

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Looking Back: Growing Up in the Chippewa Valley During the Great
Depression Years

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Abstract

This paper explores the experience of childhood during the Great Depression in the Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin by examining the conditions within the Chippewa Valley and comparing that to the memories of residents who revisit their childhood through written memoirs. The goal of this paper is to understand the world view of children who experienced the Great Depression first hand in the Chippewa Valley. This paper compares data of the effects the Depression had on the area to the experience recounted in the memoirs. The findings of the research demonstrate how despite the unfortunate and devastating effects the Great Depression had upon the Chippewa Valley, the experience of the children was not remembered in a negative manner. Instead, their world view allowed them to feel that the reality of their experience was a happy one, in which they lived with what they had and still experienced a pleasant and special childhood.

Introduction

The Great Depression was an extremely trying time for everyone. Economic hardship became commonplace and was widespread among families. The idea of supporting and sustaining a family is a daunting task during any time period, but the Great Depression era proved to alter the way that

families functioned. This paper explores the experience of childhood during the Great Depression in the Chippewa Valley of Wisconsin by examining the conditions within the Chippewa Valley and comparing that to the memories of residents who revisit their childhood through written memoirs. The Great Depression



has historically been proclaimed to begin in 1929 with the stock market crash and to end in 1941 when the United States entered World War II. This is the time frame that this paper will be focusing on. This is a time that most Americans would like to forget, but that has forever changed the economic and political make-up of our great country. The image that the words “Great Depression” usually conjure up include the Dust Bowl, mass poverty, President Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘alphabet soup’, Hoovervilles, and everlasting lines at soup kitchens. Wisconsin’s experience of the Great Depression does not differ drastically from this. The area in question, the

Chippewa Valley, is a combination of several counties in northwestern Wisconsin. These counties are Eau Claire, Chippewa, Pierce, Dunn, Clark, Taylor, Barron, Price, Sawyer, Ashland, and Iron¹. The area generally lies along the outer banks of the Chippewa River.

Identifying how the Depression affected the childhood of those in this area is a daunting task to undertake, especially in a field that is drastically underdeveloped. Nonetheless, this research focuses on memoirs written by individuals who grew up in the Chippewa Valley during the Great Depression. The research focuses on children who were at least four years of age in 1929 and no older than twelve years of age in 1929. This allows for the authors of the memoirs in question to have been at an age that is actually memorable well into adulthood during the Depression. Despite having been old enough to remember the despair and trauma caused by the Depression, many remember it as a relatively happy time in which they did not have a lot to get by on, but made the best of what they did have. My data is not only memoirs but also school records, census data, and local newspapers, in order to thoroughly understand the situation that families in the Chippewa Valley faced and the effects it would have on childhood. This is done in order to compare this data to the stories and experiences shared in the memoirs.

¹ <http://www.chippedia.org/Chippewa+Valley>

Historiography

“Childhood” has not been researched to the depth found in other fields of history. Despite this, some scholars have devoted time to research the history of childhood in the United States.

Patrick Ryan’s essay “How New is the ‘New’ Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift” “challenges the idea that a paradigm shift or an epistemological break has occurred in the current study of childhood by showing its relationships to the types of claims writers have been making about children for centuries”.² He also points out that childhood needs to be studied as the constant that it is. He compares the consistency of childhood in society to the ever constant presence of social classes. His main argument is that kids are more than just a product of their environment and genetics.³ Childhood happens to everyone, but the children themselves are active players in how their childhood is formed. Ryan argues that by the middle of the twentieth century, childhood begins to have a romantic feel to it. Children were actively participating in their lives and were no longer viewed as a product of their development. Thus, an emphasis on “culture, history, and subjectivity over biology, universality, and objectivity” begins.⁴ This idea is, I believe, echoed in the memoirs utilized for this research.

Ryan really tries to emphasize the fact that childhood has been deemed important to study because it is believed to set up a person’s adulthood. Without studying how it is different for each generation, a historian cannot truly grasp what it is like to be a member of said generation. It is essential in understanding social history.

² Patrick J Ryan, "How New Is the 'New' Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38, No. 4 (Spring 2008): 554

³ Ryan, "How New is the 'New' Social Study of Childhood, 555

⁴ Ibid, 564

This work is essential to my research in that it allows me to understand how childhood is studied within the field of History. More importantly, it details how childhood is understood by historians and eases the comprehension of the work by Steven Mintz, Ph.D.

