

Hard Times

This Was A Pretty Good Place to Be, All Things Considered

This following is based on video-taped interviews conducted by Dale Tucker in 1995-96 as part of a research project sponsored by the Nez Perce County Historical Society and funded in part by a grant from the Idaho Humanities Council. Gwen Pattison wrote it in the spring of 1997 for a class in Pacific Northwest history taught by Carole Simon-Smolinski at Lewis-Clark State College.

By Gwen Pattison

For many Americans who lived in the rural areas during the 1930s, life was a struggle. The Midwestern drought sent hundreds of farmers to California in search of work. Business people in the cities were starving and broken. Nez Perce County was lucky. There were hard times here, but nothing like what happened in the cities or in the drought-parched Midwest.

For Itha Crozier, Ellwood Hirzel, Mark Taylor, Wilma Dobroth and Roy C. White, the Depression meant being frugal, but still having a good time.

The 1920s had not been the prosperous "roaring Twenties" in Nez Perce County, which was still predominantly rural. Wilma Dobroth remembers her parents' Waha ranch with much joy. She tells of trips to Lapwai with her sisters taking eggs to sell. She fondly remembers the times before the Depression:

"We never had much money, but we were never hungry because we raised just pretty near everything that you could, you know, out there on the ranch. We raised meat and Dad would butcher four or five hogs at a time."

Waha treated them well, but Wilma speaks sadly about the loss of the family ranch when the economy became tight. She and four sisters and a brother lived there.

"I don't think they ever did real well. That's just about the time they lost the place, 1930 . . . Dad had owed a lot of money to a man that he'd borrowed money from and I guess it was just way overdue or something."

Wilma and her sister boarded in Lewiston and went to school there. She graduated in 1929 from Lewiston High School and headed for the Normal School to become a teacher. She worked cleaning houses, and she saved. Two years later, in the heart of the Depression, Wilma went to teach school in Waha.

"I taught school for three terms. That was right when the wages were going down, I guess, because the first year I got \$125, the next year I got \$85, and the third year, I got \$60 a month. But I could always say a person was happy those times . . . I always thought it was so pretty out there."

Wilma quit teaching to marry Herman Dobroth in 1934. They moved into an apartment in Lewiston and bought a little lot in North Lewiston. Herman worked as a log grader for Potlatch. And they began to save to build a house. There were a lot of bars in North Lewiston, Wilma says, but the people who lived there were friendly enough. "You got to know each other in them days."

Times were tight for the young couple. They bought necessities with cash, for which they had to save. But hard times did not stop Wilma and some of the other women of North Lewiston from finding an



Itha Crozier and Dale Tucker

excuse to go to town at least once a day, even if it was just to walk down Main Street to Woolworth's to check out the sales.

Herman's job at Potlatch was fairly secure until he tried to organize some of his co-workers. "Well, I'll tell you, Herman and two other fellows were going to start a union out there. Well, they got fired pretty quick, the three of them." Herman found a job in McCall, where they would rent a cabin for the summer and come home for the winter.

Another young bride, Itha Crozier, remembers the times fondly. Her family, who owned several successful auto dealerships in the Inland Northwest, was drastically affected by the Great Depression. When the money dried up, people could not make their car payments, so the vehicles had to be repossessed. The shortage of cash meant that the new cars just sat on the lot. Itha mentions that the loss of the business was hard for her parents, who had been quite well off before.

She graduated from Lewiston High School in 1930. Her parents had moved from Colfax in 1926, when the mill was being built. Times were good and people seemed happy, she says. After graduation, Itha stayed in Lewiston, working secretarial jobs for several insurance men, bankers, and lawyers, including John L. Phillips, a probate judge, until 1931.

"I just decided that my parents needed me. They were having a hard time and it was such an adjustment,



Ellwood Hirzel

from having everything and then not having anything, and they were still hanging on to the garage up there in Colfax. But it was bad."

They had moved back to Colfax, after the car dealership in Lewiston went under, to try to regroup. Itha stayed with them until 1932, when her high school



A night photo of Ellwood Hirzel's music store at 720 Main Street in the early 1940s. (Nez Perce County Historical Society.)

sweetheart, Harvey, suggested that they get married. They eloped. Harvey's parents did not think the \$15 a week that Harvey was making, working for his father, was enough for the two of them to live on, but they were in love.

