drove her to see Robert’s father. This helped provide support to both of his parents.

Robert’s maternal grandfather died in 1931 or 1932. Before his death, he made provisions to help assure his two daughters would have some income in the future by purchasing stock for them.
... my mother had a stock of some kind that her father had left her at some point in time, left both she and her sister. And over the years, I remember it was kind of a big deal at Christmastime. Every Christmas Mother would get a check for $50 or $60 that had come from her father. And this went on for years and years until she died. This was something that my grandfather had set up for the two gals. And, of course, back then 50, 60 bucks was a lot of money. Particularly in those earlier years, it was always kind of a blessing when that Christmas check came in.

Kathy parents were both born into fairly large families, each having five children. After her father completed his military duties in World War I, his sister who lived in the East wanted him to come live in her city, promising that her husband would help him find a job. His other sister who was living in the Midwest promised him the same opportunity. Both sisters wanted him to come to their city because they wanted to have someone from the family close. He chose to live in the city near his sister in the Midwest. His brother-in-law worked for the city and recommended him for a position at the water filtration plant. It was important to both of his sisters to help their brother and have someone in the family close to them. They knew they would not be able to coax their other two brothers in the West to move east because they were working on the family ranch, helping their widowed mother.

Although Kathy’s family did not provide financial support for one another, they provided emotional support. As a child, Kathy’s vacations consisted of visiting her aunt on the east coast or driving west to visit her grandmother and uncles who lived on the ranch. On the way to the east coast, they stopped to visit her mother’s sisters. Birthdays were especially important.

Most of my dad’s family was in [a western state], and they were a close family, so it was important for them to get together for special occasions. Every year, sounds kind of silly, but we celebrated several birthdays at the wrong time just
because we were [together]... [We celebrated the birthdays of] my dad and his two brothers whose birthdays were within a month of each other when they were born. They were very close. They called them the three little boys because they were so much younger than everybody else in the family. So they celebrated their birthday when my dad was [back on the ranch]. Then, once every three or four years, my aunt and uncle would come to [our house] and celebrate [my father’s] birthday. They would try to come sometime near his birthday. So birthdays were real important to the family.

Holidays were spent with the aunt, uncle, and cousins who lived in their city. Even though the family was spread across several states, they made it a priority to keep in close contact with one another.

Shirley did not have grandparents or many people in her extended family who were living during the Depression. When Shirley was a child her mother did provide housing for her cousin who came to live with them in one of the coal mining towns in which they lived. He paid a meager amount for room and board, but it gave the family a little actual cash (instead of scrip) to spend at the store. Instead of support from extended family, Shirley’s siblings provided significant support for her and the rest of their immediate family.

In 1930, at the beginning of the Depression, they moved from their coal mining town to the Northeast coast where Shirley’s stepfather’s family lived. They hoped to find support from them for the family, but it never materialized. Shirley said,

I was nine years old when they decided to move to [a city in the northeast]. That’s where his people lived... You know the old [tradition] where you would go where your relatives were. We moved right in the beginning of the Depression in 1930. There were no jobs, rent was cheap but unaffordable—scant clothing—women worked for a dollar a day and no luxuries.

My stepfather was always looking for work, but never could find it. My brother, who was 17 years of age, got a job as an elevator operator in a tall apartment building. He worked for $18.00 a week. He paid the rent and bought the food
and anything else that we needed. I was in the fourth grade and my middle sister was in the fifth grade. We had fun living with a bathroom with indoor toilets and paved streets.

After struggling [there] for a year, [my mother] got tired of the city and we moved back to [where we had come from] in the middle of the Depression.

Shirley’s brother was the sole support for the family when they lived in the city, paying the rent and purchasing food and anything else the family needed. After a year, Shirley’s mother insisted that they move back to a coal-mining town in their home state so her son could finish high school.

Her older brother was a father-figure for Shirley. Besides supporting the entire family as an elevator operator at age 17, he also helped the family when he was a teenager and going to school by working part-time in the mines. He later became an orderly at the hospital, and eventually went to college and became a minister. After Shirley’s eighth grade commencement ceremony, he made a significant promise of support to her.

When I graduated from junior high, I was the youngest. I graduated valedictorian of the class. [My brother] promised me, “If you graduate from high school at the top of your class, I’m going to send you to college.” He was going to finance a college education for me. And I did—at the top. I wasn’t at the top; I was second from the top. I was salutatorian of that high school, graduated second. And he kept his word. I finished college and became a teacher.

Her older sister provided support for her as well.

Now, when I was in high school, sometimes we would go on trips… One time we went to [a state college] in some type of a contest. One was a writing contest, and the other one was business, using the typewriters, something of that nature. My sister used to buy a nice suit for me if I was traveling with a group of kids, and then she would buy me an evening gown when I was in college. Yes, she did lots of nice things for me.
Her brother’s motivational and financial support at a time when there were no scholarships available to Black teenage women along with her sister’s assistance with providing nice, appropriate clothes for special school events, was transformative.

Shirley went from being the tall girl in the hand-me-down clothes and tight-fitting shoes; living mainly in shabby coal company houses; being bussed many miles to an all-Black run-down school; to a well-educated, well-dressed woman who was able to make a difference in the lives of many children. Later, she became a support to her mother in her old age. Shirley carried on the tradition of family support by supplying the down-payment on a nice house for her mother, the first home of her own.

Around 1930, Donald’s family, living in a bungalow in a large city, took care of his widowed maternal grandfather when he was nearly 90 years old. Even though there was turmoil in the immediate family due to his father’s accident at the railroad and the family was living on relief until their court case was settled, they welcomed him into their home. They believed it was important to take care of all generations, even if it was difficult or inconvenient.

Community support. Some research participants received support from people in their communities. In the early 1930s, Shirley’s family lived in a mining company house with no yard for a garden. However, those in the community who had gardens were generous with their produce. She said,

It was like an interchangeable generosity. When you had something to give or to share, you did, and vice versa. People were very kind to each other.

When Donald’s family was on relief and battling the railroad for compensation for his father’s accident, there were two families in the neighborhood who took turns providing
them with special food for the holidays. They also provided transportation for the children to go to Sunday school each Sunday.

They helped a bit with the interim time seeing that we ate. Those two families would see that we had, as far as the kids were concerned, a proper holiday. We had homemade food from them… They alternated with covering at the holidays, Easter and Christmas.

The community in which Betty grew up often gave food baskets to families in need, and did so in a way that would not to embarrass or humiliate them.

That was one of the things that was really nice, is that people were very caring. And people didn't want to say they needed help. And so you would see that so-and-so, they would need food, and then they would give them food baskets. But they didn't want to make them feel embarrassed, so they would take them and set them on the front of their door at night and knock on the door and leave. Anybody who had any extra food would do that. They didn't want to embarrass them. So they would leave the packages or the baskets of stuff on their doorstep and make sure they knew to come to the door, you know. And there was a lot of that.

Walter and Carrie also talked about the fun times they had at community and church gatherings that provided emotional and/or spiritual support for their families.

Some research participants’ families provided support to people in their communities. Kathy’s father helped all the employees at the water plant where he worked as a supervisor by making a way for them to grow their own gardens on land owned by the treatment plant. He also assisted at least two men and their families financially by providing work when they were on the verge of financial ruin.

Walter’s family helped a neighboring farmer who was unable to take care of his orchard. They tended the trees and picked the fruit, giving half to their neighbor. They also made apple cider vinegar and shared a large quantity with him as well. The fruit and the trees that would have been of no use to anyone ended up helping both families.
When Walter went to school, he often filled his pockets with apples to share with children who did not have any.

**Government support.** Donald’s father, injured in a railroad accident and then permanently disabled when severe secondary complications developed, applied for relief from his city during the time that he pursued legal compensation for his injuries from the railroad. A fight ensued when the city demanded that Donald’s parents sell their house and car.

My folks refused to sell the house. They said, “If we sell the house, where will we go?” As for the car, my dad had relatives in the garage business, so my dad just gave a temporary gift to his brother-in-law, for him to keep the car for us. They kept it in their garage and nobody ever knew about it. And then they were allowed to get relief.

Relief did not give us money. They delivered staples. They evidently gave paper voucher-type things so you could buy a little bit at the store. Many of the people had enough food because they had a garden, but we didn’t have enough room to have a garden. So we were given some staples. The staples would be in powder form, like flour and cornmeal.

The truck used to come and they’d leave a parcel on the pavement on the street, on the rough street, the asphalt. And the truck would come and they’d drop the stuff on the street. They wouldn’t bring it in or anything. Then we would have to go there with the little red wagon and, if the sack that they delivered it in broke, then we’d have to scoop it off the street. For milk and meat, that’s where this voucher or paper money that was issued to us was used. That was very small. In our neighborhood at that time there was a real small A & P Store and there was a meat market there, and so we could use the voucher or the paper money for a little bit there. You’d have to get in line and get it. There were times when I remember being hungry. We ate a lot of oatmeal.

When the weather turned cold a load of coal would be delivered to the house to fuel the furnace. After several years, the court case with the railroad was dismissed when the judge determined that it had taken too long to move through the legal system and they no longer received relief. Donald’s father then determinedly set out to find
another way to meet his family’s financial needs. Their physical needs for survival had been met by the relief office, but the lack of care or compassion from the government or the railroad left a deep emotional scar on them all.

Historian David Kennedy (1999) states that Donald’s city experienced an unemployment rate approaching 50 percent in 1932 (p. 87) which was during the time of Donald’s family’s struggle. The city government workers’ own physical and emotional resources and the financial base for the city must have been sorely stretched, especially since tax revenues would have been drastically cut due to such a high level of unemployment. Human suffering was pervasive throughout the city.

Shirley received a different type of government support; it was federal government support.

I worked in a program in our high school called the NYA, National Youth Administration I think, and I got $6.00 a month. I would help my math teacher to grade papers. I was 17 or 18.

She felt honored and proud to be chosen to do this work and be paid by the government, especially since she was an African American female student whose goal was to become a teacher. (African Americans and females were not always proportionally included in the New Deal programs.) Her oldest brother (a stepbrother) was chosen to work at a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp, which made the family proud.

**Support for strangers.** Five of the research participants’ mothers who lived close to railroad tracks, helped provide meals for strangers, often when the family itself had limited provisions. The families of Betty, Kathy, Fred, Carol, and Anna all lived within a mile or two of railroad tracks. Fred said with pride that there was a mark on his
garage, put there by traveling “hobos,” indicating that his house was one where they could find a free meal. None of the mothers feared these strangers but expected them to come to their house from time to time. They gave them instructions to sit on the porch or in the yard and they would bring them a sandwich or whatever they could provide. Strangers sometimes came to Kathy’s home asking if there was any work they could do for something to eat. This may have happened at her house because her father had a reputation for helping people by providing temporary yard work for people in need.

**Work Ethic**

**Parents.** Most of the 24 parents of the research participants modeled a strong work ethic to their children.

**Fathers.** All of the fathers with the exception of Shirley’s stepfather whom she described as “lazy” worked hard at their jobs. Two fathers, a factory worker and a railroad dispatcher, were laid off for several years but they continued to work at odd jobs or other jobs until they were called back to work. One took over much of the household work when his wife obtained a part-time retail position during that time. The farmers, the miner, the carpenter, the minister, the lawyer, and the city water plant supervisor all retained their jobs during the Depression, but the miner and city worker were paid in scrip for a while, and the minister and lawyer were often paid in goods instead of cash during this period of time. The three farmers had very little money whatsoever because the value of farm commodities was very low before the Depression and until at least the mid-1930s. The insurance salesman lost his position when he became debilitated with tuberculosis, but the financial health of his business was questionable due to the fact that
many people borrowed against their insurance policies or had to let them go during the Depression. His sister-in-law, who sold real estate for the combined business, had fewer customers because of the housing crisis caused by so many townspeople being laid off. When he went to the sanitarium, his sister-in-law closed the business instead of hiring someone to take his place, which could indicate that the business may have been in financial trouble.

**Mothers.** Most of the mothers worked at home full-time managing their homes and families and often managing the finances as well. Most of them canned, gardened, cooked, cleaned, sewed, and did laundry. Almost everything was done by hand, as there were few if any time-saving appliances available. Carol’s mother hired domestic help one day a week and when Linda’s mother’s health improved from tuberculosis and she was able to return home from the sanitarium, she worked part-time outside the home in retail. To earn a little more income she also rented a room to a couple different boarders at different times. The three mothers on the farm helped with barn duties and/or took complete charge of the chickens in addition to their responsibilities in the home.

**Children.** As children, all of the research participants had chores to do at home which significantly helped their parents and/or the family. They often began washing dishes and doing other chores around the house and/or on the farm by the age of five and were able to do most jobs like adults by the time they were teens. They often worked alongside their parents, helping with gardening, canning, cleaning, ironing, cooking, chopping wood, farming and performing many other different jobs. It was a natural way of life as they grew older. There was order in their homes, and as Carrie said, “We were
expected to be a part of the order.” One difference between their responsibilities at home and the responsibilities their parents had when they were growing up was that they were expected to attend and do well in school. This was considered part of their work in their teen years instead of working full-time at home or on the farm after sixth or eighth grade as their parents had done.

**Working for what they needed.** Most of the research participants’ parents were unable to give their children much in the way of material possessions during the most difficult years of the Depression. However, some of the participants learned that they could obtain things they wanted by their own efforts. For instance, Walter and his two brothers had worked with their father on the farm since their early childhood. They were confident in their work skills and their ability to earn money for whatever they wanted or needed. Walter said,

> My dad was good to us. He taught us how to work; he taught us how to be responsible. We never really had to want for anything because if we wanted something, we worked for it.

Walter purchased his bib overalls as a boy in grade school by gathering and selling chestnuts to the general store. One time he needed to have dental work done that cost $9.00. He earned the money to pay his bill by working for another farmer. When he was in high school, he purchased a used Whippet Coupe for $75.00. He earned over half of the money for the car by cutting, piling, and burning brush for the township. He was paid 30¢ an hour and worked on both sides of the road for about a mile to the north of their farm and a half mile to the south. He did other odd jobs for the neighbors and then gathered chestnuts to sell at the general store to pay for the rest of it. Once he had his
car, his brothers paid him $1.00 a week for a ride to school since there were no busses; that paid for his gasoline (20¢ a gallon at the time) and a few other expenses. When asked if he felt resentment as a boy for having to pay for these expenses himself instead of his parents paying for them, he said “not at all.”