His work, Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood is one of the first works on the study of childhood in the US. It encompasses all of American History and is the most comprehensive monograph available. He argues that childhood was not carefree⁵ until after World War II and a lack of family stability, working at an early age, and disease accounts for childhood plight before WWII.⁶ This work has laid out the background of childhood as a research subject.

Little else has been written on children during the Great Depression. Furthermore, nothing has been done looking into childhood during this era in Wisconsin and even more specifically to the Chippewa Valley. It is due to this gap that this research is incredibly beneficial to the historical society as a whole. While across the country it is accepted and assumed that most children were facing hardships they had never known, memoirs written decades after the Depression recount romanticized experiences of childhood that do not match the statistical data of the time.

Studying childhood through memoirs of those who have lived through the Great Depression creates hurdles that must also be addressed. This includes the reliability of memory. While it seems to the layman that memory would be the most reliable source of history, it too is inevitably biased. As humans, we remember the things that we deem important to ourselves. This

⁵ Carefree refers to the viewpoint in society today that believes that childhood is a special time in which children should have few responsibilities. It also refers to the lower mortality rate of both children and their parents, which had devastating effects upon children.

⁶ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 2

is best exemplified and explained by historian Pierre Nora in “Between Memory and History: les Lieux de Memoire”. He states “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialect of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriate, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it”⁷. He argues that there is a deep well between both memory and history in that history “belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority” and that it has a responsibility to go beyond the collective memory of a group of people and to accurately retell what occurred in the past⁸. The article focuses mainly on the difference between the two and the development of the field of historiography in order to account for the faults of memory in the study of history. This article was essential in my research in order to understand what was being dealt with when diving into memoirs, which are entirely bias to the experiences of the writer.

⁷ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (California: University of California Press, 1989)

⁸ Nora, Pierre, page 9

A Brief Look at the Chippewa Valley

Historically, Wisconsin is known for its lumber industry in the late 1800s and the Chippewa Valley is no exception to the rule. Lumber mills dominated the Chippewa River and helped to build the society and economy of the Chippewa Valley.

At the time of the 1930 census, the area was mainly rural land consisting of different sizes of farms. Every county, with the exception of Eau Claire County, had a significantly higher rural population than urban population heading into the Great Depression⁹. Many families, particularly those studied through memoirs, sustained themselves off family farms during this time period. It is in this setting that most of the memoirs take place. This is important to make note of because it sets a tone for the area. Countless books, memoirs, even movies have been made of the Dust Bowl ruining crops in rural societies. The same can be said for bread lines and mass populations of the homeless throughout urban America. Experiences of children in these areas are vastly different. As such, it is important to look at the Chippewa Valley as a mostly rural area. This is seen in the chart below, which points out the differences in rural and urban population by county.

⁹ University of Virginia, Historical Census Browser: 1930, State of Wisconsin, Eau Claire County. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>

| County | Total Urban Population | Total Rural Population | Total Population |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Chippewa | 9539 | 27803 | 37342 |
| Clark | 0 | 34165 | 34165 |
| Dunn | 5595 | 21442 | 27037 |
| Iron | 3264 | 6669 | 9933 |
| Ashland | 10622 | 10432 | 21054 |
| Barron | 5177 | 29124 | 34301 |
| Taylor | 0 | 17685 | 17685 |
| Price | 3036 | 14248 | 17284 |
| Sawyer | 0 | 8878 | 8878 |
| Eau Claire | 26287 | 14800 | 41087 |
| Pierce | 0 | 21043 | 21043 |
| Total | 63520 | 206289 | 269809 |

Family Life in America during the Depression

It is first essential to paint a picture of family life in America during the Great Depression. It is key to understand that the Great Depression did not only make poverty more widespread, but it also brought it to forefront of national issues.¹⁰ On average, American families made 40 percent less in 1933 than in 1929. However, it is important to note that prior to this, many families survived just at or below the basic subsistence level.¹¹ Thus, American families in general understood what it meant to be poor. Going into the Depression it was not uncommon for families to struggle to make ends meet and for them to have to search for ways to save (and make) money.