The young couple moved into several "affordable" places. The one she remembers most fondly was at the Oasis Apartments in Lewiston. They were fairly new and modern, with gas for cooking. She lived in a four-plex in back of the main building with two other couples in the apartments below and behind. They had wonderful times "putting together meals" to save money. They did everything as a group, eating, dancing, playing, laughing.

"I loved it because I had a husband, we had been in love for a long time, and we were finally married – and you did get married then, believe me. I felt pretty important."

Times were tight, but service was good from local businesses and people were friendly. "We were what you'd call poor, although we didn't feel that we were poor folks. We just didn't have money."

The Lewiston economy slowed, but Harvey still did well working in his father's leather shop.

"Of course people had their shoes fixed and farmers brought their harnesses and things to be repaired, true, but some of them couldn't pay. Some of them paid with, oh, we'd get a quarter of beef sometimes, because they just didn't have the money."

Despite the shortage of cash, the young couple managed to enjoy the fun times and economize in 1930s Lewiston. Itha and Harvey would go to the Friday shows, where they used to give away silverware.

"One Friday it would be a knife, and the next a fork, and the next it would be a spoon, but we'd get two and so we built up our silverware by going to the shows on Friday night."

And they danced.

"Oh, Harvey and I loved to dance and there was a place downtown on Main Street called Dreamland and that was an outdoor theater. Lewiston is balmy in the summer, and the moon and the stars out and the band playing outside and waltzing. It was just wonderful. It just was a feeling that nobody has anymore."

Dances were a popular pastime, and romance was in style. For Hirzel's Hoot Owls, it was a way to earn money when the 9 to 5 job was making it hard to make ends meet. For Ellwood Hirzel, music was a dream that



A Depression-era view of Lewiston's Main Street, looking west. The imposing building at the right is the Elks Temple, which burned in 1969. The Breir Building is in the background. (Nez Perce County Historical Society.)

ended up being realized in the uncertain atmosphere of the Depression.

After he graduated from high school, in 1927, he went back to work for Sherman Clay, a local music store. He felt secure because it was a large company. "They were the rock of Gibraltar to me." Through hard work and a commitment to what he was doing, he soon worked his way up through the Spokane, Seattle, and finally the Portland stores, where he was when Sherman Clay closed one of its last remaining Northwest stores.

"In 1931, they closed the Portland store because things were really starting to pinch. So I was young, and it didn't bother me too much. I had the desire to go to a larger city anyway, so I went to Los Angeles."

There he worked hard for a larger firm at \$60 per week.

"I could see I wasn't getting ahead and when the Depression comes, by golly, I think of home. So in 1931, after about six months down there, why, I head for home."

He came back to Lewiston, and instead of looking for work, he started his own music store.

"I started on \$125, which nowadays wouldn't even buy the paper to keep track of – whatever. The store, for about the first three or four years all that you could make of it was \$30 a month, which I fed back into the store to help it grow."

Everyone thought he was crazy. Who starts a business in the middle of a depression? (See next page.)

The Fateful October That Started it All

These reports appeared on page one of the Lewiston Morning Tribune during the last days of the lead-up to the stock market crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression.

New York, Oct. 16 – (AP) – The stock market received its second crushing blow within a fortnight today when a deluge of selling orders poured into the market, and washed away more than two billion dollars in quoted values. The extreme declines in scores of active issues ranged from \$5 to \$30 a share.

Trading had been dull until mid-afternoon when the selling assumed huge proportions with the result that the day's sales barely crossed the 4,000,000 share mark as against 5,623,000 on Oct. 4 and 8,246,740 in the record-breaking session of March 26 last.

Today's decline was generally characterized as a "secondary reaction."

New York, Oct. 19 – (AP) – The stock market finally broke with a crash today, as the severe "bearish" pressure under which it had been struggling during the major part of the week became overpowering.

