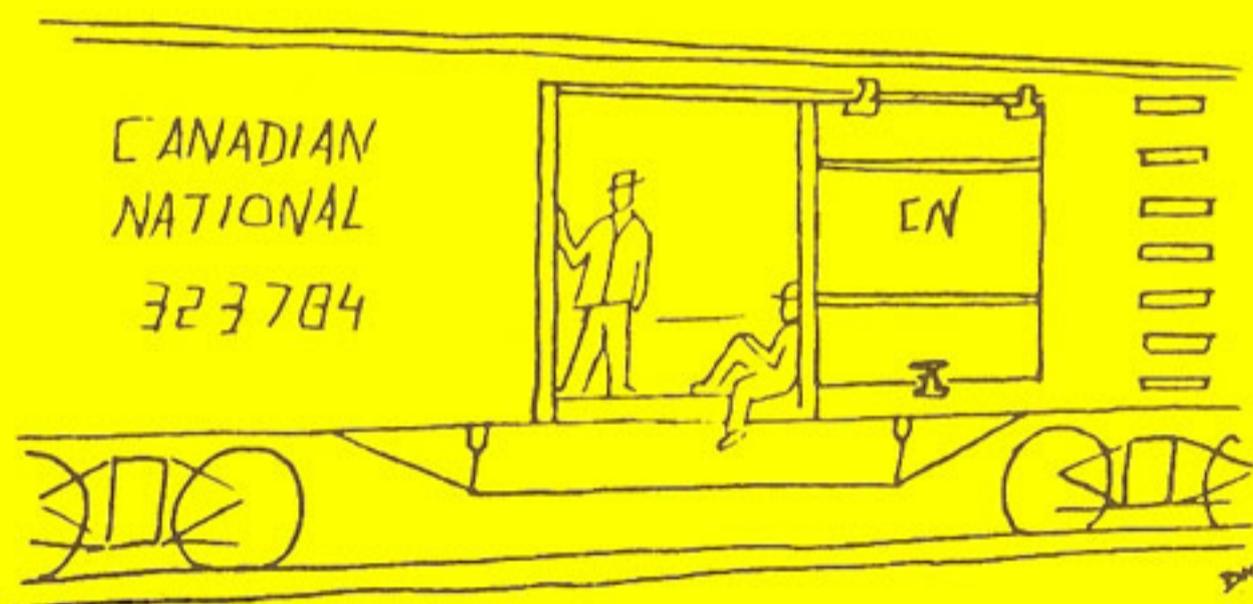


The Depression Years



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Miramichi Literacy Council – Miramichi Literacy Writers series

This series of booklets are available to anyone who wishes to order them. A single copy is \$3.00, any 3 books would be \$8.00 and a complete set of 24 would be \$60.00. Shipping and handling are extra.

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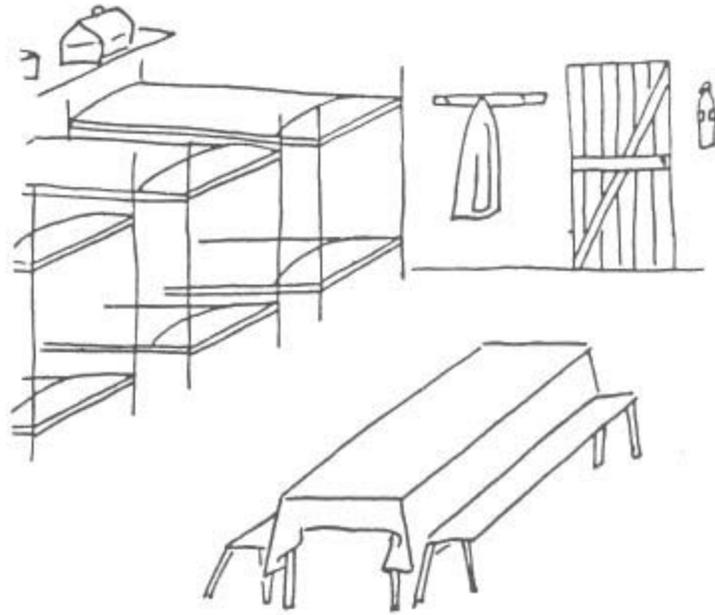
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THE DEPRESSION YEARS

CHAPTER I

Today people on the Miramichi often talk about how tough times are. And it is true! When unemployment reaches forty percent, things are not good. But there was a time in Miramichi history when life was much harder. Those years from 1929 to 1939 became known as the Great Depression.

Facts alone do not give a true picture of the Depression. To understand those years, you have to get a feeling of what life was like at that time. The many stories told by the people who lived through those tough times make you feel sorry. The Depression became known as the “Dirty Thirties” and “The Hungry Years.” People talked of “tightening their belts.” These sayings alone give you some idea of how hard everyday life was.

But what exactly caused the Depression? Its roots can be found in World War I. The war years had been very hard on everyone. After the war, human values began to change quickly. People began to value a freer way of life. They valued living for the present and not worrying about an unsure future. Money and material things became very important. Factories began to make things too quickly. People did not have the money to buy these new products. When sales began to drop off, factories began to close. This caused high unemployment. With no work, people could not even pay for the needs of everyday life.

Plans to get rich quickly became greatly valued by many people in the 1920's. They believed money could be made quickly in the Stock Market. Soon everyone wanted to buy shares in companies on the Stock Market. The price of these shares climbed quickly. But on October 24, 1929, the New York Stock Exchange fell. That day became known as Black Tuesday. The Stock Market shares soon lost all their value. Many people lost everything they owned. The thing that caused people the most pain was that they didn't understand what was happening or why it was happening.