The question then remains as to why the Depression left such extensive hurt and devastation to American families when so many already lived at the poverty level. The answer lies in the fact that families who had never experienced such economic hardship were now inflicted. It was families who had spent a lifetime paying off mortgages for their family home, building family businesses or farms, and trying to save for their children's future that were now losing everything¹². This greatly affected the middle class lifestyles as heads of households found themselves out of work and left with nowhere to turn. In many instances, families began to live together, sharing residences with extended family or even other families. Children were also sent to work or kept in school longer in hopes of keeping as many jobs open for men as possible.

It has been said that the Depression actually brought families closer together. With a lack of money, families spent more time at home, together, during their free time. During the

¹⁰ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social history of American Family Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 134

¹¹ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 134-135

¹² Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 135

Depression, divorces became much less common than throughout the 1920's.¹³ Families were forced to give up more frivolous past times that may have secluded them. Instead, if they did splurge it was often in activities that the entire family could benefit from, such as going to the movies together. This increased time spent together helped to create a tighter bond amongst members of the family and lead to a stronger set of family values.

On the other hand, it has also been found that the Depression caused more strife than good amongst families. The hardships that every member of the family now had to face caused conflict and contention within the family unit. Many of these historians turn to the rate of desertion as opposed to the divorce rate to prove this point. This left many children in orphanages or wandering the streets as vagrants.¹⁴ However, without studying the true reasons for desertion, it cannot be determined if it was a reflection of an unhappy marriage or family life or out of economic necessity. Some men deserted their families because it meant one less mouth to feed and the potential to find work elsewhere.

In response to the Depression, many families had to make adjustments in order to survive, as stated previously. This included living with other family members or sharing living quarters with another family. Marriage rates decreased alongside the birthrate. Before this, the birthrate had always been at replacement level, but for the first time in American history families' were deciding not to have children and the rate fell below replacement level.¹⁵ Other reactions to the Depression included a movement to make as much at home as possible in order to save money. There was a return to home gardening and canning, as well as baking and cooking from scratch. The hope was that families would not only save themselves money, but

¹³ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 136

¹⁴ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 136

¹⁵ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 137

may be able to sell these home goods to others and supplement the family's income.¹⁶ The overall goal was to get by, however that may be. Getting through the Depression was not just a goal for the head of the household but involved the active participation of all family members.

The effects of the Depression were evident amongst children. As Mintz points out, many were malnourished. Children also now faced an inability to get an education due to school closings. Many were forced to work to help supplement or earn the family's income.¹⁷ These effects will be revisited shortly.

¹⁶ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 137-138

¹⁷ Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions*, 140

Childhood during the Great Depression

The increase in government aid to those adults in need was not the only adjustment to federal aid offered. For the first time, child welfare became a national issue and significant aid was offered. Prior to this, it was left up to the family to provide for children.¹⁸

During the Depression itself, children suffered from “psychological stress, insecurity, deprivation, and intense feelings of shame.”¹⁹ This was painfully evident from the letters written by children to Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady. They described situations in which they were embarrassed that Santa had brought gifts for everyone else at school but to their house, and situations in which children could not go to school because of being ridiculed for not having clean clothing.²⁰

Despite this ridicule keeping children away from school, enrollment jumped. This was due in part to a movement to get students out of the work force to open up jobs for adult males. It was also supported by the raising of the minimum age to drop out of school to be sixteen.²¹ The hope was that the longer children stayed in school the longer they avoided being unemployed.

Outside of the school day, kids were expected to work to bring in supplemental income or assist around the house. Generally, girls helped around the home, completing household tasks that would save the family money. Boys helped to supplement the family income with jobs such as babysitting, newspaper carrier, and delivery boy. This divide of duties did not differ greatly among social class, which was extraordinarily interesting since social class played a role in

¹⁸ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 235.

¹⁹ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 237

²⁰ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 238

²¹ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 239

everything else. What did differ by social class is how the Depression affected whether or not children worked before the Great Depression hit.²²

²² Glen H. Elder, Jr, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Changes in Life Experience*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, pg 64

The Depression in the Chippewa Valley

Multiple factors play into the experience of the Great Depression in the Chippewa Valley. Economic, financial, social, and political factors need to all be considered in order to paint an accurate picture of what was occurring in the Valley.

According to Ralph Wise, president of State Bank of Fall Creek “the one date I remember the most is September 21, 1931. I received a phone call from a banker in Eau Claire at 4:30 in the morning. He told me that most of the banks in Eau Claire would not be opening the next morning and that I should draw out some of our money in our account to handle any runs we may have on our bank that day because most banks would be closing”²³. This statement depicts the despair that was running amuck when the banks in Eau Claire were closing.

