Economy not as bad as 1930s

Those who were there say Great Depression much worse

By AMY BICKEL
The Hutchinson News

HUTCHINSON (AP) — Most were just children at the time, coming of age amid the Great Depression.

But the images of growing up poor during the worst economic times of the nation’s history have stayed with this generation of Kansans all of their lives.

Dust storms billowed across the drought-stricken prairie. Food lines were prevalent. Jobs were few.

They lived in close quarters — one-room shacks or even the chicken house. They didn’t have much: most couldn’t afford a radio, handmade dresses were sewn from rags and products such as vegetables and meat were hard to come by at certain times of the year. Most lived on foods made from flour or beans.

There was no money for a 10-cent movie, and if they had a Thanksgiving dinner, it meant they were high on the hog.

Many families fled, causing an out-migration of the Great Plains. Others were too poor to leave.

These life experiences of the Depression generation tell a relevant story amid a credit crunch, rising unemployment and an upheaval on Wall Street — of how people persevered in times of extreme hardship.

Yes, the nation is in the worst slump since that era, but there is no comparison, said Hutchinson resident Nyle Heller, who scoffed at the idea.

He worked several odd jobs as a teenager to help provide for his family.

“Oh, I’d say it was a lot rougher then than it is now,” he said. “It hit everybody.”

Many who lived through that era, or who have researched it, wonder how the current generation would withstand such dismal conditions.

Ninety-year-old Fern Gilbert, who recalls the hard times growing up in Stafford, said she never had a credit card. She never will.

“We paid cash for stuff,” the Hutchinson resident said. “Even when (husband) Fred had a steady job with wages coming in, we didn’t buy more than we could afford. Maybe I am tight, but we got along pretty good that way.”

Sylvia Feuers Hilliard, a 91-year-old Haskell County woman, summed up life in three words.

“Times were hard,” she said.

“We ate a lot of beans, but we didn’t go hungry.”

That was living simple. Those days, however, are long gone. Today’s residents have a couple of cars, cell phones, Internet access and cable television. They have mortgages and bank notes that add up to thousands of dollars.

Simple living these days is not going out to eat dinner, said Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, author of “Rooted
in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas.”

“Going out for a nickel hamburger was a luxury, and we just have no conception of how much we do that is unnecessary,” she said. “People don’t have the kind of basic survival skills that our great-grandparents had. If we did have problems on the scale that arose in the 1930s, a lot of people would be DEPRESSION

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**Depression**

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Her grandparents lived in Depression-era Liberal; her grandmother graduated from high school there in 1930. She wanted to go into nursing but had no money for training. Instead, she found jobs and sent the money back to her family.

There are some similarities to today, Riney-Kehrberg said, including bank failures. Many small banks had operating loans for farmers. When wheat dropped to 25 cents a bushel in the early 1920s, a lot of families could not pay their loans.

“They couldn’t even pay the cost of production,” she said, noting it cost 50 cents to produce one bushel of wheat.

Yet while the auto industry and others lay off workers, Riney-Kehrberg said unemployment rates were the highest in the 1930s, not falling below 15 percent.

Unemployment peaked at 25 percent in 1933. Another 25 percent of the work force was underemployed, meaning they either worked part time or weren’t using their trained skills to their full potential.

This year, October’s unemployment was 6.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“In the early 1930s, when all this was getting bad, we had no government tradition of trying to work against the economic cycle, of trying to even out the highs and the lows,” she said. The 1930s was a time when hundreds of thousands of farms went out of business across the United States. Drought and dust storms hurt income, with the average farm household making half or less than nonfarm households.

Nearly a quarter of southwest Kansas’ population responded to the decade’s challenges by leaving, Riney-Kehrberg said. Those who stayed didn’t have the money to go anywhere else.

Kansas’ far southwestern county of Morton, in the heart of dirt-storm country, lost about 50 percent of its population.

Then, Franklin Roosevelt became president, and his administration’s New Deal programs were aimed at saving America’s farms and rural areas, as well as creating work for the nation.

Lorene White, 89, of Elkhart, who lived on a farm in northwestern Morton County during the Dust Bowl and Depression days, said her father helped build a Works Progress Administration bridge.

Between 1935 and 1943 the WPA provided almost 8 million jobs, which included construction of public buildings and roadways.

White said she worked in the school cafeteria under a similar program, the National Youth Administration.

By 1938, the NYA had served 327,000 high school and college youth, who were paid from $6 to $40 a month for work-study projects at their schools.