**Helping children earn money for what they wanted.** Sometimes parents or grandparents provided a way for their children to earn money to purchase things they wanted. Cheryl’s parents allowed her to take care of a lamb that had been rejected by its mother. When it was grown she sold it and purchased a new bicycle, which was the first and only bicycle she ever owned. “I was one happy girl!” she said with a wide grin. Instead of giving her the bicycle, they gave her a way to earn the money herself so she could purchase it. She still has the bicycle in her garage.

When Robert and his family went to live on his grandparents’ farm after his father went to the tuberculosis sanitarium, he rose at 5:00 a.m. every day to help milk the cows by hand. He helped his grandfather by weeding the garden and doing other chores on the farm. His grandfather had very little money but he provided a way for Robert to earn some money to spend as he wanted.

What he used to do, like in the summertime, he would let me set up a little stand at the end of the lane. Anything I sold there: corn or tomatoes, peppers, whatever, was mine... In the summertime, I did pretty good selling. I would go down and sit there all day, and people ... would stop and buy corn. I would sell a dozen ear of corn for 15¢ a dozen.

Kathy worked in her father’s greenhouses fertilizing and watering the plants to earn money to pay half of the cost for a particular brand of bicycle she wanted or a radio with certain features. This is what her father did if she wanted something that he thought
was a little extravagant. Some of her friends at school lived in an “upscale area” of the city and had more expensive clothes than Kathy had such as fur coats. In 1939, when she was 16 and in high school, she told her parents that she would like a fur coat as well. Her father said,

If you want a fur coat you can have a fur coat. You can pick out any coat you want, but you will have to earn half of the money for it. When you earn half the money you can have the coat and I will match what you’ve earned.

So I got a job at the Five and Ten. By the end of, I don’t know how long it was, months, I just didn’t have enough, not even near enough for half of what I had to have for the fur I wanted. So, I finally settled for a coat that was a lot different than the one that I really wanted, and my dad paid the other half. I got my fur coat which I only liked for about two years. You know how kids are... I ended up selling it to a friend of mine after two years.

**Earning money outside of home.** Besides their responsibilities in the home, 10 of the 12 research participants earned money as children or youth outside of the home. Betty worked as a nanny and Fred shared a paper route with his next door neighbor. In grade school, before his father became ill, Robert jumped at the chance to start a *Liberty Magazine* route.

Carol began working at her father’s law office in the summer answering telephones when she was 14 years old. The next summer she worked at the Five and Dime for 27½¢ an hour. The next summer she worked at Sears for 37½¢ an hour. (This was possible because she lived in a large city where there were many stores.) Linda worked at Woolworth’s to save money for her college education. As mentioned above, Kathy worked at the Five and Dime to help purchase a fur coat. Anna ironed clothes for a family in town. Walter’s work experience consisting of working for the township, other farmers, and selling chestnuts is highlighted above. Shirley worked for
the NYA for $6.00 a month by helping her high school math teacher. Finally, Donald began working at age nine by mopping the floor of a neighborhood pharmacy once a week; he gave the money to his parents. The only research participants who did not work outside the home to earn money during their childhood or teen years were Cheryl and Carrie who lived on a farm and did not have an opportunity to do so. The parents (and often the grandparents) of these research participants modeled how to work hard, and all the participants seem to have learned how to work hard themselves.

**The rest of the family.** The parents and children were not the only family members who demonstrated strong work ethics. One of the important strategies each of these 12 families and their extended families used to successfully navigate through their difficult financial experiences was to work hard.

**Older family members.** In some families, the older members of the family displayed a very strong work ethic, in spite of their age. Speaking of his paternal grandfather, Robert said,

> He was still farming until he died at 75. He had a 100-acre farm, still doing it the old-fashioned way, plowing with horses. All of his neighbors had tractors. I don't know whether he felt he couldn't afford one or that was the new way and he was going to do it his way. Instead of having milking machines, which all the other farmers had, he was doing it the old-fashioned way.

Carol’s maternal grandfather worked until he was 75 years old. He and his wife daily used the stairs to reach their second floor apartment in Carol’s parent’s duplex. In her older years after her husband died, Carrie’s paternal grandmother helped raise three of her grandchildren, along with the assistance of her unmarried daughter and married daughter-in-law who did not have children.
Walter’s maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather who both lived with him showed a very strong work ethic. At one point his grandmother handled the mending for the nine family members living in their house.

My grandmother would sit there and mend all day long, and she’d run out of something and she’d come out there and say to my mother, “Have you got any more things to sew?” She loved to sew. She was the sewing machine in our house. She’d patch our clothes, and it was nothing for us to wear pants with big patches on them. We weren’t ashamed to wear them that way.

Walter said he felt sorry for his neighbor who was very poor. This neighbor “went around with big holes in his clothes.” For Walter, holes, not patches, were a sign of poverty.

Every member of Walter’s family helped when it was time to butcher hogs on New Year’s Day. Seven hogs were butchered and everyone had a job, including his grandmother.

Then it came time, after you got the sausage ground, to stuff the sausage. We used internal organs. Grandma would always clean those organs real good, and they had to be cleaned good. I still remember Grandma had her cleaning board with the back of her butcher knife, cleaning those things. She’d sit there and clean those all day. That was her job, Grandma’s.

Perhaps the most tenacious older member of the family who was determined to keep working was Walter’s paternal grandfather. Walter said,

Grandpa came and lived with us for nine years before he passed away. He had a farm [close by] which he still owned while he lived with us. He rented out that farm to other people. Grandpa would go up there and work once in a while, but he was getting to the point where he couldn’t because he was getting feeble. So when my father would plant crops like corn, Grandpa would go out there and hoe corn with one hand and lean on his cane with the other hand. He just wouldn’t give up. He’d clean up our pasture fields in the fall of the year and get out there and get rid of those weeds and thistles. He kept himself busy.
Other family members. In most families, the young and middle-aged adults, usually aunts and uncles of the research participants and sometimes siblings, worked hard as well. On the farms, they took the lead with the heavy work. They also worked in towns, and if they had lost their job they did what they could to contribute to the family’s needs by hunting, fishing, gardening, or caring for children. In these 12 families, almost every single person in every household contributed to the family’s welfare by shouldering their share of the workload. There are many stories of families during the Depression who had financial difficulties who became so discouraged that they became immobile. That is not the story of these 12 families. At the time of the interviews, all research participants were either living in their own homes, living with one of their children, or in independent living apartments connected to a senior living facility. They keep busy, and much like Walter’s grandfather, they “just won’t give up.”

Thrift

All of the parents of this study’s research participants lived in the United States during the period of World War I, 1917-1918. The pervasive influence of the thrift movement during those years is outlined in the section entitled “Thrift” in Chapter 2 of this paper. Six of the 21 parents for whom their birthdates are known were teenagers at the time that the United States entered the conflict. The other 15 parents were primarily in their 20s and 30s; one father was 41 years old at the time. All were old enough to be impacted significantly by the massive campaign to save food and fuel and purchase Thrift Stamps and Liberty Bonds for the sake of United States military and the allied nations in Europe. Although it is likely that most of the parents relaxed their emphasis
on thrift during the 1920s, they are unlikely to have forgotten all of the strategies they utilized during that time to save money and make the most of their limited resources. It is my belief that when their time of financial crisis came in the 1930s, they would be able to recall and put into practice many of the lessons they learned on how to live with less during the Great War.

Management. During the time of the financial crises faced by the parents of this study’s research participants, many lived in environments that operated with little cash. They managed their limited resources in such a way as to provide for their needs for survival, making the most of what they had and compensating for what they lacked. Following are some of the typical categories of expenditure in most family budgets, along with the management strategies used by these parents to meet the needs of their children.

Clothing. With the exception of Carol, whose father was a lawyer, and to a lesser extent Kathy, whose father was a water plant supervisor, the research participants in this study and their family members had few clothes which were worn repeatedly between launderings. The 10 participants who attended church on a regular basis typically owned one special “church” outfit that was reserved to wear to church and for other special occasions. Walter wore bib overalls to elementary school. If they got dirty during the day or on the walk home, his mother washed them that evening so they would be clean for the next day. Referring to her wardrobe, Cheryl said she had “enough” to cover her. Shirley and Anna wore hand-me-downs which had often been homemade by their mothers for an older sister. Carrie’s and Fred’s mothers remade clothing for them
that were donated by family members or friends. Their wardrobes were not as extensive as is common today in the United States. Fashion styles did not change as quickly, and many children wore what they had, regardless of fashion trends. Some of the participants indicated that they did not pay attention to what others wore—especially in elementary school. In high school, Kathy wanted a fur coat like her friends but had to pay half for it.

Parents had fewer clothing as well. Anna’s mother had one good dress that she wore to church. Anna’s older sister took the dress when she traveled to another state to elope and live, which was a shock to the family. Her mother’s immediate reaction to the news indicated that she seemed to be more dismayed about the loss of the dress than she was that her daughter eloped when she cried out, “Oh, what will I wear to church now?”

**Food:** All of the research participants ate three meals a day, but few of them ate snacks between meals. Anna said some of her meals were “pretty skimpy” but she does not remember really feeling hungry. Anna and Walter did not eat many sweets, unless there was a special occasion. When Donald’s family was on relief and their food supply was very limited, he said they “learned to eat less.” Kathy’s family ate a lot of fruits and vegetables, many of them that they grew in their garden. Fred’s mother prepared a special meal for Sunday but either through lack of resources or creativity, her daily menu was very repetitive.

I would always have some kind of a cold cereal and always chocolate milk and always some kind of fruit for my breakfast. Even through junior high school I would come home for lunch, walk my several [blocks] back for lunch, because you had an hour for lunch. My mother always had the same thing every day: Campbell's vegetable soup, fruit salad, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, everyday. Once in a while a bologna sandwich. I ate that year in and year out,
and that was it.

For dinner, or we called it supper, she always managed to have, maybe once in a while a splurge and get a couple of pork chops, but made a lot of gravy, made a lot of bread and gravy. I can see my dad yet eating that white gravy with bread.

We had the big meal on Sunday. Everybody had a big Sunday meal. They don't do that anymore. I know we would spend all week waiting to see what kind of a big meal she could come up with on Sunday.

None of the research participants were overweight as children. Dishes that required more expensive ingredients were served on Sundays, holidays, or for special occasions.

Part of the expense for daily food was reduced because meals were prepared from basic ingredients, not pre-packaged. Women baked their own bread and used dried beans to make a variety of dishes. They canned produce that often came straight from their garden or orchard. They stretched food by adding water to the soup or, in Shirley’s mother’s case, to the buttermilk when she made biscuits. Fast food was nonexistent, and dining in a restaurant was an extremely rare occasion for these families. If Walter’s family went somewhere for a special day such as the county fair, his mother prepared a picnic lunch to eat while sitting on the grass. These research participants learned to eat what was set before them without whining or complaining.

**Health:** The families in this study were cognizant of the importance of doing everything they could to remain healthy. Their lifestyles were healthy, with an emphasis on eating in moderation, going to bed and rising early, often sleeping in unheated bedrooms, even in the dead of winter. They were active on a daily basis through working at home or on the farm without the benefit of a large number of mechanical or electrical appliances. They regularly walked significant distances to school, church,
neighborhood or local stores, and for recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, or riding bicycles. Most of the participants played outdoors in active games involving running, jumping, and yelling, helping them to expend their energy so they slept well at night. Cleanliness was important to most of them, even on the farm. Walter’s mother did everything she could to keep her home and family’s clothing clean, in spite of the constant dirt and mud on shoes and dust in the air. Seeing a doctor was rare, and if it was absolutely necessary, the doctor normally made house calls. Anna said hospitals were considered to be places people only went to die when she was a child.

**Utilities:** None of the families of the research participants paid very much for utility expenses. Almost half lived in homes with a coal furnace, which required a ton or more of coal to keep running, depending on the size of the house that was being heated. The others had stoves that were used to heat single rooms which could be fueled with either coal or wood. When the family ran short of money, they used wood instead of coal because they could chop and haul it themselves. Most of the farms in this study had no electricity during the family’s most difficult time during the Depression. Instead of paying an electric bill, they spent money to purchase oil for lamps and lanterns. If they lived in homes that were connected to electricity, they did not have many electrical outlets or appliances so they did not spend very much money for that power source. Most did not use their automobile on a daily basis, cutting down on the cost for gasoline. However, Carol’s father drove 10 miles downtown to his law office daily, Robert’s father used his car before he contracted tuberculosis, and Fred’s father used his vehicle to drive from one customer to another all over the city. Even those who used their
automobiles regularly owned only one automobile. Most of the research participants lived in homes with telephones, but some on the farms did not. Some had electrically-powered radios, and Walter’s brother purchased a battery-operated radio in 1940 before the farm was connected to electricity in 1941. However, none had air conditioning, dishwashers, televisions, computers, cell phones, or any of the appliances or other technological advancements for which Americans purchase power or utilities in the form of electricity, natural gas, gasoline, cable, or water today.

Children’s entertainment. Most of the research participants did not talk about toys. Cheryl had a difficult time recalling exactly what toys she owned and played with as a child. They were not much of an emphasis in her family. Fred and his friends made bows and arrows and used their imaginations to come up with their own play scenarios. Several recalled playing board games in the winter. They played games outside that did not require props or equipment. Once Kathy’s family came through their time of difficulty and financial insecurity, they sometimes spent a nickel to purchase an ice cream cone when the ice cream truck came down the street, but only after the crisis was past. In the summer, sometimes Walter’s family went to watch a free movie that was shown outdoors in the nearest town. Other families were sometimes able to spend a nickel or dime to attend a movie in the theater.

Family vacations. Families today sometimes spend thousands of dollars on vacations, but they were almost nonexistent for the research participants in this study. Most were focused on survival and there was no money for such luxuries as a vacation away from home. Carrie sometimes visited family members in the city but it was never
for an extended period of time. Kathy and Carol were the exceptions. Kathy’s family vacations were spent visiting either their family in the West or other family members in the East. In 1935, after the worst of Carol’s family’s financial difficulty was past, her father purchased an Oldsmobile, and they took a trip out West to visit her aunt and stopped by to see Yellowstone Park. On the way, they tested the car to see how fast it could go. With a wide smile, Carol recalled encouraging her father to go faster, faster. The car peaked at 85 mph. She said, “We were really moving!”

**Equipment.** Very little money was spent on equipment. Cheryl sometimes mowed her family’s lawn with a rotary human-powered lawn mower. Lawns were not fertilized so the grass was not too thick. All the farms except the one that Carrie’s parents rented used horses to pull the plows. Only Carrie’s father had a tractor. The farm equipment was mechanical but fairly simple. All the farmers in this study were able to repair their own equipment when they had a breakdown or breakage. Household equipment was basic and most of it was manual instead of mechanical. Tools were built to last and did not have to be replaced often. Most people used the same equipment year after year unless it was broken and unable to be fixed.