Weak holders of stock on margin were at last unable to meet the persistent calls from their brokers for more funds and were herded out of the market in a wild rush. The volume of trading on the New York stock exchange which had averaged only about 3,300,000 shares a day during the preceding full day, of five-hour sessions, this week, rose to 3,488,100

shares in today's two-hour session, the second largest Saturday turnover in history. . .

New York, Oct. 21 – (AP) – The stock market was put through the ordeal today of absorbing one of the most violent deluges of selling with which it has been confronted, but after scores of issues had tumbled \$5 to \$45 a share, powerful efforts to support the market began to meet with success, and leading issues rallied moderately from their low levels.

The session was highly confusing as the tickers fell more than an hour behind the actual trading on both the floors of the New York stock and curb exchanges. The stock exchange ticker did not print the final quotation until an hour and 40 minutes after the closing gong. The extent of the rally, therefore, was not realized until long after the close of the market, when the damage to the price structure was found to be much less severe than had been supposed. . .

New York, Oct. 23 – (AP) – Wall Street was thrown into the nearest approximation of a stock market panic experienced in years during the last hour of trading on the New York stock exchange today.

A new and wholly unexpected avalanche of selling swept over the market, carrying scores of stocks down from \$10 to \$96 a share, and wiping out more than \$3,000,000,000 in paper values in the brief interval of about an hour, an average of about \$50,000,000 a minute. . .

Ellwood borrowed and traded for almost everything.

"If you needed a load of wood, you might trade a radio for it or something."

In 1933, he began to build a house for his future bride. "I built the house for \$1,800. So you could do a lot, see, for very little, so we traded this and traded that. Anyway, I give my wife \$5, I at least made \$5 a week playing, and that would buy our groceries and buy any necessary clothes she might need and then of course we had a garden. It was amazing what a few dollars would do. Of course it was amazing how hard it was to come by 'em."

Ellwood was married in 1934. They honeymooned at the World's Fair in Chicago, taking \$100 with them. After \$50 was gone, they turned around and came back home.

Mark Taylor also traveled to the world's fair that year. He remembers seeing the Ford assembly line display and taking free rides in Ford cars. He also remembers his first introduction to one-way traffic; thank goodness the police were accommodating.

The car he took back to Chicago was a Buick sedan that he bought especially for the trip. When he got home, however, he could not make the payments on the car - \$34 a month - and he could not find a job, so he went to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which was building the road between Riggins and Salmon. He worked as a camp newspaper man. (See next page.)

'Self-Denial' Day Proposed As Way To Help Feed Needy Clarkston Residents

Morris Williams, chairman of the Community Chest, yesterday announced that plans have been made for the Clarkston people to declare Sunday "self-denial" day for the benefit of the needy. The plan is, he said, for all those who do not suffer need on that day to deny themselves the usual bounty and give the difference to needy families.

It is estimated, Williams said, that 100 families could be helped. In order that there be no duplications of service, he suggested that those who would like to aid, call Mrs. Ira D. Perkins, president of the Union Aid Society, telephone 1021-R, who is in a position to know of all such families. She has names and addresses.

By following the plan outlined, Williams said every needy family can be taken care for at least one day. - *The Lewiston Morning Tribune, February 4, 1932.*

More Handy Hints, Compliments Of Lumpkin's Drugs

The Fall Winter, 1997, issue of the Journal included a sampling of helpful household hints from a brochure distributed by St. Joseph's Family Medicines and given away to customers of W. A. Lumpkin's drug store in Lewiston about 60 years ago. Here are some more.

Keep creases in - When pressing trousers or other articles of clothing where creases are required, add a teaspoonful of sugar to a cup of water and sponge the crease with it.

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Washing brushes - Washing hair brushes is made easy by adding a tablespoonful of ammonia to a basin of warm water, then rinsing thoroughly in cold water.

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For dull knives - To sharpen a dull knife, draw the blade sharply over the neck of a bottle.

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When clothes freeze - In hanging clothes out in cold weather, add a little salt to the last rinsing water and they will not freeze.

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Squeaky shoes - If your shoes squeak, place them in a dish with just enough linseed oil to cover the soles and let them stand all night.