Economically, farms were experiencing troubling times. Farm goods were not selling for what they were worth. Gale VandeBerg reminisces that “Milk brought only 50 cents per hundred pounds and we had little to sell. Pigs were \$1 each and at times we wouldn’t sell a calf or a pig because there were no buyers”²⁴. In comparison on a national scale, a half-gallon of milk sold for 33 cents in 1920.²⁵ This is a huge decrease in the value of farm goods nationwide. Despite this, the percent of population on relief was quite minimal in this area. According to research by Paul W. Glad, in *The History of Wisconsin*, there is quite a large discrepancy in the percent of the population that was receiving relief in 1935²⁶. This is laid out in the chart below.

²³ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Remembering the Depression, October 27, 1979

²⁴ Gale VandeBerg, “And that’s the way it was: 55 stories of farming and rural living in Wisconsin 1880-1943. “The Great Depression-and the Dust Bowl Era: We became poor people”.

²⁵ “1920’s Food and Groceries Prices”, The People History.

<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/20sfood.html>, Accessed November 22, 2013.

²⁶ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin Volume V: War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940*. (Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990)

| County | Percent of Population on Relief |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| Chippewa | 6-12% |
| Pierce | No Data Available |
| Dunn | 12-18% |
| Clark | 6-12% |
| Taylor | 12-18% |
| Barron | 6-12% |
| Price | 12-18% |
| Sawyer | Less than 18% |
| Ashland | Greater than 18% |
| Iron | Greater than 18% |
| Eau Claire | 12-18% |

Furthermore, unemployment rates in 1930, the onset of the Depression in the Chippewa Valley was relatively low, with only about 6% of the total population reporting being totally or partly unemployed.²⁷

| County | 1930 Totally Unemployed Registered persons | 1930 Partly Unemployed Registered Persons | 1930 Total Population |
|--------------|--|---|-----------------------|
| Chippewa | 1296 | 921 | 37342 |
| Clark | 922 | 763 | 34165 |
| Dunn | 834 | 530 | 27037 |
| Iron | 693 | 169 | 9933 |
| Ashland | 1204 | 599 | 21054 |
| Barron | 1217 | 703 | 34301 |
| Taylor | 693 | 507 | 17685 |
| Price | 1001 | 676 | 17284 |
| Sawyer | 950 | 371 | 8878 |
| Eau Claire | 1334 | 844 | 41087 |
| Pierce | 507 | 444 | 21043 |
| Total | 10651 | 6527 | 269809 |

When one remembers their own personal childhood, attending school and education is usually one of the most prominent memories. As many historians have pointed out, it was

²⁷ University of Virginia, Historical Census Browser: 1930, State of Wisconsin, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>

common for children to be irregularly attending school for various reasons. However, in the Chippewa Valley, this was not the case.

In 1930, a total of 42,276 children, ages seven to thirteen lived in the aforementioned

| County | 1930 Population Ages 7-13 | 1930 School Attendance Ages 7-13 | 1940 Population Ages 7-13 | 1940 School Attendance Ages 7-13 |
|------------|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| Chippewa | 5853 | 5666 | 5597 | 5363 |
| Pierce | 2983 | 2911 | 2642 | 2594 |
| Dunn | 3932 | 3838 | 3647 | 3574 |
| Clark | 5658 | 5565 | 4523 | 4392 |
| Taylor | 3343 | 3296 | 2996 | 2889 |
| Barron | 5545 | 5462 | 4603 | 4533 |
| Price | 2916 | 2852 | 2503 | 2431 |
| Sawyer | 1565 | 1527 | 1516 | 1484 |
| Ashland | 3249 | 3193 | 2621 | 2429 |
| Iron | 1599 | 1588 | 1199 | 1185 |
| Eau Claire | 5633 | 5572 | 5439 | 5288 |

counties making up the area known as the Chippewa Valley. Of those, 41,470 attended school on a regular basis.²⁸ This is an attendance rate of 98.09%. This means that nearly all children who lived in the Chippewa Valley were attending school on a regular basis in 1930, a year after the

²⁸University of Virginia, Historical Census Browser: 1930, State of Wisconsin, Eau Claire County. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>

| | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total | 42276 | 41470 | 37286 | 36162 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|

crash of the stock market and at a point that is still considered the beginning of the Depression.