**General shopping.** Most of the families in this study shopped at small general stores for their basic needs. The stores were family-owned and the proprietors knew their customers by name. When Walter and his siblings needed to earn some extra money, they gathered chestnuts to sell at the closest general store. All of the farmers traded eggs and cream at a general store for other food items and goods they were unable to produce on the farm. The general stores or corner stores in the towns and cities were
small and they carried basic items. There was little variety with their merchandise and the research participants did not feel compelled to constantly purchase the newest gadget. Candy was a big draw for nearly all of the research participants, however. Shirley remembers earning a nickel a day to tutor one of her friends, which was quickly spent at the general store for candy.

**Leisure.** Children played outside a lot once homework and chores were completed. For adults, leisure was a reward for completing their work. Parents enjoyed getting together with friends or family and talking. On Friday nights, Robert’s parents played cards with their best friends and drank coffee, an inexpensive evening of fun. Carrie’s parents enjoyed talking with friends in town on Saturday night. They might shop a little, but mostly they enjoyed conversations with those in their community, which cost nothing. Walter’s community had monthly meetings in the evening to have fun and reconnect with friends.

**Controlling the controllable.** When life seemed out of control for Kathy’s parents, they concentrated on what they could control instead of what they could not, such as bank closures and payment in scrip. They gardened, canned, and harvested fruit from trees next to them that were not being used. Instead of complaining about politicians or the federal government’s handling of the economic crisis or the city’s lack of financial planning which left it bankrupt, they took the opportunity to teach their daughter about how to live in such a time. Kathy remembers them saying, that “it was real important to be careful about everything; that you never knew when things could happen that could become a hardship and you should be careful of everything.” They
said they must all “watch their pennies,” which was something her parents modeled daily. Instead of saying that it was no use to save money because tomorrow it could be gone without warning, they looked on the positive side and began to save again. Once they had come through their crisis and Kathy was in her teen years they told her she “should remember how tough things were at one time and [they] got through all that by being careful.” They encouraged her to “make sure that you put money aside for a rainy day and think about your future. Think about saving for your grandchildren or for your children’s education and for your old age.” She heeded their advice and has lived her life “being careful.”

When Cheryl was asked if she recalled hearing her parents worry that they might not be able to make the mortgage payments on the farm she said, “They would talk about how hard things were, but [it] seemed like they were always able to come up with something to pay with.” They lived month by month, doing every possible thing they could to earn money and gave up many comforts to make their mortgage payments. They watched as some farmers in their area “couldn’t make it” and lost their farms. Proudly, Cheryl says her parents

… managed with what they had, and they just kind of planned ahead, you now, and did things as they could afford it. I think once in a while maybe they took out a loan. I am not real sure about some of that business, but it seemed like [normally] they would wait for money to come in, somehow, and then they would buy.”

The greatest indication that Cheryl bore no emotional scars from living in rustic conditions as a child was that she and her husband chose to live the same way as her parents lived while they paid off their farm. They lived just as she had as a child, a
much less common occurrence by the time they did it in the 1940s and 1950s, until the farm was theirs, free and clear, 16 years later.

**Skills**

The skills utilized by the families represented in this study were primarily labor intensive. Some homes lacked electricity altogether; other homes had access to electricity, but not in the manner commonly known today. Homes then had many fewer electrical outlets and electrical appliances. For instance, only 21 percent of the homes in Muncie, Indiana in 1935 had either electric or gas refrigerators (Robinson, 1997).

In this study, the mothers were all able to cook well from basic ingredients, as there were no convenience foods in those days. Cheryl, Shirley, Walter, Kathy and Carrie all spoke with pride of their mothers’ and/or grandmothers’ abilities to bake well. Special occasions and holidays such as Sunday dinners and Christmas were made special with home-baked pies or cakes. Shirley said her mother “would take a very small amount of anything and make a delicious meal.” Cooking, baking, and canning were part of job description for the mothers in this study. Betty’s mother competed with the other ladies in their small village to make the “prettiest canned stuff” and Fred’s mother and her friends “took pride in their pantries” of home canned goods. Generally, the girls in the family helped with the canning and cooking. Typically they worked with their mothers or other women in the family to learn how to prepare and preserve food for the family. This happened in all families except for Betty’s family. She learned how to cook in her high school home economics classes because her mother was too nervous to have anyone else with her in the kitchen.
Many of the women sewed as well. Linda’s mother “sewed beautifully” and fashioned dresses for herself and Linda. Carrie’s and Fred’s mothers were able to alter garments that were given to them from other people into clothes for their children. Walter’s grandmother loved to mend and did all the mending for the three generations of family members who lived in their house.

Walter helped his father and Robert helped his grandfather on their farms. Just as the girls learned how to cook and clean from their mothers, the boys learned to perform valuable assistance to their families with the tutelage of their fathers or grandfathers. In addition, Fred and Walter learned to hunt and fish from either their fathers or other male figures in the family. Fred’s father was a skilled carpenter and was able to use his skills to earn his income.

Kathy said “My dad could do anything.” He was able to do electrical work, carpentry, masonry, and he built an addition on their house, which included laying brick. He built his own greenhouses and raised plants. He painstakingly worked to develop a new hydrangea that would not wilt and was able to sell the growing rights to a large business. She said that if he did not know how to do something, he would find books on the subject, study them, and then “work at it until he got it right.” Her mother also taught her how to perform household tasks, do the laundry, can food, and how to take care of her clothes. She taught her to “be careful of things” so what they owned would last as long as possible.

In Walter’s family, his father and mother modeled their work ethic to the children. They taught them to work by working with them. When wood needed to be
chopped weekly, the boys went to the woods with their father to chop wood. They shore sheep in the spring and sold the wool to a fur company. They trapped animals in the winter and sold the pelts of muskrats, raccoon, fox, possum, and skunk. Their actions indicate that they believed it was important for their children to learn how to work and to perform their work well. By the time Walter and his brothers reached their teen years, they were able to perform a great many jobs on their farm that proved to be extremely valuable to the well-functioning of the farm and family.

The more skills the parents of the study participants possessed, the less money or income they needed. The more they were able to do for themselves, the less they had to purchase from others. They did not have to purchase meals in a restaurant because they were prepared at home. They did not have to purchase the skills of repairmen because most of the fathers were able to repair basic equipment themselves. Carol’s family was the only one who hired someone to come and help with housekeeping one day a week. The rest of the families did not need to purchase that type of assistance because they were able to do it themselves. Carrie’s mother was even able to do her own dry cleaning, and all the women did their own laundry.

Some of the parents also intentionally taught their children how to get along with people. Kathy’s mother, in a kind but firm way, taught her to refrain from gossip with her friends. Her admonition to never say anything negative or mean about others made a long-lasting impression on Kathy. Robert’s father invited him to travel with him to visit his clients on farms, thus allowing him to observe how his father interacted with his customers. His grandfather also allowed him to go shopping with him on Saturday
nights and observe how he interacted with other men in the community. Carol’s parents served as role models for her as she observed their leadership styles in the church and community. She grew up to fill similar roles in her church and community.

**Beliefs**

What were the most important beliefs and values to the families of my research participants? Although they were not identical with all 12 families, they were similar in many ways.

**Religious faith.** As adults, all 12 of the research participants were active in their churches and claimed a personal religious faith. As children or youth, 10 out of 12 participants went to church, and a personal religious faith was central to most of their lives. In Kathy’s experience, she was the one who found the church and then her parents joined her. In Donald’s case, he went to Sunday school with neighbors, because his parents did not attend church. Linda’s family did not attend church in her childhood, nor did Fred’s. For all the others, church and religious faith was central to their families.

Cheryl attended church with her family since childhood and was baptized when she was 13 years old. Betty’s family would have gone to church regardless, but it was more central to their lives because her father was the minister. In her small community she said that church services were well attended. “Everybody wanted help from God.”

Robert said “I pretty much grew up at church”—attending Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon youth group, and Wednesday night prayer meeting. The weekly family get-togethers on the farm with the extended family always occurred after church,
never in place of church. His family’s faith was personal and they took their problems to God. Speaking about his father’s illness he said,

It was different not to have a father around, but we understood that he was off in this distant place; that hopefully they were going to find a cure for the type of tuberculosis that he had. We just waited and prayed for that to happen. On the few times that he was able to come home for a while, it was always great to have him home, even if only for a weekend pass or whatever.

They waited and prayed for a cure for his father’s type of tuberculosis. There was no word of resentment toward God for allowing his father to become ill. He believed God sustained them in their difficulty and has only good memories of the church he grew up in.

Carol’s family was always at church as well. She said,

There was never any question about church on Sunday. We had our Sunday clothes. My mother taught Sunday school for 45 years. My dad was chairman of the board for years, and he did all of the law work for the church.

Her parents were active in church until they were no longer able. At 80 years old Carol’s mother was still leading a women’s group at church.

Religious faith and church was very important to Carrie’s parents and family.

“They saw to it that we got religion classes. My parents … were very religious. Going to Mass was very important to [her father].

Anna’s father “made sure that the family went to church every Sunday.” When asked how her mother managed so well she said, “I guess she just trusted the Lord.” In addition, she said her parents wanted their children to be “good citizens. [They] just wanted us to live right, do good for other people.”

When asked how Walter’s parents coped with the difficulties and hard work of farm life and caring for three generations of family members, he said they
stuck together and they lived by the Bible. We went to church regularly, and sometimes we didn’t have transportation so we walked to church. It was a couple miles from our home.

In Shirley’s family, there was no question of where they would be on Sunday. Shirley said,

We [children] had to go to church and Sunday school. We learned the basic principles of God—the commandments and God’s ordinances.

Faith and prayer was personal for them.

Another time, when there really were no jobs to be had, Mom and my stepfather fasted and prayed for a job. Sure enough, he went out and he came home with not only a job that paid $30 a month—we were rich!—but he also had a bag of groceries given him by the wife of the hospital superintendent.

Family. When Carrie was asked what was most important to her parents, her first answer was a “strong religious faith.” Second on her list was “close family ties.” Likewise, Anna said one of her parents’ most important values or beliefs (along with their religious faith) was “taking good care of their family.” The importance of family was one of the most important values to all the participants. These 12 stories have been largely stories of their family lives and how their family members supported and cared for one another.

The research participants, without exception, have carried on the tradition of investing in the lives of their family members. Along with stories and/or photos of their parents, the research participants in this study proudly shared stories or photos of their children and/or grandchildren with me. In some cases, I met one of their children.

Robert told about his decision to move to the area where his daughter lived when he retired. He said,
[His daughter] kept saying, "Once you retire, why don't you come back to [the city close to where she lives.] You're missing so much of [his grandchildren’s] growing up." So I retired in January of '93, and that fall we did move up here… And it was true. [His grandson] was on the [school] golf team, and so I followed all of his golf matches; and [his granddaughter] got involved in track, and [I] went to her track meets and things like that. Our family has always been involved together as a family. And even as [his granddaughter] has grown up and got married and [his grandson] is married, we still are so close. It's just great to be a part of this family.

**Education.** All of the parents of the research participants believed that it was important that their children receive a good education. Although most of the parents had not graduated from high school themselves, all the parents expected their children to do so at the very minimum. With the world changing quickly with so many technological advances, a good education was considered essential to enable their children to succeed in life. Parents were willing to sacrifice the hours that their children could have been home helping or working to help earn money for the family to allow their children to go to school five days a week.

All of the research participants did graduate from high school. Four participants attended a one-room rural school for their elementary grades and five attended large city schools. The other three attended grade school in relatively small towns in schools with multiple grades, one of whom attended an all-Black school. Five graduated from large city schools and seven graduated from small town, village, or consolidated schools. All four male participants went into the military after graduation and served in World War II. Six of the 12 participants graduated from college with bachelor’s degrees (two of them financed with the GI Bill). Two more attended college but did not graduate, one attending one year and the other attending three years. One participant attended a
business college after high school graduation and obtained a certificate in clerical studies. One participant received a scholarship to attend college, but her father would not permit her to accept the scholarship “because she was a girl.”

Discipline, order, and a respect for authority were expected by the parents and in all of the schools their children attended. In Betty’s one-room school, the big boys were required to cut switches which were piled in a front corner, constantly visible to all, for the teacher’s use in case of a breach of conduct.

In Kathy’s city school, her teachers were described as “excellent” with the exception of her third grade teacher who went overboard in her enraged punishment of Kathy for talking when the teacher left the room. A new student’s parents and grandparents “raised all kinds of fuss” with the principal on her behalf the next day, eventually leading to the teacher’s dismissal, but Kathy’s parents had a much milder reaction. Her mother had taught for 10 years before she married Kathy’s father and did not say anything that would undermine the ultimate authority of the teacher or other adults. The principal in this school was especially held in high esteem. Kathy said she “was a very wise woman and she taught us all so much. We had meetings in the auditorium regularly about patriotism and religion and just being good people.” In many public schools, a positive outlook regarding religion and an emphasis good citizenship and character development was not only permissible but encouraged.

Although families were generally strong supporters of the school systems, the needs of the family came before extracurricular activities. Walter and most of his friends who lived on farms were unable to participate in school sports, especially
basketball, because they were needed to do chores on the farm right after school. In the spring Walter played softball for the high school team when he could. He was only able to play at the home games during the week or away games only if they were on Saturday. If away games were any other day of the week, he was unable to go. The coach allowed him to play even though he could not take part in all the games. School sports adapted to the needs of the family instead of the family adapting to the dictates of the school.

No complaints. One of the nearly universal beliefs that I found while interviewing children of the Depression was the importance of bearing hardship without complaint or grumbling. No matter what happened, the parents did not complain to their children. All of the families encountered financial challenges of some sort during at least part of the 1930s and all had a downturn in income. At the same time, many of them coped with various other problems that can occur at any time during the lifespan. In addition, most of their parents had to work incredibly hard in what we today would consider difficult living conditions. Some of the difficulties these families encountered were:

- Three families had a family member who had tuberculosis which resulted in tremendous financial hardship and family upheaval.
- One, and possibly two, mothers suffered with mental illness.
- Two and then later three families lived and worked on farms that lacked the comfort of modern equipment to help with the workload.
• One family moved from one rental farm property to another and was never able to purchase a farm. They suffered the embarrassment of being rejected for a bank loan for needed equipment.

• One family’s father lost his job at the railroad when the entire plant closed down for several years. Nearly the entire town was unemployed for an extended period of time making other job opportunities scarce.