“I think I made about 10 cents an hour,” she said. “I remember getting paid $6 one month. I thought that was great.”

Roosevelt’s programs did help jump-start the economy, said Donald
Worster, a University of Kansas professor who has studied the Dust Bowl and Depression era.

"It certainly got things started," he said, noting the worst of the Depression was over before World War II. The war, however, is what helped the country rebound. "There is nothing like war to stimulate demand and to get factories going," he said.

Worster said the characteristics of today's era might not be identical to the 1930s, but he wouldn't rule out something similar happening someday.

He emphasized the U.S. government is trillions of dollars in debt, a contrast to the government of the 1920s and early 1930s, which balanced the budget.

"This past decade we have borrowed from the Chinese and everywhere else," he said. "In some ways, people back then didn't have as far to fall - the quality of houses, the quality of transportation, the quality of clothing. People's houses foreclosed on today have computers, automobiles and credit-card furniture."

With global warming, Worster also warns of a possible continual drought like the one that plagued southwest Kansas in the 1930s.

For anyone so smug as to believe the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s was a one-time occurrence in the evolution of the world, Ella Maune begs to differ.

At 88, Maune, a Kearny County farmwife has lived through enough history to know it repeats itself.

"All it would take is for the rains to slack off and the winds to get to blowing," said Maune. "Nobody is so smart it can't happen again."

Staff members Clara Kilbourn, Kathy Hanks, Jessica Self and Jason Probst contributed to this story.
City to consider utility increase

City utility customers likely will see an increase on their bills next year.

Parsons city commissioners will consider an increase in the storm water utility bill that is charged to all utility customers in the city. The charge was implemented on a state mandate this year at $1 per month per business or household. City Manager Fred Gress told city commissioners during a Wednesday work session that the price needs to increase to $2.50.

"I will be the first to admit this is very substantial in terms of an increase," Gress said.

The increase is needed because the collapse of a storm water drain earlier this year caused the city to spend $100,000 on its repair. Most of that money, $76,000, was borrowed from the wastewater treatment plant budget. Gress said the money needs to be replaced. He also said the city hasn't completely complied with the state's unfunded mandate and needs to put more money into the storm water utility fund. He said the city's storm water drainage system is very old, but he hopes the collapse of the 600 feet of storm water pipe was an anomaly.

In addition to the increase, Gress said the city needs to create a storm water master plan so that it can schedule improvements to the system. The city must first gather preliminary data, such as the size and number of culverts in the city.

Gress said he hopes a fee of $2.50 per month is all that is needed, but he indicated the city may need another raise in the rate eventually. In the future, the city may consider charging more for commercial properties. If the commission approves the $1.50 increase, customers will see it on their January bills.

The commission will meet at 6 p.m. Monday in the commission room at the Parsons Municipal Building.

IN OTHER BUSINESS, commissioners will consider:

- Approving a resolution that indicates the intent of the com-
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mission to issue multi-family housing revenue bonds in an amount not to exceed $2.5 million. The bonds, similar to industrial revenue bonds, would finance the acquisition of the Parsonian Hotel by LEKRE LLC as well as the remodeling of the hotel into a 50-unit apartment complex. The bonds also would finance a debt service fund and certain costs of issuance. The city would not be responsible for paying off the bonds.

- Approving payment to Heckert Construction Co. in the amount of $33,591.45 for a street resurfacing project.
- Approving payment of $3,719.44 to TranSystems Corp. for professional services on the improvement of the intersection of Union Road and U.S. 59.
- Reappointing Joe Steverson and appointing Chris Holding as an alternate to the Public Wholesale Water Supply No. 4 Board with terms to expire in October 2010.
- Approving a request for reimbursement of $64,274.36 from the Kansas Housing Resource Corp. for a housing rehabilitation program that the city receive grants to operate.
- Approving payment of $3,074.69 to CH2M Hill for engineering services at the water treatment plant.
- Approving a shared user agreement between the city and the Kansas Department of Transportation to allow the city to operate its communication equipment on the state's 800 MHz digital radio communication system. The state would give the city several radios under the agreement.
- Approving the use of the Carnegie Arts Center by the KU Alumni Association with food, beer and wine being served from 6:15 to 7 p.m. March 10 preceding a performance by the KU Concert Choir at the Parsons Municipal Auditorium.
- Approving an ordinance that would make revisions to the city's floodplain management zoning regulations based on a model recommended by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Kansas Department of Agriculture.