This is laid out in the chart above.

In comparison, the 1940 census details that there were 37,286 children living in the area at this time. Of those, 36,162 were attending school on a regular basis. This is a regular attendance rate of 96.98%. These numbers do not prove that in the Chippewa Valley the Great Depression caused a change in how many children were enrolled in school. In fact, it alludes to the fact that most kids attended school in this area. What can be learned about these numbers however, is that there were less children after the Great Depression took place. A drop in birth rate is a common occurrence during economic hardships, as people decide to put off having children until they are financially able to do so. However, it is very possible that there are other factors that lead to the decrease in a youth population by 1940.

Unfortunately however, census data about school attendance and youth population does little in the means of telling the personal story of the time. It sets up an important precedence, though, of how many children were in this area and where they were spending a large amount of their time. Children who were attending school were not working in the fields at the family farm or at various other jobs. At the very least, this is true for during the school day, it is still possible and likely that they were helping out outside of the school day. While these things may have been going on, school continued to take up a large chunk of time.

Wisconsin's divorce rate remained considerably higher than the national average throughout the majority of the Depression. There is a drop in 1932 and 1933, but prior to these years and following them, divorce is rates are increasing. Marriage rates were on the decrease

these two years as well as in 1930.²⁹ In the 1930 census, 1,333 persons aged 15 years and older in the Chippewa Valley had been divorced. After 1933, the divorce rate increases even more throughout the state of Wisconsin. This low number does not necessarily mean that families were not breaking apart. Instead, economic stress most likely played a role in why people may have chosen not to get divorced, as it was simply more costly than separating or staying together.

²⁹Thomas C. McCormick and Douglas W. Oberdorfer, *Marriage and Divorce Rates in Wisconsin, 1920-35* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, Jan 1942) *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 47, No. 4

Remembering the Depression, Year's Later

While statistical data, newspaper articles, and various other sources prove to the catastrophic devastation that took place during the Great Depression here in the Chippewa Valley, it seems that remembering one's childhood during the Depression does not always elicit horrifying memories of hardship. This can be seen through more recent newspaper articles containing interviews with people who had grown up during the Depression, and memoirs written since the 1980's that recall what life was like.

In an article written on March 1, 2009 by the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, many of the people whom lived through the Depression believe that today's society could never live through such terrible conditions again. They issued several lessons that were learned during the Depression, giving it credit to having had "shaped many of their core values". All of these lessons include a recognition of how terrible the times were, yet all recall it in a very "go –get-em" attitude in which, it was nothing more than another thing they had to go through³⁰. Many of the residents offer simple advice on how they survived, but it comes off as nothing more than advice that should be followed every day, not something to pull out of one's pocket during the largest economic crisis the United States has ever seen.

One specific interview, with Don Dickson of Altoona, stuck out the most to re-iterate this idea. He claimed "I knew we were living in hard times and were considered poor, but we thought everyone was poor"³¹. Another interview, with A.L. 'Mitz' Nowak proclaims "it was normal to us. We didn't know anything different"³² Another, is with Edgar Peterson, a retired banker who

³⁰ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Eric Lindquist, Memories of the Depression, March 1, 2009

³¹ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Seeing a man leap from the Grand Avenue Bridge, March 1, 2009

³² Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Everybody Does Their part, Even Children. March 1, 2009

claimed “we sometimes didn’t have many customers, but we made it”³³ One of the most impactful look-backs at the Depression came from Ernest Williams in an interview showcased in the Leader-Telegram in 1991. He claims that his experience in the army camps, part of the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps, of President Franklin’s New Deal, was an “extremely beneficial and worthwhile enterprise”³⁴. An AP article also printed on the Leader-Telegram on the same day contains a quote from Russell Welborn claiming “At least back then everybody had a little farm, or everybody around here did. We didn’t need much money. Now all the small farms are gone, and you have to have cash to get by”³⁵. All of these people offer up a different point of view on how the Great Depression affected their lives. Despite having different experiences, the general reoccurring theme was that, while there were challenges, it was nothing they could not handle and that it made them all the better. It epitomizes the world view of a child, in this case. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, children did not seem to feel that it was an unhappy time in their lives.