• One family lost their savings in a bank failure and lived on “scrip” for a lengthy period of time.

• One family, who had previously lived comfortably, lost their “dream home” because they could not afford it, welcomed other family members into their home who needed a home because they were older adults or had lost a job, and were often paid for their services with lamps, women’s clothes, and other possessions.

• One family lived in poverty because they spread their meager earnings thin trying to help other members of the family.

• One family suffered from racial prejudice.

• One family went several years without adequate income because the father was injured in a railroad accident and as a result lost his job. This family lived on government relief for several years and was the only one who came close to complaining. They tried to fight the railroad to regain the father’s position and felt a sense of frustration and bitterness because they believed they had been treated unfairly by a wealthy employer.
In the first couple of interviews, after a research participant explained a situation
that sounded very challenging, I said, “That sounds like it must have been very hard for
your parents. Did they complain?” The standard reaction to that question was a blank
look on the interviewee’s face, followed by a facial expression that included a furrowed
brow, an utterance that sounded like “Hmm,” and finally these words were uttered
almost verbatim: “You know, I can’t remember my parents complaining about
anything.” After this was repeated a couple of times, I changed my questioning.

After discussing the challenges his or her family faced, I asked “And what were
the things that your parents complained most about?” The exact thing happened as
before: blank look, furrowed brow, and then “You know, I don’t think I can remember
them complaining about anything. I guess they just weren’t complainers.”

In later interviews, after the research participant said he or she could not
remember any complaints, I then said something such as, “Do you think they were
protecting you?” “Well, maybe. Perhaps they were, but then, we talked about most
things as a family.” Then, in the last few interviews I said, “When you grew to be an
adult and could talk to your parents as one adult to another, did your parents complain to
you then?” Once again the reaction was a blank look, furrowed brow, and a slight side
to side shake of the head. “You know, I don’t think they complained. They just weren’t
that type of people.” In a period of time when there were many things about which these
parents and family members could have complained, they did not—at least to their
children. Following, are their accounts, highlighting especially what they did not
complain about.
Living with less. Carol’s father was a lawyer whose clients often paid him during the 1930s with women’s clothes, porcelain lamps, and other goods instead of cash. Carol’s uncle (who had lost his job and had nowhere to live) and aunt moved into their house and lived on the second floor while her grandparents moved to the attic. Twelve-year-old Carol was sent 10 miles downtown to shop in the clearance section in the basement of a large department store for her mother and grandmother. In earlier years, her mother had shopped in local dress shops for her clothing. Carol said neither her mother nor her grandmother complained about the clothes that Carol chose for them or that they needed to purchase clothing in that manner. Later, the bank foreclosed on the house they were building in a new housing development which would have been a prestigious step up for their social status. When asked if her mother ever complained when her father was so often paid in clothing and lamps instead of cash, Carol said, “I can’t remember my mother ever complaining about anything.” Neither the family’s financial situation nor any of the other challenges with family members living in such close proximity was ever discussed—at least not in front of the children. As far as Carol and her sister knew, everything was fine.

Fred’s mother never complained that their finances were so pinched from her husband’s meager earnings that sometimes they had to seek loans from a finance company to manage their own financial needs. He never heard her suggest that they should cut back on how much they were helping support other family members. He said, “She made do [and] never complained. That was the wife’s job.” She had wanted to help increase their income by selling blankets door to door, but her efforts were
quickly halted by her husband. Instead she scrimped, canned, altered clothes for Fred, did without for herself, and they made it through their most difficult years.

*A matter of perspective.* Throughout the many years that Betty’s family lived in the parsonage in their little village, she never heard her father complain. He did not complain that the house provided for him by the church he served did not have a well, resulting in significant hardship for his family, nor did he complain during the period of time when the church could not pay him his salary but instead he was paid in produce from his parishioners’ gardens or milk from their farms. Most of all, he did not complain about his wife’s erratic moods and odd ways. Betty said in spite of it all, her father “loved her mother dearly. They had a closeness that bridged all [the problems].” He had been raised in a family with 16 children in a southeastern state. Perhaps the parsonage, with all of its problems, felt more spacious to him with only five inhabitants than the home where he was reared with 18 people. It is likely that there were at least occasional strained relationships living in deep poverty with that many family members in his childhood home. From his perspective, his life in the 1930s may have been easier for himself and his family than the life he experienced in his childhood.

Linda’s parents had grown up on farms in relative poverty. When they married and moved to the city in the 1920s, her father easily found a job in manufacturing. Linda cannot remember them complaining about their circumstances when her mother contracted tuberculosis and was forced to leave home and go to a sanitarium for several months. Nor did she hear any complaining when her father was laid off from the factory for two or three years. It did not seem to be too uncommon to Linda because others in
the neighborhood had also lost jobs and were struggling to survive. She said, “Everyone did what they could. [They] seemed to try to be doing something… to get along.”

Linda’s father was 12 years older than her mother, who was at times sullen and moody. He was “a good man and he adored her. He thought she was the most wonderful person alive, and anything she did or said was all right.” Was he blind to her faults or did he sympathize with her because of her physical frailty? (Her tuberculosis returned three more times.) Normally, he and Linda fixed their own meals and did most of the housework, but he did not complain. Perhaps, from his perspective, he believed that Linda’s life was easier, even with the financial and emotional challenges they faced, than it might have been if she had grown up as he had on a farm.

A positive outlook. Kathy was about 10 years old when her parents lost their savings in a bank closure. They spoke of it in her presence but in a calm, non-alarming way that kept her from worrying or becoming angry. She said,

I don’t remember my mother and dad ever being bitter [about the bank closure]. Sometimes they seemed worried and concerned and wondered how they were going to manage, but they had a positive outlook, always.

Kathy’s parents were planners, looking ahead at what might happen in the future and doing what they could to prepare for it. For a while it looked like their careful planning was for naught. The money they had saved for the future was at least temporarily and partially lost in the surprise bank closure. Kathy’s father’s stable job for the city where he had earned a comfortable salary all of a sudden was uncertain when the city ran out of money and was forced to turn to scrip to pay all city employees. The gold coins they had saved over a period of time to help hedge against inflation had to be
relinquished when the government went off the gold standard. In the midst of these unforeseen blows to their attempts to control their circumstances, Kathy never heard her parents complain. They did not complain about politicians or the federal government’s handling of the economic crisis or the city’s lack of financial planning which resulted in bankruptcy. The only hint that her parents were more concerned than they appeared was that in the years of the Depression when they experienced their greatest financial struggles, her mother suffered with debilitating headaches. They went away after they were no longer on scrip and her father was once again receiving regular paychecks.

**Few expectations.** Carrie says she was “perfectly content” in the rural community in which she lived. The other children from the farms and the small town where she went to junior high and high school were largely “in the same boat and we did not suffer with it.” The children in town had bicycles, which Carrie and her sisters lacked, but

in this little town, which relied on the farmers, they were pretty much in the same situation financially. We didn’t have that much to begin with [so] we had no idea what we might be missing. We were just content. I didn’t expect things and was satisfied with what I had. There were not a lot of expectations, I guess.”

Of her father, she said he “was patience personified, and he just never complained. We knew his back was breaking; it hurt a lot.” Even so, on Saturday nights the family would bathe and clean up and go to town to socialize with their friends. She said her parents “seemed perfectly happy. I never knew that my parents were unhappy or stressed.” Her parents may have complained about the weather when it affected the crops, and Carrie does vaguely recall them occasionally expressing frustration about the
way farm commodities were priced, but they did not complain that life was not fair or too hard. “Maybe some did, but they did not. I think they were not typical.”

When asked what her parents were like later in life, she said they never complained when Carrie moved away and did not try to prevent her from moving. It was the same with both of her sisters. Carrie and one sister married men who were from a distant state and another sister married a man in a state in the opposite direction. None of the three daughters stayed at home or in the community. No child was left to take over the family farm or to be close to their parents and beloved aunt. No child was left whose children could have been a comfort to her parents in their older years. Still, there were no complaints from her parents. Any expectations they had for their children were laid aside, allowing them to follow their own life path.

They never, ever complained. Never said a word, and you know, they accepted our husbands and whole families, and it was the way it was. It had to be hard for them, but they never complained.

In much the same way, Cheryl’s parents did not complain about their hard work or lack of material possessions. They had the Sears catalog at their house, which enticed many Americans to desire new fashionable clothes or tools or furniture and caused them to become discontent when they could not have them. However, it held little “power” in their home. After they looked through the catalog as much as they wanted, the pages were used as toilet paper.

Cheryl’s family lived in a farmhouse with no electricity and no well. The upstairs was not heated. When asked if she grumbled about that she said,

We went to bed in the cold, and I mean cold, but we didn’t know any better. I mean, we just really didn’t realize [it could be different].
When asked if her parents complained about the conditions in which they lived, she said:

No, because there wasn’t anything else available at the time. It seemed like everybody around was in the same situation, you know. Until we got electric … you didn’t get a lot of things.

The farmers in their area must have lived similar lifestyles. However, Cheryl and her siblings went to junior high and high school where there was electricity, central heat, and indoor plumbing. Her father sold produce and farm products door to door to people in town who had more modern houses and conveniences than they did on the farm. They regularly interacted with people who lived differently than they did. The only thing Cheryl envied of her friends in town (who had electricity, radios, and indoor bathrooms) was that they could go to events in town easier because they lived so close. She said, “We didn’t really feel deprived. I mean, we had plenty to eat, which some people didn’t always [have].” Because they had “plenty to eat” they did not feel deprived. Cheryl’s parents focused on what they had, not on what they did not have and somehow did not expect to live like the people they knew in town. Thinking about her life she mused, “I really can’t complain, you know.” She could complain, but she chooses not to.

*Adjusting to the new normal.* Robert’s mother coped with blow after blow during the 1930s. First her husband contracted tuberculosis, lost his job, and had to be institutionalized. Then they lost the house on the hill to the bank and their family moved to her in-law’s farm for six years. When asked about her reaction to this, Robert said,

I think she was devastated. She had been a city girl, born and raised in [town] and never lived on a farm... I would say Mother and her sister were probably raised in, not lavish style, but in pretty good conditions. When we had to go to the farm, it was a total change for her. She adapted, but I don't think easily. She and my grandmother got along quite well, but I remember Grandmother doing
most of the cooking. Mother didn't have a job: probably couldn't have gotten a job if she wanted one.

His mother adapted to all these changes but it was not easy. When asked if his mother complained to the children about hating life on the farm, Robert said,

They had an outhouse that was a considerable distance from the house. And in the wintertime it was hard. That was quite a change from living in the house [in town on the hill] where we had heat and plumbing and city facilities and everything there. That probably was the biggest change for us, having to go take that walk. You know, for my mother and my sisters to have to go to that outhouse, must have been awful. Oh, I suppose, I'm sure they complained about it: "I have to go out in the cold." But it was part of the life.

I pressed a bit, wondering if she had become bitter as the years passed and she grew older, and whether she had complained to him as one adult to another. He said,

If she did any complaining, it would be one of two bases: One, that she had spent so much of her life alone; and she missed Dad and he missed her and they were very close. I suppose you could call that complaining. It wasn't of such, but it was just her concern or whatever of how much she missed him. She felt that she had lost a great deal of her life, because with him being gone most of the time, she had to be the breadwinner for us [after moving off the farm]. She never had a vacation, other than maybe they did before kids were born, but after Dad got sick, certainly there was never any time for that or any money to do that. You know, I think it was just a concern that she had missed so much, and she had.

Her complaints were not that they lost the house to the bank or that she had to give up the car. She did not complain that she and her children lost the prestige of living "on the hill" across the street from close friends or that they had lost the financial security she once had known. Other than the adjustment to using an outhouse in the dead of winter, she did not complain that she had to leave the town where she had grown up with the common luxuries of indoor plumbing and central heat and an easier life and she did not complain about moving in with her in-laws on a farm. She did not complain that she had little say-so in her mother-in-law’s kitchen after she had spent years cooking
in her own kitchen. She did not complain that she had to give up shopping for her children’s clothes in the department store in town but instead she set aside her pride to rely on her father-in-law to purchase clothing for her children when they needed something. She did not complain when her son became gravely ill and missed a year of school at the same time that her husband was in the sanitarium, himself gravely ill.

Grateful for the blessings that she still had, she adjusted to the “new normal” in her life. Robert said

She just accepted it. This was what life was. I never heard her complain that life had cut her a tough life. She missed my father tremendously; they had been a very close couple, but an awful lot of her life was lived without him and he without her.

Anna described her mother as “easy-going.” Her mother had two brothers and two sisters. They lived in poverty in a shack when she was a child so her life improved significantly when she married Anna’s father. Even after there was no income coming in after her father was laid off from his job, Anna cannot remember her mother complaining, no matter how difficult life became during the Depression. She was a hard worker, always busy sewing or canning or cooking or managing the home. Even in the worst of times, neither of her parents complained. Because of their example, Anna said she and her siblings did not worry or complain. “Why should we? We were happy. We played; we didn’t worry about things.” Anna accepted the new menu, one that offered very little meat and a standard fare of soup or white gravy on homemade bread as “just the way life was now.” If she or her siblings wanted something that her parents could not afford, they simply received an answer of “no” and that was the end of it. Somehow the children understood that sacrifices needed to be made with the railroad closed and so
many people out of work. Their parents did not whine or complain and the children understood that they were not to whine or complain either. The only time in her life that she observed her mother as discontented and unhappy was at the end of her life when her father died, forcing her mother to give up her independence and live in a nursing home.

**Learning to be thankful.** Shirley’s mother’s life was challenging even as a little girl. As an African American child, she grew up in “an environment of deep slavery-type prejudice.” Her mother died when she was four years old. Her first two husbands died young, one of a coal-mining accident and the other of tuberculosis. She married a third time to a man whom Shirley referred to as lazy and undependable to do all he could to provide for the family. During the Depression, the family moved seven times, always seeking a better job and situation. In spite of it all, Shirley said her mother did not complain. At times she voiced concern that there was not enough money to purchase proper food for her family and that their living conditions were very often shabby, but she never complained that life was not fair. Shirley said,

> She was **thankful** [spoken with emphasis] for what we had. We [children] learned to be thankful; grateful to God for what we did have.

Shirley admitted that her older siblings might have a different perspective of their life if they had been interviewed, but she could not recall any of the members of her family complaining as a normal occurrence. They were happy for even small things. She said,

> At Christmastime [at church] we got an orange, a few nuts and some hard candy. But you know something? We were glad to get that. We were happy!