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To separate eggs - When separating eggs, break them in a funnel. The whites will go through and the yellow remain.

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Rusty leather - Leather furniture lasts much longer and looks better if rubbed with castor oil occasionally.

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For cane seats - The cane seats of chairs can be tightened by sponging them with hot water.

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Sticky bottles - To clean bottles easily, crush a quantity of egg shells fine. Put them in the bottle with cold water to soak for several hours. Then shake thoroughly and rinse several times. This will remove the thickest sediment in bottles or jars.

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Traveling rockers - To prevent a rocker from moving across the carpet when rocking, paste a narrow strip of old velvet on each rocker.

Mark had graduated from Lewiston High in 1931, and aspired to be "the cattle king of Idaho County." Toward that goal, Mark bought 4,000 acres and cattle on credit from the Cottonwood bank. As other ranchers went out of business, he would get the money to buy their herds, and pay off the balance. Times were tight, he says, just the essentials were bought; the rest, were improvised.

"Instead of buying a cinch for our saddles, we'd fashion a burlap sack into a cinch and weave it into the rings. It worked just as good as a cinch that you would buy."

The dances were the high times for Mark and his friends. They would all go down to the Metronome in downtown Lewiston, Riverside in North Lewiston, or to Canter's in the Orchards. Every now and again they would go to Uniontown, just for the night.

"Of course we'd load the car, so there'd be seven or eight of us in this Packard sedan. We'd go up and attend dances and break the monotony of going locally, you might say. It was kind of a fun thing. Great bunch of guys, there was no drunken wrecks, and a pleasant bunch, they didn't fight and raise hell. If you couldn't defend yourself by running like hell or with your own fists, why you better be peaceable and get along."

Another face at many of these dances was a young Roy C. White, who was in his teens during the Great Depression. He played drums and later guitar in several bands at many of the local dance halls. He speaks colorfully about his days as a musician, traveling and talking with other local musicians – especially the Mann Brothers, who were a favorite local group.

Roy was growing up in Lapwai, where things for the Indian people were never prosperous. He says his people were never "success-oriented. They were just worried about what they could get that day and survive on it." That meant bartering in many cases. His father traded for nearly everything and anything. One day, Roy C. became an unhappy part of the barter system.

"I'd come up here (to the barn) and get my little horse, get him all cleaned up, curried up, and shaved up good. And I'd ride him to town to show off my good lookin' horse and the saddle. Sometimes I used to put him in Lou's livery stable. I'd put my horse there and sometimes I'd come back ready to come home, and there'd be an old nag sittin' there with my saddle on. My dad traded my good horse off."

Roy would work often for the local farmers, who didn't have a lot of cash to pay the boys. Usually he earned only about a dollar a day, but a lot of cash wasn't necessary.

"There was a store up here called Roy C. Lane. I bought a pair of wool tweeds, black and white shoes, maroon sleeveless shirt, and a gray shirt and a maroon

More Bodies Removed From Old Cemetery

Twelve bodies have been exhumed from the old cemetery within the past few days and re-interred in the new by Dud Gilman, working under his former contract with the city.

It appears that the dense growth of grass in the summer concealed some of the mounds which marked the places of interment, but when the cemetery was thought to be abandoned by both living and dead, the plat was used as a cow pasture and the bovines soon swept away the thick grass.

Then evidences of unopened graves were discernible and three weeks ago two bodies were taken out. Last week Mr. Gilman again repaired to the place and by Monday noon had unearthed and removed ten more bodies. All of them were unknown and they were put in the unidentified portion of the new cemetery. Four graves were opened which contained no body, although the boxes or caskets were there in good condition; their contents had doubtless gone to the enrichment of medical science in some dissecting room. The plat will be plowed over this week and any bodies not then discovered will probably lie undisturbed thenceforth. – *The Lewiston Morning Tribune*, December 7, 1893.

bow tie and suspenders, and I only paid around six or seven dollars for that whole outfit. So money was really scarce."

He remembers Prohibition as a young man.

"You go to a dance in Lewiston, or anyplace. In these community dance halls all you see is people outside, their flasks shining around. They had those little white flasks with moonshine in them – \$2 a bottle. That was a lot of money to them, but if people wanted to drink, they paid it."