All of these people looked back at the Depression as the trying time that it was. However, they acknowledged that it was the way that it was and do not have any bitter reserves about growing up during this time period or express feeling like their childhood was something less than what childhood was like today. This is echoed in the memoirs written by local people that are housed in the Chippewa Valley museum in Eau Claire, Wisconsin³⁶. All of these memoirs have been written in the decades after the Great Depression.

³³ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Remembering the Depression, October 27, 1979

³⁴ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), Susan Allen, Depression-era work project may be right down the block, June 23, 1991

³⁵ Leader-Telegram (Eau Claire, Wisconsin). “The WPA’s Legacy: Sturdy signs of WPA crews still dot nation” Deep Gap, N.C. (AP) June 23, 1991

³⁶ The Museum is located in Carson Park in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. <http://www.cvmuseum.com/>

In “And that’s the way it was: 55 stories of farming and rural living in Wisconsin 1880-1943” Gale VandeBerg retells of the family strife during Christmas. Despite recognizing the unfortunate situation that the family found themselves in, he retells about Christmas time and how they would each pick one person’s name and that was who they got a present for and exclaims how they “never lost our sense of humor” and recalls spending time together to decorate the tree which they cut down in their own woods. “We all helped decorate our Christmas tree. Each year we would spend an evening making popcorn and stringing it on white threads, to use as long white chains to ring the branches. We would make paper ornaments to go along with the colored globes and tinsel kept over from previous years”³⁷ He recalls a Christmas program at school that ensured every kid had a part, no matter how small. Family members came over during the various holidays, bringing different dishes and ensuring for a good time. During Easter, he recalls partaking in egg decorating and attending church where women wore their spring hats. Even during blizzards, he describes finding things to do despite the fact that they had nothing, “no telephone, no electricity, no running water, no newspaper, and no next door neighbor” yet the blizzards were memorable, and even enjoyable because they family passed the time together singing or playing the piano³⁸. This is an obvious example of how despite the conditions that he was growing up under, he remembers the parts that made his childhood a special time and does not credit the Great Depression with lessening that experience.

He also exclaimed, after explaining the numerous and vastly different jobs that his father, brothers, and himself worked on “Actually, we boys enjoyed working together doing these

³⁷ Gale VandeBerg, *And that’s the way it was: 55 stories of farming and rural living in Wisconsin 1880-1943: A Living History of Farm Like From a Family Perspective*, “The Great Depression-and the Dust Bowl Era: We Became Poor People”, 2001

³⁸ Vandeberg, *And That’s the Way It Was*.

jobs”³⁹. The most impactful part of this entire memoir was the end section in which the author exclaims:

“The twenties were great-the thirties had their hardships! Nevertheless, these two decades hold great nostalgia for me and I’m sure for the rest of my family. The hardships, struggles, and worries are overshadowed by the positive features of what I refer to at times as “the good life”. Good life in terms of the family and community closeness, the feeling of responsibility for each other, and knowing each was concerned for the other. The 30s must have been very difficult years for my parents, but those were the years in which lasting family bonds developed. Together we had prevailed and our farm and home were intact”⁴⁰

This entire memoir is written in separate stories/articles as experienced by the author, Gale VandeBerg in Clark County, Wisconsin. The most interesting aspect that this memoir brings to the table is the fact that he continuously lumps the 1920s and the 1930s together in this childhood memoirs as seen in the previous example. He does specifically reference both decades separately in their own individual story or chapter, but for the rest of the chapters which are grouped together by content, the two decades seem to flow together seamlessly for him. This is incredibly interesting because they are so vastly different in the experiences of people around the country. The 1920’s are seen as a time of economic boom in which wants became needs. On the other hand, the 1930’s were a time when even absolute necessities couldn’t always be obtained.

In, “A Lifetime of memories: In bits and pieces” Norma Pire from the township of Clear Creek, Eau Claire County, designates an entire section of her memoir to the “Depression Years”. In it, she recounts random memories that she holds dear to her heart and describes what life was typically like. She recalls watching her father walk behind a “one-share plow with a team of horses to plow a whole field”⁴¹. She also recounts how laundry was done, including the fact that

³⁹ Vandeberg, *And That’s the Way It Was*.

⁴⁰ Vandeberg, *And That’s the Way It Was*.