**It was the way of living.** Walter’s family lived with three generations in a house on a farm with no modern conveniences. There was order to their lives. Every day held
different responsibilities such as laundry or baking, and none of them were easy to do without electricity or indoor plumbing. His father, 54 years old in 1930, was constantly working to produce as much on his farm as possible and he also repaired his own farm machinery. With daily life as hard as it was for this farm family, Walter said,

I never heard Mom complain; never heard it. Never heard my aunt or grandma complain; never did. I never heard Dad complain. I would hear him talk about some things he’d have to do, and he’d say, “Well, I’ve got to get out there and get to that,” but I never heard him complain.

Both his parents were energetic and self-motivated to manage their responsibilities on the farm for the good of the family and they simply did what needed to be done.

In Walter’s farming community, farmers helped one another at thrashing time, traveling from farm to farm until everyone’s thrashing was completed. The women prepared a huge meal while the men worked in weather that was almost always sweltering. There was no way to cool the kitchen to make cooking more bearable. There was never enough hot water to wash when the men and boys came in from the field to eat. Instead, they used cold water from the well or cistern. Even so, Walter said, “Nobody complained. It was the way of living.” Everyone accepted physical hardship and discomfort as a normal part of life.

We were old enough to take it. The only research participant who indicated that his parents had complained with their circumstances was Donald. His mother was known as a “worrier” and had pleaded with her husband not to hire a lawyer to sue the railroad after his accident. Up until that time, Donald’s family had prospered, paying cash for both their house and their new car. After the accident, Donald’s father not only lost his health but also his job. This was a double blow since he had been strong and
athletic up until that time. Although his parents sometimes worried and complained, Donald said

They [tried to keep] us happy, like nothing was out of the way. It was just that we had to take and slow down on our wants. We were old enough to take it.

When they explained the new way the family now needed to live and “what we had to face” the children understood and “fit right into it.”

_The cultural influences on the parents of the research participants._ This overwhelmingly positive attitude stumped me and I did not know what to make of it. I wondered if my research sample exhibited unusual findings. In my background reading of what life was like for families in the 1930s, I read accounts of people who became embittered, angry, and desperate. Only one of the 12 families in my study had this type of reaction. I thought of my own parents, whom I casually interviewed before the study began, who told the same story of parents who faced great difficulties without complaint.

I began to wonder how it was possible that parents who grew up in at least eight different states, in communities whose population ranged from large cities to rural farms and ranches, whose families were relatively well-off or painfully poor or had income somewhere in between those two, all had such similar thoughts, attitudes, and behavior concerning their acceptance of facing the difficulties of life with so little outward complaint. I wondered if there might have been common cultural influences in American society at the time of their childhood and youth that affected the thinking and behaviors of these remarkable parents.

Trying to gain a better understanding of the societal or cultural influences on the parents of my research participants, I sent a letter to them all asking that they complete a
small 3x5” card and mail it back to me (see Appendix M). The card asked the dates of their mother’s and father’s birth and the last grade each parent completed in school. I received responses back from 11 out of 12 participants. One person could not remember the date of her father’s birth or the last grade he completed in school. However, the others were able to give at least the year of their parents’ birth, if not the full date.

From this information I learned that the oldest mother was born in 1883 and the youngest mother was born in 1904. The oldest father was born in 1876 and the youngest two fathers were born in 1900. The following table provides more complete information.

Table 2

*Year of Birth and Highest Grade Completed of Parents of Research Participants*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Year of Mother’s Birth</th>
<th>Highest Grade Completed</th>
<th>Year of Father’s Birth</th>
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The majority of the parents were of school age at some time between the years of 1900 and 1915.
I would have liked to have been able to have interviewed these parents myself to better understand their thoughts and attitudes. However, because they all died many years ago, I tried the next best thing and attempted to look at some of the cultural influences from an historical perspective on children in general in the United States between the years of 1900 and 1918. The five areas I explored were school, popular literature, scouting, the thrift movement, and religious faith and church life. It is uncertain how great of an impact these cultural influences had on the thoughts and attitudes of the parents of the research participants, but there was a general belief that it was important to help children and youth develop strong moral character and all five of these areas of influence attempted to do that. These five areas are explored in greater detail in chapter two.

Dr. Martin Seligman reported in 1990 that Americans were “in the middle of an epidemic of depression” (2006, p. 10), stating that severe depression was ten times more prevalent than 50 years earlier in 1940. He reported on two studies conducted in the 1970s concerning the rate of mental illness in America. The results indicated those Americans born in the middle third of the last century were more likely to have experienced severe depression than those in the first third of the century. People born in 1925, which is the cut-off date for participation in my study, were found to only have a four percent likelihood of experiencing even one episode of severe depression over the course of their lifetime. Those born before World War I, as were the parents of this study’s research participants, were found to only have a one percent likelihood of experiencing one episode of severe depression over their lifetime (p. 64). Researchers
were surprised with these findings because common sense indicates that the longer a person lives, the more likely they are to experience an episode of depression. Those born before World War I had lived through two world wars and a severe economic depression and yet 99 percent of the population did not exhibit signs of severe depression. Seligman asserts that it is possible to lessen the likelihood of a depressive episode by changing one’s thought patterns. Did any of the cultural influences of school curriculum, popular literature, scouting, the thrift movement, and/or religious faith and church life mentioned in chapter two provide a different psychological focus for them by promoting a positive attitude that looked for the good and downplayed the negative? I would love to have been able to discuss these things with the parents of this study’s research participants.

**Life Lessons**

I asked the 12 research participants in this study if they could imagine what advice their parents might give to young parents today who faced financial struggles. That seemed to be difficult for them, although they had learned many life lessons from their parents that could be shared with others. I then asked them if they had any advice that they would like to share with young parents. They had many words of advice and life lessons that they wanted to pass on to others. The following advice is either given verbatim or by inference and is arranged in sections that are grouped alphabetically. There is no specific order as to what the participants believed was most important.

**Children:**

1. Children often turn out to have similar values and behaviors as their parents.
2. Expect your children to work to help the family. Work with them and show them how to accomplish the tasks and do them well.

3. Be a good example to your children and spouse and extended family. Model to them how to live and then live that way.

4. Do not talk about financial problems or other difficulties in front of young children. Protect your children from worry about adult issues.

5. Talk about financial issues or other issues with your children in a way that does not scare them or cause them to worry. Explain the situation to them on their level.

6. Expect children to play outdoors and use their imaginations to have fun.

7. As a daily rule, do not entertain your children. Expect them to use their imaginations and to entertain themselves. If they complain, perhaps they need a job.

8. What a blessing to your children if they grow up to remember only your even temper and pleasant nature.

9. Children are worth their parents’ investment of time and attention. Parents should be their first teachers and pass on to them all they know about life and caring for themselves, their possessions, and their relationships.

10. It is more important for parents to spend time with their children than to give them material possessions.

11. Parents should be responsible and wise so their children can look up to them and emulate their good example.
12. Expect your children to do their best in school. A good education is extremely important.

13. Children pick up on attitudes of those around them. Do not complain. Teach them not to whine and complain.

14. Children will appreciate possessions more if they have less and have to wait and maybe even work for those things that they really want.

15. Teach children to be generous with other people.

16. Teach children to act respectfully to their teachers and other authority figures.

17. Help your children become good citizens. Model to them how good citizens behave.

**Family and Friends:**

18. Mealtime should be a time for pleasant talk about the happenings of the day and not a time to discuss only those things that adults talk about. Eat together as a family often.

19. Mealtime can be even more fun with a picnic!

20. Work to strengthen your family. First become a responsible person who does what can personally be done before expecting others to step in and help. You be the model of a responsible, caring person in your family.

21. Make strong commitments to your spouse and children.

22. Reach out to be an emotional and physical support to extended family without allowing them to take advantage of you. If the children in your extended family
have enough (or more than enough), give them other things that they might not have such as experiences. Invite them to be part of your life.

23. Help your parents. Do not take advantage of them. In their older years, be a loving and helpful support to them. Do not expect anything in return and do not complain if it is not always easy.

24. Cultivate friendships. Be hospitable and invite others to join you in fun activities. These do not have to cost much money.

25. Keep in touch with family and friends, even if you live a distance from them.

26. Appreciate nature. Care for nature. Spend more time outdoors as a family.

27. Talking with your friends and family is relaxing and helps release tension.

28. Conversation does not cost anything. Do things with friends and family that does not cost anything.

Growing as a Person:

29. Be the best person you can be. You cannot give to others what you do not possess. Improve yourself and do not be stopped by the realization that others in your family may not become or desire to be all they can be. You be the best you can be.

30. Do not expect life to be easy.

31. Slow down. Parents and children alike need to have less stress. That may mean cutting down on some outside activities.


33. Check your tongue and make your face and body language positive.
34. If you decide to be happy, even in circumstances that could make you unhappy, you will most likely be happy. Much of our emotional health depends on our choice of attitude.

35. Expect hardship, not ease. Expect to persevere through hardship. Expect to do better than you thought you could.

36. Maintain a positive attitude and a pleasant demeanor.

37. It is important for adults to keep up with current events and read the newspaper or listen to the news.

38. Do not gossip or speak negatively about other people. If you do not have anything good to say, keep quiet.

39. Make the most of each day because you do not know what difficulties may come tomorrow.

40. If you are careful with your appearance and dress nicely, it will help your children to be proud of you.

41. Children notice how people dress and how they take care of themselves. Be a good example to them so they will respect you more.

42. Do not complain if it is warmer or colder than you like. Adapt.

**Health:**

43. Take care of your health. Eat well-balanced meals that are not excessive.

   Exercise (even if you are in your 90s).

44. Rough it more often to develop toughness in yourself and your family.

45. Slow down.
46. Eat more vegetables.

47. Get back to real food. Cook from scratch and learn to do it well.

**Helping Others:**

48. Help those in need. If you can, give them the dignity of working for you in order to earn money or food.

49. Help others help themselves. Do not do for other people what they can do for themselves, but help provide the tools they need.

50. If you give to those in need in your community, do it in such a way that will not cause embarrassment.

**Home:**

51. Make your home a place of order. Expect your children to help keep the order.

52. Put a greater emphasis on caring for your home. Expect your children to help with this task. Spend more time at home. Develop your home.

53. If you move into a larger home, do not go into debt to furnish it. Purchase furnishings as you have the money.

**Money and Possessions:**

54. Do not expect to have every material thing you want. Save the money first and then purchase what you want or need. Be willing to wait.

55. **Own** your car and other possessions instead of always paying on them. Ownership of possessions is a good thing. Making large monthly payments is not a good thing.
56. If possible, keep your car long enough to pay for it and save toward the next car.

Pay cash for your next car and every car after that.

57. Take care of what you have. Care for your clothing and furniture and other possessions so they last as long as possible.

58. Be careful with your money. As much as possible, do not go into debt for those things that you need.

59. Save for tomorrow. You do not know what difficulties you may face in the future where your savings will be necessary.

60. Take advantage of opportunities to use your skills of labor to save money.

61. Find ways to help your children earn their own money for things they really want.

62. For more extravagant purchases, expect children to earn at least half of the cost.

63. Do not waste energy or resources. Do not leave lights on when you are not there and do not waste food. Use things up and don’t waste them.

64. It is possible to live happily and be content with fewer clothes and fewer things.

65. Hunting and fishing can provide meat for the family to eat fairly inexpensively.

66. If you have room in your yard, plant a garden to raise some of the food your family needs. If you do not have room, purchase produce in bulk at a farmer’s market or some other produce outlet and preserve it.

67. Live today but plan for the future.

**Religious Faith:**

68. Do everything you can do and leave the rest to God.
69. Consider finding a church that speaks to your spiritual needs. Keep looking
yourself, even if others in your family are not interested.

70. Things will get better if you are strong in your religion and in your family.

71. Parents should encourage their children’s religious and academic education.

72. Show respect for God by dressing more nicely when you go to church.

**Work Ethic and Skill Development:**

73. Develop skills and learn to do more yourself so you do not have to pay others to
cook for you or do many of your jobs for you.

74. Learn to work hard, physically hard. (If you do this, you won’t have to work out
in the gym so much.)

75. Work hard and allow play and personal entertainment to be a reward for hard
work, not something in place of hard work.

76. Use “pizzazz” to make ordinary things more special. This does not have to cost
money. Have picnics, make cakes from scratch and decorate in a fun way.

77. Learn to cook and bake well.

78. Even young children can learn to work and accomplish many things. Older
children can and should do considerably more.

79. Every child should have chores to do.

80. It is possible to live with little or no electricity. How much energy could parents
save if more was done by hand instead of machine or gadget?

81. Do as much as you can to live without the assistance of the government or others.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview of the Problem

This study’s participants all had at least some fond memories and good experiences that were shared in their interviews, even though all the participants’ families had experienced financial hardship at some point in the 1930s. What did the families do that enabled these children who are now adults to emerge strengthened instead of weakened from their challenges? Although it was not possible to interview the parents of the research participants, it was possible to examine their actions and beliefs through the eyes and memories of their children and discover answers to those questions.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies and skills parents utilized to provide for their family’s basic survival needs, and the beliefs and values they embraced during the Great Depression to provide for the physical and emotional needs of their families in the midst of economic hardship. The focus of this study was based on the following research questions:

1. What are the most enduring life lessons learned from parents during the years of the 1930s concerning life in general and family life specifically?

2. How did parents who experienced financial hardship provide for the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and intellectual needs of their children and other family members during the 1930s?
Review of Methodology

A narrative research approach was utilized in this study. Obtaining a pool of participants for the study proved to be a greater challenge than I anticipated. Unsuccessful attempts to locate participants were made that included contacting local pastors, directors of area agencies on aging, and senior center administrators. When those efforts failed, I publicized the study and need for participants at my church. As a result, several people put me in contact with potential participants who either participated or talked with friends about the study who were able to participate. In addition, I spoke with a retired news reporter who wrote a bi-weekly column in the local newspaper. He highlighted the study in one of his columns, which sparked interest, inquiries, and eventually interviews. I also contacted two retirement communities with independent living apartments and was able to recruit several participants from those contacts.