The Depression hit some harder than others, even in Nez Perce County, but everyone remembers hearing about the devastation in the larger cities. "I didn't know anybody personally that went hungry, myself, but I remember reading and hearing about all these things. In the big cities they had soup kitchens, and lawyers, bankers, executives were standing in line to get something to eat and it was a terrible thing," remembers Itha Crozier.

Mark Taylor agrees. "Well, I never, and I don't think our neighbors really suffered any. Of course it was a lot different, we read about it and saw it in the newspapers." (See next page.)

The New Deal reached into Idaho and the Inland Northwest, and helped many people. Wilma Dobroth remembers Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

"Oh, everyone thought he was great. Everybody seemed like they got a better look on life, I guess it was because they could work a little bit. I think that's when they started these CCC camps, wasn't it? And my dad got employment doing something. They all got a better look on life and I guess it did help because they could get a little money."

It did help, says Mark Taylor: "I wasn't affected directly, but the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and those programs provided work for a lot of people. The small rancher who was dependent on a few head of cattle and perhaps had a very limited income . . . those programs were real good for those people."

Roy C. White worked in a program under the CCC, an Indian conservation outfit. He remembers that the money was helpful, as little as it was. They helped build roads at Mt. Adams for the Yakimas.

County's Needy Given Cash

The Nez Perce County unit of the state Department of Public Assistance distributed \$14,341 in cash for direct relief to destitute persons in the county, aged and needy men and women, dependent children, and blind persons during March, according to G. Ray Reinhardt, director. — *The Lewiston Morning Tribune*, April 1, 1938.

Horticultural Society Elects Orchards Grower President

The North Idaho Horticultural Society concluded its seventh and best annual convention here yesterday with election of F. B. Gano, Lewiston Orchards, president; C. E. Berry, Clarkston, vice president; Dick Ryalls, Lewiston Orchards, secretary-treasurer; O. Fallwell, W. B. Ryalls, J. R. Sparks, Lewiston Orchards, and C. C. Booker and Aleck Listula, Clarkston, directors.

The society went on record as being against further reclamation project developments until the ratio of supply and demand for agricultural products is more equalized. — *The Lewiston Morning Tribune*, January 9, 1932.

"They were looking for jobs, for what they could do with those CCCs . . . That's why they had 'em all over the country. That's when they started up our Indian Conservation; they said they were gonna need some roads built up there."

It helped that people could work, and Roosevelt had a knack for making jobs where there weren't any, according to Mark Taylor.

In Lewiston, Mark says, "The economy was good in spite of the Depression." Ellwood Hirzel wonders at the lack of damage wrought on downtown Lewiston by the Depression: "The amazing thing, during this Depression most of these stores stayed in business. There were department stores and Penny's and Newberry's and Woolworth's and men's stores. Quite a lot of businesses moved out of the location on this side of the street over to the other side of the street, due to rent. The rents were half on the other side of the street."

People had to shuffle and downsize, but they survived, and many went on to contribute greatly to the economy of Lewiston.

All of them talk about how there was always something to eat. No one went hungry. Family and friends and community were there to help out or to visit to make the days pass.

Itha laughs. "Visiting didn't cost anything."

Because Nez Perce County was rural, and things could still be grown, people could survive. There wasn't the hunger that there was in the cities or in the dustbowl of the Midwest. Times were tight, there is no denying that, but people adjusted. People in the area managed to be economical, and to move forward. To marry and to build homes and businesses during the Depression was not easy, but the community was there to support and help.

Ellwood Hirzel says it best: "You were better off in a small town. In fact, I still think you are."

City Council Gets Estimate Of Normal Hill Road Cost

City Engineer Burns last night submitted to the council estimates covering a grade to extend from Second Avenue, Normal Hill, around the west and north side of Fifth Street park to New Sixth Street, the cost of which would be \$13,504.70, these figures being independent of the cost of right-of-way. He also submitted to the council an estimate on the cost of improving Fifth Street park approach, without the roadway, the cost of which would be \$9,520.50. — *The Lewiston Morning Tribune*, June 10, 1919.