⁴¹ Norma Pire, *A Lifetime of Memories: In Bits and Pieces* (Chippewa Valley Museum: Eau Claire, Wisconsin). Pg. 23

there was no electricity in their home yet and they had to scrub the clothes by hand and hang them outside on a line to dry. She recalls “But summer was not all chores by any means. Growing up on a farm was great”. She also recounts the ways in which she made her own fun as a child, “making mud pies was something that occupied much time”, “we did a lot of ‘pretending’, and we were quite good at inventing our own pastimes”⁴². The fact that she does not remember spending all of her time outside of school working, demonstrates how children in the Chippewa Valley do not look back and believe their childhood was wasted because of the Depression.

One interesting thing is that in many memoirs, people tell of how they had to spend the summer barefoot. Pire seems to emphasize this as a fun, freeing, sort of thing. She proclaims “we ran barefoot all summer long. The soles of our feet had become like shoe leather”⁴³. She appears, to readers, to be indifferent to the reason for being barefoot (inability to afford shoes, or an intention to save money by not wearing shoes) and instead enjoys that it was a freeing experience. Through the world view of a child, having to be barefoot was not an unfortunate situation.

The first mention of hardship does not come until the second to last page of the section on the Depression. She proclaims “Things were pretty skimpy at times. One made do by cutting corners, but there really weren’t all that many corners to cut.”⁴⁴ And then continues on to discuss how they didn’t have a telephone for a while to help cut corners and explain what it was like when they did have one. Mentions of things such as “no part of the animal was wasted” and “eating in a restaurant was something that was hardly ever done” are spread throughout the

⁴² Pire, *A Lifetime of Memories*, page 24

⁴³ Pire, *A Lifetime of Memories*, page 26

⁴⁴ Pire, *A Lifetime of Memories*, page 27

memoir as well.⁴⁵ However, despite devoting an entire section of her memoir to the Depression, Pire spends basically no focus on the hardships that were faced. Instead, it was all seen positively and is reflected in a manner in which it does not seem very negative or heart wrenching.

In “Digging up the Past” by Truman Torgerson⁴⁶ he describes how his family had to “make do with what we had was the rule of the times in the 1920’s, even more so in the 1930’s”. He was a teenager during the Depression, growing up in Meridean, Dunn County⁴⁷. “Hand-me-down and remade clothing with patching and mending of holes was an absolute necessity” and that when he was young his days were relaxed. While they had “few luxuries, sometimes even being short of necessities” they “needed very little to be happy”. He continuously detailed the hardships, but brought them back into a more positive light when recalling what it was like to grow up during this time. The most powerful thing that he shares is “I believe those days helped our generation to accept the times we live in now. Ups and downs have come and gone and will come again. We take these in stride rather than letting ourselves slide into despair”⁴⁸

Torgerson’s memoir, similar to the other memoirs, does not always remember the difference between growing up in the 1920’s and the 1930’s as purely black and white, instead crediting his “early days” to being “quiet and restful” and needing very little in order to be happy. This, I believe, plays into the world view of a child. They do not require as many things in order to be happy. They may also be oblivious to the hardships around them, which appears to be the case of many of the children in the memoirs.

⁴⁵Pire, *A Lifetime of Memories*, page 29 and 37

⁴⁶ Truman Torgerson, *Digging up the Past* (Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 1994)

⁴⁷ Torgerson, *Digging up the Past*, page 27

⁴⁸ Torgerson, *Digging up the Past*, 27

John Vodacek was born in 1925 in Chicago, Illinois. His family moved to New Auburn, Wisconsin in 1931, providing an interesting look at growing up in the Chippewa Valley during the Great Depression and not having been born in the area originally. He details his trip to the Chippewa Valley, and the reasons for leaving, including his parents' hope of being able to sustain the family through farm life⁴⁹. His autobiography provides one of the most complete looks at what it was like, encompassing what daily life was truly like at both home and school for a child growing in the Great Depression era in the Chippewa Valley. He recalls, that “during the Great Depression, my parents tried hard to make life as pleasant as it could be without much cash to spend. As many families did, we just ‘made do’”⁵⁰

Vodacek recalls many aspects of his childhood life on the family farm at a young age, including the outhouse on their farm, In the leanest years toilet paper was pages torn from Sears and Roebuck or Montgomery Wards catalogs, crumpled well to be as soft as possible. The Catalogs served as reading material as well”⁵¹. This is a very powerful statement as to the conditions they experienced, yet he shares them in a way that comes across very light-hearted to readers of his memoir by adding in a joke of sorts about how they served as reading material. He approaches bathing in a similar manner, joking that bathing daily-even if it was just a sponge bath-was reserved for “city folk”.⁵² His focus on the struggles of everyday life in a humorous way, leave a light-hearted feel for readers.