Twelve participants were personally interviewed using a semi-structured interviewing technique and asked to tell their stories of family life during the 1930s. This type of inquiry focuses on finding meaning and a deep level of understanding. Personal narratives and family stories were some of the types of data that were analyzed, as well as a limited number of artifacts. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, cleaned up to make it easier to read, and then restoried to arrive at a deeper level of meaning. The transcriptions were then sent to the participants so they could provide input into the perceived accuracy of the stories. Themes emerged from the data and were substantiated by passages from the interviews.
Research Outcomes

Support. The families in this study were the first line of support for the research participants and their parents. They utilized a comprehensive type of family support to help meet the physical and emotional needs of every generation of the family. It was not a one-sided support, but there was generous give and take on all sides. It was administered in such a way that every person of every generation provided support and was a recipient of support. The children were reared by their parents with the aid of aunts and uncles as well as grandparents. Older family members, especially once they were widowed, were supported by their children and grandchildren in such a way that expressed respect but did not assume that they were unable to contribute to the well-being of the family. Unmarried aunts and uncles in these families lived with the larger family, providing work and support for those in their own generation as well and those in the younger and older generations. The parents of the research participants both supported and were recipients of the support of the larger family. No one took over the authority of the parents in their responsibility to rear their children, but everyone contributed to the well-being of the others.

Community support became the second line of support for the research participants and their families. Sometimes this support was in the form of physical assistance. It was more often in the form of emotional support, providing fellowship and fun in the midst of economic challenges that could have led to discouragement. At times, the parents of the research participants provided support to members of the community in a way that also helped their own families. For instance, Walter’s family
helped take care of a neighboring farmer’s orchard when he was unable to do so himself. They split the produce with their neighbor and kept the rest for themselves so all were helped in the process.

In two instances the government provided support for the research participants. In one instance, it was offered in payment for work through the NYA to a high school senior. She was elated with the opportunity to take advantage of this type of support and was both emotionally and physically assisted. The other instance was city relief that was offered to Donald’s family when they had no where else to turn for support. They felt humiliated and ashamed to have to accept this type of support and the lack of warmth or caring by those who administered it produced pain instead of emotional support.

**Work.** A strong work ethic was highly valued in the families of the research participants. All generations worked to help the family. The parents and their siblings (the aunts and uncles of the research participants) carried the heaviest workload but the older generation also did as much as their strength would permit without coercion or guilt. In the case of Walter’s aged grandfather, he tenaciously worked harder than any of the other family members expected. However, they allowed him to continue to work in the fields as he was able if he so desired and did not attempt to shield him from the possible negative health-related consequences that could have occurred. In this way, he felt proud of his contributions to the family’s overall well-being. The children were taught to work as early as four or five with age-appropriate jobs so that by the time they became teens, they were competent in their ability to perform many valuable tasks. The
parents and other adults in the family served as models for the children, showing them how to perform tasks with energy and a positive attitude.

**Thrift.** All 12 families in this study practiced thrift in the 1930s. They made the most of their resources and were not wasteful. They cooked from basic ingredients and most of them grew at least a portion of their own food. They had few clothes but took care of them meticulously so they lasted as long as possible. Most of the research participants had few toys but they used their imaginations to make their own fun. As much as possible they saved for purchases before they bought them and went into debt only if absolutely necessary. If debt was inevitable to purchase absolutely essential food at a corner store or to be able to stay in an apartment when there were no funds for the monthly rental payments to a landlord, the debt was repaid as soon as possible. Most of the research participants cut back on their spending and determined to wait until they had the money instead of going into debt for desires that were not absolutely necessary.

**Skills.** Most of the parents of this study’s research participants were rich in practical, labor-intensive skills, replacing the need for much of their money. Their ability to produce and prepare their own food; sew, mend, or restyle their own clothes; repair their own homes and machines; gather and chop wood for fuel for their stoves; hunt and fish for additional meat and/or pelts to sell at the store; and many other skills provided power to improve their living circumstances. They knew they were not helpless, which provided them with hope for a better future. They also had the ability to learn and increase their skills when they did not know how to do something. Kathy’s father could “do almost anything,” but he read books on what he did not know and
learned to improve his skills in that way. Their skills also gave them bartering power to trade farm products such as eggs and cream for flour and sugar and other products they could not raise or grow. Their skills increased with use and served as a foundation from which to solve many practical problems with very little or no money. In the families in this study, most of the parents intentionally taught their children skills that would enable them to provide valuable assistance to the family as well as empower them with the skills they would need as adults.

It is doubtful that the research participants and their families could have endured some of their hardships as well as they did without the advantage of some of the skills that they used. They were able to eat better, clothe themselves better, and make better use of all their resources because they knew how to do so many things.

Beliefs. The parents and families in this study adhered to several beliefs and values that impacted their thoughts and expectations as they reared their children during the years of the Great Depression.

Religious faith. Ten out of 12 of the families in this study considered religious faith a foundational belief and attended and participated in various church activities regularly. All 12 participants became church members either as children or adults, believing that God took a personal interest in them and would help them meet their challenges if they asked.

Family. In addition to religious faith, the parents of all 12 participants held the family unit in high regard. The supportive family actions of at least one and usually both parents indicated the unspoken value they placed on all generations. Much of their
leisure time and most of their important holidays were spent with family instead of alone or with friends.

**Education.** Technological and scientific advances in industry, medicine, and energy, to name just a few, convinced the parents of the importance of education. All of the research participants graduated from high school, and several went to college or business school after graduation. Even though most of the parents had not graduated from high school, they considered it vitally important that their children have that opportunity.

**No complaints.** Nine out of 12 of the research participants cannot recall their parents complaining when they faced difficulties. Of the three who can recall their parents complaining, Donald’s father was seriously injured in a railroad accident and suffered debilitating complications from that injury. Donald remembers his parents and especially his mother worrying about the future when the railroad refused to provide compensation for the accident. Shirley remembers that her mother’s only complaints were that she did not have proper food and clothing for her children. Other than that, her mother was “thankful” for what she had. Robert remembers his mother expressed disappointment that she had to live so much of her life without her husband after he contracted tuberculosis—and that it was difficult to have to go out in the cold to use the outdoor toilet after growing up in the city with an indoor bathroom. Other than that, she did not complain about her circumstances. The other nine participants cannot recall their parents complaining at all, regardless of their circumstances.
The cultural influences of the years of the parent’s childhoods were explored to see if there were occurrences that had an impact on their beliefs and attitudes. Those five influences were 1) school and especially school curriculum, 2) popular literature for youth, 3) scouting, 4) the thrift movement, and 5) religious faith and church life. All these influences encouraged strong character development, which included an emphasis on working hard and maintaining a cheerful attitude. Did these influences have any impact on the parents of this study’s research participants? Or, were they simply protecting their children from worry and anxiety by not voicing their concerns in front of their children?

**How Did They Do It?**

**Physical Needs.** The parents of the participants in this study provided for the physical needs of their children and other family members during the 1930s by readjusting their expectations of what they should be able to provide their children. Most of them utilized a large set of skills that enabled them to provide for the basic needs of their family with the labor of their own hands. They gardened, preserved, hunted, fished, chopped wood, sewed and mended garments, repaired equipment and built their own out-buildings. At times they shared labor with other members in the family. With creativity and motivation they found ways to provide enough so that even those like Donald, who was hungry at times, remained healthy and strong.

**Emotional Needs.** The emotional needs of the research participants and their families were met largely through the support of their families and communities. The research participants were all important contributors to the welfare of their families by
their own work ethic and skills. This sense of competence increased their sense of power and self-esteem. All 12 participants spoke with pride in their interviews of the contributions they made to their family during the 1930s. It is interesting to note that none of them spoke of their parents or other family members praising them for their assistance but each of them knew that they were filling important roles to help their families. They did not have expectations of large numbers of possessions, partly because most of their friends were in similar situations. Several participants noted that the children in school did not seem to notice if clothes were worn over and over or if they were a little shabby. Adults managed with the belongings they had and expected the economy to get better soon. No American economic depression had ever lasted as long as the one in the 1930s and many people believed it would just be a matter of time until the economy improved and life would get easier. Carrie said, “Women just managed with what they had, and if they were fortunate, they were content with what they had.”

**Psychological Needs.** Very little was said by the research participants in this study about how the parents and families provided for the psychological needs of their children and other family members. Betty’s mother had some sort of mental illness or instability but people did not talk about it. Her father never told the children where their mother went when she was gone from home for a year. He did not explain when she returned or even later in life. Her mother never told them why she was gone all that time. Betty said, “Back then, if you had a little problem like that, nobody talked about it. She did keep a little problem all her life, and it was kind of hard to live with that.”
Mental illness was a mystery to even health care professionals at the time and psychotropic drugs were not available to help patients. Betty’s church and community did not hold her mother’s illness against Betty or her family. If anything, Betty received extra attention from her teacher in grade school who thought her mother was neglecting her because she was so thin.

**Spiritual Needs.** The parents of the this study’s research participants largely attempted to provide for their children’s spiritual regular church attendance. Most of them went to church themselves and expected their children to attend with them. Eight of the 12 participants had this experience. Fred, Donald, Linda, and Kathy did not go to church with their parents, but when Kathy was 11 or 12 years old, she decided on her own to find a church and her parents encouraged her in this pursuit. Eventually she joined a church and then they began to attend as well. Donald went to Sunday school with his neighbors, and his parents did not discourage him from this. Eleven of the 12 participants were regularly encouraged to maintain high moral character. When Carol was 16 years old she went to Germany as a foreign exchange student. Her chaperone allowed her German boyfriend to take her canoeing up the river. However, she said, “but fortunately my mother had instilled so many concerns about morality and with the upbringing that we had, there were no monkeyshines or “monkeying around” in my life.” One exception was Donald’s father, who was shown by a neighbor how to jump electricity so they did not have to pay for it. Donald said, “We were all taught to do a no-no against the company.” All three children were taught not to answer the door for anyone from the electric company until the wires were pulled.
**Intellectual Needs.** All the parents of the research participants encouraged and expected their children to graduate from high school at the very least. It was understood that whereas a sixth or eighth grade education had been appropriate for many of them in their youth, their own children would need a higher level of education to meet the challenges of the new technological age. The parents permitted their children to take time from their responsibilities at home to continue to go to school and to spend what time was necessary to complete their homework.

**Enduring Life Lessons**

The enduring life lessons that were learned by the parents of the research participants were not easy at first to detect. When first questioned, a typical answer was that they were not sure. However, reviewing the interview transcripts showed that there were lessons to learn. The parents taught by example more than by words although some did use words as well. Several participants noted that their parents set the model and they just followed. The importance of thrift, family, faith, and maintaining a positive attitude were all learned so naturally by some that they adopted their parents’ worldview without realizing it.

Talking with Cheryl about how her parents helped her to realize she must wait for some things she said, “Well, they didn't sit down and just say, you are going to do this, you are going to do that. It is just the way we lived. We kind of learned to live the way they did and saved.” Kathy, referring to the way her parents taught her to be thrifty said, “They never really talked about difficulties, they just lived them in such a way that I grew up being very thrifty myself about everything, without them ever saying…”
Impact of Research on Researcher

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) assert that in narrative inquiry the researcher and the research participants develop a relationship with one another, one in which all involved grow and change in the process. My research journey coincided with caring for my parents, who were of the same generation as my interviewees. In March 2011, my mother died after a very brief illness but a long period of decline. A week before she became ill for the final time she insisted that she wanted to help with my research and paid for the video camera and tripod that I used to record the participant interviews. After her death, my father had numerous health problems and was in and out of the hospital and back and forth for doctor’s visits for the next 17 months until his death. My interviews began three months after my mother’s death. The participants’ stories were interwoven with my own experience of caring for my father. I found courage and a desire to keep moving forward in the stories of my interviewees as well as the stories of my parents. By the time I was reading literature that was popular during the youth of the parents of my research participants (see chapter two), my father was receiving hospice care at home and I was there daily and often spent the night. I gained courage from reading stories like Laddie, Betty Zane, Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, and Five Little Peppers. At times the only avenue I could take that would allow me to continue moving forward was to read books such as these. Through the wonder of narrative inquiry, as I reflected on the stories of my interviewees and the stories of the characters in the popular literature from the turn of the last century mentioned in chapter two, I was
able to “beam into” their experiences, witness their strength and fortitude, and keep moving on. What an unexpected and very great blessing that was for me.

**Limitations**

Using the narrative method of qualitative research has some limitations. One limitation may be the age of the sample population. The process of interviewing multiple times, transcribing the interviews, and restorying the story was time-consuming. I was concerned that in the period of time between the initial interview and the point at which I was able to send them their final “restoried” story that they might have become ill or unable to proceed with the study. One participant did have a slight stroke, but she recovered and was able to read her final story. I attempted to bring their stories to the restory stage as quickly as possible to decrease the likelihood of this possibility, but it took longer than I anticipated.

Another potential limitation may be what people remembered. Studies with older adults show that memory tends to decline to some degree with age (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2008; Nilsson, 2003; & Spaniol & Madden (2007). The participants may not have always remembered the most critical things that could apply to this study—at least at the time of the interviews. The interview questions were sent ahead of time to help jog their memories of situations that pertained to the topics in question. Some participants jotted down notes to share during the interview as a result of the questions.

The pool of participants was somewhat limited by a certain geographic area. There were no participants representing the Deep South or the most western or northern regions of the United States. Most participants came from the central and eastern states
of the United States. If participants had been available from other regions, they may have added a different perspective to the study.

The educational attainment of this study’s research participants was not representative of all youth their age during the 1930s and beyond. All the participants graduated from high school. Of the 12 participants, six graduated from college and three others attended college or business school for a period of time. If there had been more participants with a greater diversity of educational attainment, the stories and family outcomes may have been different.

**Transferability**

Although all of the research participants grew up during the 1930s and lived in the same country, there was diversity in their family experiences and backgrounds. Some families had very little income for a long period of time and some experienced financial challenges that were relatively short-lived. All of the participants married when they reached adulthood and had children. Most of the participants were people for whom religious faith was important. All participants graduated from high school and three-fourths of them pursued higher education after graduation or the completion of their time in the military. The findings of this study should not be generalized to individuals in general who grew up during the Great Depression. The findings are only transferable to others with similar backgrounds or characteristics.

**Relating This Study to Family Studies in the 1930s**

One of the major findings of the American Home Economics Association Study (Morgan, 1939), was that high parental skill levels enhanced the parents’ ability to
successfully meet the challenges of reduced income. This present study confirmed that finding. The parents in this study had many personal skills that they utilized to help them meet their financial challenges. Often, the need for money was reduced because they were able to utilize their skills to provide for the family’s needs.

Angell’s study (1936) found that the level of a family’s adaptation and integration could predict whether a family would adjust positively or react negatively to the changes that occurred in their family due to a decrease in income. Analyzing the 12 participant families in light of these findings to determine in what ways they were adaptable or integrated showed that most of the families were able to adapt to their financial difficulties in positive ways and pulled together as a family to increase their integration. Each of the families were able to adapt at some level when they met their financial challenges, either by children or a spouse taking on a different role or by other family members helping in supportive ways. See Table 6.1 on the next page for more information.

Cavan and Ranck’s study (1938) measured its participants as either organized (adjusted, cooperative, unified) or disorganized (uncooperative and conflicted). Those who were most “organized” were able to meet their financial challenges the most successfully and pull together as a family. Evaluating the 12 participant families in light of these findings shows that most of them were adjusted, cooperative, and unified.
Table 3

*Adaptation and Integration of Participant Families*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Support Network/Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>With job loss, parents took on role of pioneers, eking out existence from land and woods.</td>
<td>Close to immediate and extended family. School and neighborhood friends important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Father took over role of both parents.</td>
<td>Close to father but not mother. Close to neighborhood children and community. Close to teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>With decrease in salary, Carol became family shopper. Parents and grandparents were caregivers.</td>
<td>Close to immediate and extended family. Church important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>Aunts and uncles provided support for parents and children in time of struggle.</td>
<td>Close to parents and extended family. Close to church and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Parents and children worked together toward all-encompassing goal of ownership of farm.</td>
<td>Close to immediate family. Church important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>When father became incapacitated, children took larger role in providing for family.</td>
<td>Close to immediate family. Government painful support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Father took on role of family provider. Derived satisfaction from care-giving role.</td>
<td>Close to parents and extended family. Close to neighborhood children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>When lost financial security, kept working, saving, and helped others to help themselves.</td>
<td>Close to parents and extended family. School important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>When father lost job, mother worked part-time and took in boarders.</td>
<td>Somewhat distant from parents until cousins came. School and books provided outlet and support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>When father became incapacitated, grandparents became caregivers until mother eventually took that role.</td>
<td>Close to immediate and extended family, especially father and grandfather in childhood. Close to church family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>When stepfather unable to find work, brother took over role of provider.</td>
<td>Close to mother and siblings. School and church important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>Family took care of one another on family farm. All three generations worked. Children took on role of providing for self early in life.</td>
<td>Close to immediate and extended family. Close to church family and community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(These qualities strongly correlate with Angell’s (1936) qualities of adaptability and integration.)

In the Oakland Growth study (Elder, 1974), it was reported that when the fathers lost their jobs during the Depression and the children assisted the family by seeking work, the children often became more responsible and motivated to help. This finding was shown to apply to many of the research participants in this study who worked to help their families in significant ways during the Depression and grew in their self-esteem and maturity as a result.

The Middletown study (Lynd and Lynd, 1937) revealed that many families drew closer together as a result of the Depression. The families that sought their security through intimacy with family members instead of through material possessions displayed a positive outlook. Most of the families in this present study seemed to grow closer as a result of their experiences in the Depression. Most had close family ties even when they lacked many material possessions.

All in all, this study confirmed the findings of the previous five studies that were conducted in the 1930s. Most of the families in this present study seem to have come through their difficult experiences during the Depression in such a way that they were positively affected and strengthened as a result. Just as Satir (1972) spoke of the metaphor of a mobile to illustrate family systems theory, these families adapted to the challenges in their lives, were able to maintain their equilibrium, and kept going. The combined efforts of all members of the family—children, parents, grandparents, aunts,
and uncles—combined to create a supportive family unit that was stronger than the sum of the interdependent family members themselves.

**Strong Families**

In the 1970s, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) embarked upon a quest to discover what qualities provided the strength behind successful families. One hundred and thirty families from diverse backgrounds contributed information about their families through the use of the Family Strengths Inventory. The results of their research indicated that strong, successful families are similar in at least six major qualities. Strong families, 1) are committed to one another; 2) appreciate one another; 3) communicate well with each other; 4) enjoy spending time together; 5) are spiritually and value oriented; and 6) are able to cope with crises in a positive, productive manner (p. 14). Many of these qualities, especially being committed to one another and appreciating one another and being spiritually and value oriented with an ability to cope with crises in a positive, productive manner, were exemplified by almost all of the families in this study. Long before Stinnett and DeFrain began their quest to identify qualities of strong families, these families were living the qualities out. Perhaps it is because they embodied so many of these qualities they were able to emerge from the Depression strengthened instead of weakened.

Masten (2001) asserts that resilience “does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (p. 235). A common list of factors are associated with resilience include,
but are not limited to, a positive attachment with parents or caregivers; faith, hope, and meaning in life; supportive friends; supportive communities and schools; and positive self-perceptions (Masten, 2010, p. 29). All the children in this study had a positive attachment to at least one adult in their family, and many had a positive attachment to several adults in their family. Most were positively impacted by their religious faith. As children, most of them lived in communities where they had supportive friends, neighbors, and schools. They had good self-images, partly because they were competent in a variety of skills. As a result, the children emerged from their family’s’ financial difficulties during the Great Depression resilient and stronger than when they entered that period of time. Most of their parents emerged from the Depression as stronger people as well, for the same reasons. Most of them had the same types of support systems and self-perceptions as their children. They knew they did not have to face their challenges alone, and they knew that they were not powerless to positively change their circumstances for the better.

**Implications for Practice**

In the last few years a number of opinion editorials have been written urging the revival of a new and improved “home economics” education. Lichtenstein and Ludwig (2010) wrote an op-ed in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* titled “Bring Back Home Economics Education.” Concerned with the high incidence of pediatric obesity and the poor diet of adolescents in the United States, they suggest the type of program they believe would be most useful.

A comprehensive curriculum to teach students about the scientific and practical aspects of food might include basic cooking techniques; caloric requirements;
sources of food, from farm to table; budget principles; food safety; nutrient information, where to find it and how to use it; and effects of food on well-being and risk for chronic disease (p. 1858).

They believe that a “home economics” classroom, (now known as family and consumer sciences), in cooperation with other school subjects, would be the most effective way to reach the largest number of youth and children to help them gain healthy life skills.

In *The New York Times*, Veit (September 5, 2011) in her op-ed titled “Time to Revive Home Ec” outlines the problem:

Too many Americans simply don’t know how to cook. Our diets, consisting of highly processed foods made cheaply outside the home thanks to subsidized corn and soy, have contributed to an enormous health crisis. More than half of all adults and more than a third of all children are overweight or obese. Chronic diseases associated with weight gain, like heart disease and diabetes, are hobbling more and more Americans (p. 1).

Ruth Graham, in an op-ed titled “Bring Back Home Ec!” in *The Boston Globe* (October 13, 2013) begins her article with the question: “What’s wrong with young people today?” (p. 1). She agrees that issues of childhood obesity and poor adolescent diets could be addressed in school but believes that children and youth today need assistance with more than the life skills associated with food and nutrition.

Most people may not balance a literal checkbook these days, but basic financial literacy is arguably more important than ever: As pensions disappear, Americans are increasingly responsible for setting up their own retirement plans; credit card offers and student loans are complex decisions with lifelong repercussions. Even sewing is gaining a certain relevance, as consumers grow increasingly wary of disposable garments made in unregulated factories overseas (pp. 6, 7).

Graham’s article provided the catalyst for at least a half dozen other online commentaries including “Let’s Make Home Ec Rad(ical)” (Blackmore, October 15, 2013), “Why Home Economics Should Be Mandatory” (Philpott, October 16, 2013), and
“How Home Ec Could Save a Generation” (Lobello, November 7, 2013). These authors all expressed a belief that home economics (family and consumer science) programs are just what today’s young people need to improve their life skills.

The family and consumer sciences curriculum covers more topics than food and financial literacy. The national standards for family and consumer sciences include 16 areas of competencies including food science, nutrition, consumer services, the family, parenting, housing, human development, textiles and apparel, hospitality, and more (National Association of State Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences, http://www.nasafacs.org/national-standards--competencies.html). The curriculum covers areas of emotional and social intelligence as well, helping students relate well to those in their family and community as well as on the job.

In general, family and consumer sciences teachers already understand the importance of their curriculum to help train the next generation to live effectively and efficiently. However, many schools are experiencing financial challenges today, and in the face of budget cuts, “elective programs such as FCS are the most likely to be eliminated” (Betz, 2008, p. 164). In light of this fact, other venues should be explored to help today’s youth with the types of assistance the parents and families of the children of the Great Depression provided for their children. This assistance included emotional and financial support, the development of a strong work ethic, life skills, financial competence and the utilization of principles of thrift, and an encouragement of character development and spiritual values.
Most of the children in this study spent many hours with their parents, learning life skills, attitudes, resilience, family values, and social skills through one on one interaction on a regular basis. When they reached adulthood and left home, they felt competent to meet life’s challenges. The most effective and way to meet these needs of today’s youth might be through support and training of parents and family members in their roles of life coaches to their children.

Organizations such as The American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences and extension services could promote the importance of parents and children working together on a variety of tasks at home along with an explanation of the positive outcomes that could be achieved. A multi-media campaign, including television and radio public service announcements, could be launched to emphasize the value of spending more time together as a family doing meaningful work and not just playing together or going to an amusement park to be entertained. Extension services could sponsor parent/child cooking classes to teach how to prepare nutritious and delicious low cost meals, allowing the parent and child to work together to learn important skills and bond at the same time. Churches and other faith organizations could develop more family outreach programs that could train parents how to provide the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs for their children.

Authors could be encouraged to write children’s books that portray what strength of character and family values could look like in today’s society. In addition, some of the books from the past such as *Laddie: A True Blue Story* (Porter, 1913) that provide strong images of a positive parental role and the value of personal hard work and self-
sufficiency could be reprinted and marketed to families with children. Often, the characters in stories can provide good role models who can show people how to live positively, especially for those who have not had good role models in their personal lives.

Professionals in family and consumer science could promote a simpler lifestyle for families that is less dependent on income and more dependent on using personal skills to replace the need for more money. Along with this, they could encourage a revival of interest in the value of thrift, not necessarily for the sake of having additional money to purchase more material goods but to guide financial decisions that could help parents have more time to spend with their families.

New programs emphasizing the importance of strengthening family bonds, promoting healthy lifestyles, and increasing financial literacy should meet the felt needs of youth and their parents. They should provide positive models of achievable life goals and encourage youth and parents to believe that a better life is possible with increased life and social skills. If parents or other family members are unable or unwilling to fulfill this role, family and consumer sciences teachers, religious organizations, and leaders in youth organizations within the community should do what they can, within reasonable boundaries, to fulfill this role.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In order to make connections between families today and the families in this study who lived through the Depression, the following research topics could be considered for future research.
1) In a similar type of study with a similar methodology, it would be informative to interview the children of the research participants to identify the strategies, skills, and beliefs their parents held during the childhoods to assist them in meeting either financial challenges or other challenges of living. Then, it would also be revealing to interview the grandchildren of the research participants to identify the strategies, skills, and beliefs their parents held during their childhoods. A three generational study could highlight the ways in which the worldviews of the various generations have remained the same or changed.

2) Considering the messages the culture sent to the parents of the research participants in their youth, it would be informative to identify the cultural messages sent and accepted by the generations represented by the research participants and the generations that followed. Have the messages changed or stayed the same? In what ways do they impact families living today?

3) Is it more difficult to produce strength of character in times of abundance or of lack? What long-term effect might super-abundance have on individuals, families, and communities?

**Conclusion**

The study of the personal stories of the children of the Depression will give insight into coping strategies, specific skills that proved to be helpful to physical sustenance, and beliefs that assisted in the development of emotional and spiritual growth and development during times of economic hardship. In the process, it is
possible to gain insight into the human condition, expand options for action and attitudes, and provide courage for living.

Following is a final story by Cheryl, one of my research participants, that highlights the impact of her attitude and beliefs on her level of happiness in the later years of her life.

**I made up my mind to be happy.** Packing up my video camera and equipment after my interview with Cheryl, she said something that made me stop and set the tripod and camera back up. I asked her to repeat what she said so it could be recorded. She had moved off of the farm and was now living in a small two-room independent living apartment owned by a senior care facility. She said,

> You can leave your own home and be very happy or you cannot be happy. But if you make your mind up you are going to be happy and be that way, you are going to be happy. I have been very happy for over six years [since her husband died and she moved to the apartment], and I just made up my mind this is where I was going to live and that I would be happy, and I have been.

This has been her life’s philosophy, which sums up the attitude that most of the parents of this study’s research participants exhibited. They accepted life’s difficulties, made the best of them that they could, and intentionally “chose to be happy.”
REFERENCES


Greenough, W. S. (1922). *The war purse of Indiana; the five liberty loans and war savings and thrift campaigns in Indiana during the world war*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission.


Appendix A – Boy Scout Law, Oath and Motto

The Scout Law

1. **A scout is trustworthy.** A scout’s honor is to be trusted. If he were to violate his honor by telling a lie, or by cheating, or by not doing exactly a given task, when trusted on his honor, he may be directed to hand over his scout badge.

2. **A scout is loyal.** He is loyal to all to whom loyalty is due: his scout leader, his home, and parents and country.

3. **A scout is helpful.** He must be prepared at any time to save life, help injured persons, and share the home duties. He must *do at least one good turn to somebody every day.*

4. **A scout is friendly.** He is a friend to all and a brother to every other scout.

5. **A scout is courteous.** He is polite to all, especially to women, children, old people, and the weak and helpless. *He must not take pay for being helpful or courteous.*

6. **A scout is kind.** He is a friend to animals. He will not kill nor hurt any living creature needlessly, but will strive to save and protect all harmless life.

7. **A scout is obedient.** He obeys his parents, scout master, patrol leader, and all other duly constituted authorities.

8. **A scout is cheerful.** He smiles whenever he can. His obedience to orders is prompt and cheery. He never shirks nor grumbles at hardships.

9. **A scout is thrifty.** He does not wantonly destroy property. He works faithfully, wastes nothing, and makes the best use of his opportunities. He saves his money so that he may pay his own way, be generous to those in need, and helpful to worthy objects. *He may work for pay but must not receive tips for courtesies or good turns.*

10. **A scout is brave.** He has the courage to face danger is spite of fear and has to stand up for the right against the coaxings of friends or the jeers or threats of enemies, and defeat does not down him.

11. **A scout is clean.** He keeps clean in body and thought, stands for clean speech, clean sport, clean habits, and travels with a clean crowd.

12. **A scout is reverent.** He is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties and respects the convictions of others in matters of custom and religion.
The Scout Oath

On my honor I will do my best:
1. To do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the scout law;
2. To help other people at all times;
3. To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

The Scout Motto

Be prepared.