He details school life as well, recalling the small school house he attended and the teachers that he had. His school day ran from 9am to 4pm with an hour lunch and two fifteen

⁴⁹ John Vodacek, *The World and Back: A Chippewa County Life* (Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, Wisconsin 2006), page 17

⁵⁰ Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 34

⁵¹ Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 18

⁵² Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 20

minute recesses in the morning and afternoon.⁵³ He also recollects his mother's desire to bring him a hot lunch at least once a week, making them the lunch in time to deliver it to the school right at noon, even as his classmates ate "their own cold sandwiches-sometimes not much more than bread, butter, and brown sugar"⁵⁴. He himself walked to school most days and recalls playing "kitten ball" and "Auntie, Auntie Over" at recess and the Christmas program that the school had every year.⁵⁵ It was these instances that allowed him to view the Great Depression through a more positive lens than an adult may be able to. While he acknowledges that his parents struggled, it did not affect his view of his childhood.

There are many common reoccurrences in these memoirs that detail what it was like to grow up in the Chippewa Valley during the Great Depression, particularly in the rural areas. Children did not grow up having telephones and electricity, running water, or going to restaurants. Instead, they spent their time using their imagination to come up with games and things to do with what they had. They spent their days walking to school, helping around the farm or doing odds and ends kinds of jobs, and enjoying the things that they had. While they acknowledged having to go without in their memoirs years later, they do acknowledge feeling that they were without during their childhood. It was simply the way it was, and everyone experienced it. The world view of a child allowed for their reality to be different than their parents, who had to make ends meet in order to sustain their family.

⁵³ Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 21

⁵⁴ Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 21

⁵⁵ Vodacek, *The World and Back*, page 27

Conclusion:

Perhaps it is because people do not want to dwell on the bad, perhaps it is the disintegration of memories over time. Perhaps people pushed the horrific events out of their minds, focusing instead on only the good attributes. Perhaps it is the “it was way worse when I was a kid” but then telling the stories of the hard work and the lessons learned. It could also be that this is a case study of the Chippewa Valley, a region spotted by family farms and relatively miniscule rates of industry and the experiences in this area differed from those around the country.

Studying childhood is an exceptionally difficult undertaking. Primary sources written by a child simply do not exist in a capacity that allows us to understand what life was like from their point of view. In order to even attempt to get close to the way that childhood was, memoirs, usually written decades after a person’s childhood has ended, are one of the closest ways that we can draw any form of conclusions. The draw back with this is that memory inherently gets in the way, as such it has become evident that the memory of a person’s childhood may not always accurately depict the way it truly was.

What is interesting about this research is that all of these memoirs and autobiographies look at growing up during the depression as a generally happy, albeit scant, time. Yet, according to Mintz, childhood was not necessarily seen as a special time until the middle of the 20th century. This draws back to the question of whether or not these this area of the United States was a sort of exception to the horrid-ness that was the Great Depression? With such a small data sample of memoirs, it is a possible limitation of the research and can be a reason for this research to be continued. Yet, it is nonetheless a reoccurring present theme.

This research is significant and important because oral history still holds an important part of how we, as a society, understand the past. The general population creates an understanding of the past through the stories that their ancestors pass down. If we know that, despite how horrible the census data, newspaper articles, and statistics point to the Depression having been in the Chippewa Valley grand-parents and great grand-parents are still describing it in a manner that makes it appear to not have been that bad, then that is what the following generations will remember. It is these personal histories and narratives that connect us to the past in ways that a text book cannot for most people. It makes it real and tangible. As historians, it is vital that we understand that this is how society will view the past.

Most significantly, the finding of this research is that the world view of the children in the Chippewa Valley, by example of the memoirs available in the Chippewa Valley Museum, demonstrate that their reality may not necessarily be the same as the adults living through the same time period. The experiences they retell in their memoirs allude to the Great Depression as just another time for a child. Yes, it may have been less materialized than childhood today, but it was still a happy childhood in which they made their own fun out of what they had and the things they had to do. This research speaks wonders to the power of a child's view point and to world view as a whole and how differently people can experience the same event.

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