Appendix B – Institutional Research Board Approval

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 4/21/2011

To: Ardyth Gull
467 Melody Lane
Marshall, OH 44845

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Studies of the Children of the Great Depression: What I Learned from My Parents

IRB Num: 11-165

Submission Type: New

Exemption Date: 4/28/2011

The project referenced above has undergone review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protection regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b). This IRB determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for an annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as proposed in the IRB application, including obtaining and documenting informed consent if you have stated in your application that you will do so or if required by the IRB.
- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB on a Continuing Review and/or Modification Form, prior to making any changes, to determine if the project still meets the initial criteria for exemption. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an IRB proposal will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please be sure to use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. Only the IRB may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.
### Appendix C – Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire

The Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire (SPMSQ)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Incorrect Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the date, month, and year?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is the day of the week?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is the name of this place?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is your phone number?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How old are you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. When were you born?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Who is the current president?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Who was the president before him?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What was your mother’s maiden name?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Can you count backward from 20 by 3’s?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scoring:**

0-2 errors: normal mental functioning  
3-4 errors: mild cognitive impairment  
5-7 errors: moderate cognitive impairment  
8 or more errors: severe cognitive impairment

*One more error is allowed in the scoring if a patient has had a grade school education or less.

*One less error is allowed if the patient has had education beyond the high school level.

Appendix D – Introductory Letter

467 Melody Lane
Mansfield, OH 44905
July 6, 2011

Name
Address
Address

Dear ____________:

I am a graduate student at Iowa State University, working on my doctoral dissertation on the topic: “Studies of the Children of the Great Depression: What I Learned from My Parents”. I am also an assistant professor of family and consumer sciences at Mount Vernon Nazarene University in Mount Vernon, Ohio, and reside in Mansfield, Ohio.

I spoke this evening with Mr. and Mrs. _________ concerning my research. They recommended that I contact you as someone who might be willing to be interviewed for my study. I am seeking research participants who are at least 85 years old (born in 1925 or earlier) whose families experienced significant financial hardship during the 1930s. In addition, these participants must be in relatively good health and be of sound mind. For further information, please see the enclosed information sheet.

Research participants will be interviewed several times. These interviews will be videotaped and then transcribed. Participants will be given unedited copies of their taped interviews, which could prove to be treasured sources of history for their families. Participants will not be compensated further for their time. (This is a very low budget project, which I am funding myself.)

If you would be interested in sharing your experiences from the 1930s or know of seniors who you think might consider this opportunity to share their personal stories as a way to help today’s young families, please let me know. Participant’s stories and information will remain strictly confidential. If interested, please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope I have enclosed.

If you have any questions concerning this research, please contact me at the above address, by cell phone at 740-485-1431, by home phone at 419-589-7460 or by email at astull@mvnu.edu. Thank you for your consideration of this research request.

Sincerely,

Ardyth Stull, CFCS

Enclosures (Questionnaire, Informed Consent Form, and Information Sheet)
Appendix E – Informational Flyer

A Research Project with the Children of the Great Depression

How did you and your family “make it” through the Great Depression?

The 1930s were challenging years for a great many American families. The difficulties spurred positive growth in some families and profound devastation in others. As a graduate student at Iowa State University, working on my doctoral dissertation, I am seeking research participants who are 85 years old or older to share their stories of how they and their families “made it” through the Great Depression.

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies parents developed, values they embraced, and skills they utilized to provide for the basic needs for survival and the emotional well-being of their children and the rest of the family during the years of the Great Depression. In addition, this study will explore what life lessons the children of the depression learned from their parents, and what advice they might give to today’s families as they encounter financial challenges.

Research participants must meet the following qualifications:
   1) You were born in 1925 or earlier
   2) Your family experienced significant financial hardship during the 1930s
   3) Your parent’s marriage remained intact through the depression and beyond
   4) You live at home or in the home of family members

How will this research be conducted?

Potential research participants will complete a brief questionnaire. If chosen to take part in the study, participants will be interviewed three to five times. Interviews will be videotaped and/or audio taped and transcribed. Participants will receive an unedited copy of either the DVD or CD of each interview. They may choose to be interviewed in their own homes or in a neutral place of their choosing (for instance, a church). A family member or trusted friend may be in the room to observe if the participant would like. Participants will also be asked to provide photos, journals, letters, or other memorabilia from that time period to share to produce greater insight into the culture, values, and beliefs of their family or family setting. (The researcher will not keep any of this memorabilia but will only glean information from it.)

Why should you consider taking part in this study?

Many of today’s young families have little understanding of what families experienced during the 1930s. Stories of families who have lived through economic difficulties in the past could have a strong positive impact on those families facing similar difficulties today. The children of the Great Depression could give insight into coping strategies, skills that were helpful to physical sustenance and beliefs that assisted in the development of emotional and spiritual growth during times of economic hardship. In the process, it will be possible to gain insight into the human condition, expand options for action and attitudes, and provide courage for living.

If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in this study, please contact Ardyth Stull, MAEd, CFCS, at 740-485-1431 or by email at astull@mvnu.edu.
Appendix F – Participant Questionnaire

Participant Questionnaire
A Research Project with the Children of the Great Depression

Research Participant ___ (Number given to participant by researcher to protect identity.)

Please give a checkmark where applicable and print the remaining information.

In the 1930s, you lived in which of the following settings?

_____ Rural setting
_____ Small town
_____ Medium sized city (20,000 – 50,000)
_____ Larger city (50,000 – 100,000)
_____ Large city (100,000 and larger)

My family experienced financial hardship during the 1930s. _____ Yes           _____ No
If yes, in what way? __________________________________________________________

I am willing to provide memorabilia (photos, journals, letters, etc.) from those years. I understand that the researcher will use these objects to enhance insight into the time period and will not keep or in any way harm this material. _____ Yes           _____ No

I am willing for the interviewer to ______ audiotape ______ videotape the interview sessions. If videotaped, I understand that I will receive a DVD of the interview.

I do not have extreme physical challenges that would make it difficult to conduct an interview (such as significant hearing impairment). _____ Yes           _____ No

I would prefer to be interviewed in ________ my home              ______ another setting
If another setting, please suggest a site. __________________________________________________________

Please return this questionnaire in the attached self-addressed, stamped envelope to Ardyth Stull, MAEd., CFCS, 467 Melody Lane, Mansfield, OH 44905
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Stories of the Children of the Great Depression: What I Learned From My Parents

Investigator: Ardyth A. Stull, ABD, CFCS

The 1930s were challenging years for a great many American families. The difficulties spurred positive growth in some families and profound devastation in others. The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies parents developed, values they embraced, and skills they utilized to provide for the basic needs for survival and the emotional well-being of their children and the rest of the family during the years of the Great Depression. In addition, this study proposes to explore what life lessons the children of the depression learned from their parents, and how those lessons continue to impact them today.

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you were born in the United States in 1925 or earlier, your family experienced financial hardship during the years of the depression, your parents’ marriage remained intact throughout the depression and beyond, and you are living at home or in the home of family members. Information gleaned will be utilized in this study and any subsequent publications.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: The video or audio recordings and the transcripts from these recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet and/or in a password secure computer-type device during the interview process. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) __________________________________________

(Participant’s Signature) __________________________________________ (Date)
Appendix H - Preliminary Interview Questions

1) Please describe the home and community you lived in during the 1930s.

2) What challenges did your family experience as a result of the Great Depression?

3) How did your parents cope with those challenges?

4) What are the most important values your parents held during the years of the 1930s?

5) What skills did your parents utilize to provide for your family’s basic needs for survival and the emotional well-being of their children?

6) What stories from the years of the Great Depression do you most vividly recall?

7) In what ways did your family or community help each other during those years?

8) When you compare your family when you were children to families you know now with young children, what kinds of similarities and differences do you see?

9) In what ways does living through the Great Depression impact you today?
Appendix I – Example of Individualized Follow-Up Interview Questions

Follow-Up Questions for “Shirley” for Second Interview

1. Your family suffered significant hardship during the Great Depression. Did your mother complain to you or in your presence about the hardship? If so, what were the types of things that she complained most about?

2. You indicated that when you were in school, the schools were segregated. Can you tell me more about the schools you and your siblings attended? In what ways did they compare with the schools that the white children attended? How did your parents react to the injustice that you and your siblings experienced?

3. Were the mines and mining towns also segregated? Was the mining company more unjust to certain people or families?

4. What were family celebrations like? How did you celebrate birthdays, weddings, and holidays?

5. Your mother seemed to be an independent woman and said that she did not want to accept charity. What did she think of the government programs that were begun during the 1930s by President Roosevelt such as the WPA, FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration), and Social Security?

6. Did resentment and bitterness impact your everyday life? If so, in what way? If not, why do you think that was the case?

7. You said this in our first interview:

   “When we were children during the Depression, we understood what was going on. We knew we didn’t have certain things and we accepted it. We didn’t covet our neighbors for what they had if they had more than we did. But we did dream of a better day.”

   Where did that strength and grace come from? Did others in your family and community feel the same way? Please explain further.
Appendix J – Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Home Environment
Heat, light (utilities)
# of people, room sharing
Family gathering room?
Neighborhood

Family Structure
Your place in the family
Parents, siblings, extended family, others

Employment
Father
Mother
Siblings
Self

Social Supports
Extended Family
School
Church or religious organizations
Extra curricular activities

Effect of Great Depression on Family
Emotional
Physical
Financial
Relational
Spiritual

Awareness of Societal Challenges
Unemployment
Foreclosures (home, farms)
Bank closings
Stock market declines
Weather extremes (drought, dust storms)
Various governmental interventions (WPA, AAA, etc.)

What did atypical day look like in your family?
During school year
Summer
Holidays
Bedtime routines
Mealtime

**Describe how parents handled**
- Discipline
- Allowances
- Sibling rivalry
- Bullies
- Behavior problems at school
- Disagreement with their expectations
- Back talking
- Entertainment
- Requests for toys, special clothes, etc.

**Describe typical family meals**
- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Supper
- Special occasions (birthdays or holidays)

**Parents**
- Typical day
- Their reaction to difficulties
- Complaints?
- General

**When you picture your parents in your mind, what do you see?**
- Facial expression
- Clothing
- Physical characteristics
Appendix K – Coding Examples

So you had very little actual cash, very little money. Very little, I never saw money unless we had to earn our own, us children. We had to earn money for our clothing for school. Of course we didn’t dress for school like the children do now. We had to buy what they called overalls with the bibs on, and that’s what we’d wear to school. We’d walk to school, and then when we come home from school, if our clothing was dirty, Mom would wash them, so they’d be clean for the next day. When I got into high school it was a little different. We had to have a little better clothing. I had some dental work I had to have done. It cost me $9.00, so I had to work somewhere and earn that $9.00. I worked for another farmer to get enough money. So we were more or less self-sufficient. Dad taught us these things: If you want something, you have to work for it. Dad was good to us, and he taught us how to work and how to be responsible. We never really had to want for anything, because if we wanted something, we worked for it.

And you didn’t feel badly like maybe your parents should have paid for your dental work? No we didn’t. My oldest brother, he liked to hunt and fish, and he wanted a rifle so bad. One winter he trapped down in the swamp for muskrats. He got 80 muskrats that winter, enough muskrats to buy his rifle. We used to go out and check the traps before we went to school. One day he had a coon in that trap. That involved a little bit more time, so I had to go back to the house to get something to put that coon in. I didn’t want to kill it right away, so I was late for school.

How did you have time for homework and studying and all of that? If we had homework, maybe we’d have some arithmetic or something like that; that was most of our homework, arithmetic. After supper at night we’d sit at the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kids had to work for money</th>
<th>Kids worked for house clothes. Work Ethic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overalls - like &quot;uniform&quot;</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walked to school</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom made sure clothes were clean &amp; ironed</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if not laundry day</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better clothes help school</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid for own dental work.</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dad worked for what you want</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sure taught them to work</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never felt deprived</td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brother Trapped for rifle
Walter allowed to stay along
Up early checking traps
Walter took care of coon for brother
Did he earn spending.

Not much homework, but expected to get it done.

Homework -- Work Ethic
Part of his job as a student
kitchen table by the kerosene lamp and do our homework. In the wintertime there was always a pan of apples on the table and there was a pan of popcorn on the table and we could snack at that while we were doing our homework. Soon as we got the homework done, bedtime.

So you went to bed early? Well, my grandpa went to bed first. Soon as supper was over, Grandpa would go to bed. We were allowed to do some things like read or do our homework. If we had company we could stay up a little later. People would walk. Sometimes we see somebody coming up on the porch after supper and it would be some neighbor coming to visit us for the evening, but people walked.

So, how did your parents cope with all this? Did your mother ever complain that life was hard? I mean that would have been hard. I’m trying to think as a woman to have done all that canning and preserving and all that. That’s hard physical labor. I never heard my mother complain. If she complained, it must have been to my father, my dad. I never heard her complain. On Monday was wash day. Tuesday was ironing day. They had their meals prepared. You know on washday you ate beans. We ate beans for lunch and they had each meal every week it was the same way. Then Tuesdays and Saturdays, were bake days. Mom would bake bread on Tuesday and on Saturdays she would bake pie and things of that sort. She had everything regulated. And she’d press your clothing. You had to press your clothing. There wasn’t any self-press. But I never heard Mom complain. Never heard it. Never heard my aunt or grandma complain. Never did. I never heard Dad complain. I would hear him talk about some things he’d have to do. And he’d say, “Well, I’ve got to get out there and get to that.” He always repaired his own farm machinery, but I never heard him complain. He’d say, “Well, I’ve got busy or get to that or something.”
Appendix L – Errata Sheet

Revisions to Interview with [Name of Participant]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page number</th>
<th>Paragraph number</th>
<th>Revision to be made</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Appendix M – Letter and Questionnaire Sent to Participants Concerning Parent’s Birth Date and Education

467 Melody Lane
Mansfield, OH 44905
December 18, 2012

Name
Address
Address

Dear ________________.

Christmas greetings to you! I hope that you are well.

I am working on my research and writing concerning parenting during the Great Depression. As I have worked, I realized that I need just a little bit more information about your parents. I am struck by their remarkable attitude and strength of character. Because of that, I am looking at some of the cultural influences on their lives as they were growing up to see if the source(s) of their strength can be discovered. To do that, I need to know when they were born and how far they went in school. On the enclosed card, could you please send me the date of your parents’ birth and the last grade they attended in school? This will help me to more accurately look at the period of time when they were growing up.

Thank you so much,

Ardyth Stull

Enclosures
   Brief questionnaire
   Stamped, self-addressed return envelope
Questionnaire:

Demographic Information on Parents of Research Participants

Please fill in the blanks below and return this paper to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope at your earliest convenience. Thank you!

Date of mother’s birth ______________________________

Date of father’s birth ______________________________

Mother’s last grade completed in school ______________

Father’s last grade completed in school ______________