CHAPTER II

The Depression on the Miramichi really began in the early 1920's. Many businessmen in New Brunswick lost badly when the Belfast Stock Market fell. For years the Miramichi had employed people at its sawmills. But there was no longer any need for these products. By 1925 many of these mills were closed. This caused high unemployment. Snowball's Mill, the largest sawmill on the Miramichi, had been torn down. In 1932, the Fraser Company became the last of the large mills to close. About 125 men lost their jobs from Fraser's Mill. Many people had to leave Chatham. Things did not improve until 1940 when the Canadian Air Force Base arrived.

Before the Great Depression, there was no unemployment insurance for people out of work. Hospital services were not free. There was no such thing as the "baby bonus." The government gave money to old people, but it was not enough. They might get as little as \$3.50 a month. Others got up to \$20 a month. The poor were very poor. Many of these plans to help the poor came into being in the late 1930's and 1940's because of the Depression.

CHAPTER III

It took some time, but soon the Canadian Government knew it was not most people's fault that they were poor. It was at this point that they began offering the "relief" or "dole" to the unemployed. The dole was usually in the form of stamps or money. These stamps could be used at some stores to buy food, firewood, and clothing.

Today, some people don't mind taking government help. But in those days the "dole" was a dirty word. Men who were at the end of their rope would come to the government office with tears in their eyes. They would walk around town many times before getting the courage to go in. Most people thought taking the dole was the same as looking for a handout.

The dole was very small. A family of ten people might get twenty dollars a month in payments from the county council. One person could only get five cents for a meal. One year it got so bad in Northumberland County that forty-two percent of the people were on the dole. In Chatham alone, 225 heads of families were getting government help.

Even people working were not doing much better. Pay was very poor. For example, a farm helper might earn five dollars a month and his meals. Bank employees would work long hours for only seven dollars a week. In those days, there were very few workers' unions. Some employers were fair, but some treated their employees like slaves. They would fire them if they could get someone to work for less. Many women had to find jobs just to feed their families. People would take any job offered to them.

People had such a hard time just paying for food that they had no money left to pay their taxes. The Northumberland County Council governed the Miramichi in the 1930's. One year the council was able to get only fifteen and one-half percent of the county taxes. They had to ask the province and the Canadian Government for money just to pay the county dole. By 1936, things were so bad that the jobs of the county council were taken over by the Government of New Brunswick.

When people didn't pay their taxes, the county council could take their homes away. This did not happen often on the Miramichi. The homes were useless to the council. No one had any money to buy them anyway.

Government tried their best to fight unemployment. The Chatham Town Council paid men to do work on the roads. The government of New Brunswick was busy building new highways and bridges. They needed these highways to get wood products from the woods to the ships and then overseas. They also began to plow the highways in winter.

The Canadian Government decided to make people work in relief camps to earn their dole and lower their unemployment. These relief camps were built far from the cities. Young men were taken there. The government feared these men would start trouble because they had no food or jobs. The work in the relief camps was without meaning. For example, roads were built that started nowhere and ended nowhere. Life in the relief camps held no joy. Every day was the same. The food was bad. All you got was a place to sleep and twenty cents a day in pay. After two years the government ended the relief camps before real trouble broke out.

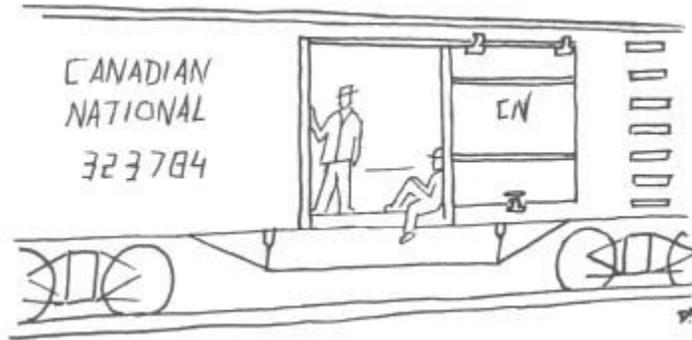


Picture of a Relief Camp

There were no relief camps on the Miramichi. But many men were made to go to the woods to cut wood. This wood was used to heat public buildings like schools. The problem was that these men were not dressed for work in the woods. Many of them had never done this kind of work before. The plan was soon dropped.

CHAPTER IV

Many young men from the Miramichi began to “ride the rails” across the country. They would jump into boxcars to get a free ride on the train. This was against the law, but people didn’t care. Most of the men were looking for jobs. They soon found out there were no jobs anywhere. But they still travelled about just for something to do. When these men, coming from other parts of Canada, arrived by train in Newcastle, they asked for food. The women would feed them if they could because they reminded them of their sons.



Riding the Rails

Some of the older Miramichi Families had money. If you had money, the Depression was a good time to live. Everything was very cheap. A new home could be bought for two thousand dollars. Food was also very cheap. Two loaves of bread cost only ten cents. So did a pound of ground meat. If you made \$6,000 a year, you could live like a rich person.

Banks were not willing to make many loans during the Depression. One famous story tells of a Mr. Amos Lutz. He had just become the new manager of the Royal Bank in Newcastle. He refused to give a loan to a man. The man had known the manager before Lutz arrived. He said, “Andy would have loaned me that!” Lutz answered, “I’m Amos.”



Picture of a soup kitchen

Many people went hungry during these years. Some people were too proud to go to the bread lines for free food. The country people were better off because they grew their own food. Most crops could not be sold by the farmers. In fact, each farm in New Brunswick made only twenty dollars a year. Fishermen still fished, but they couldn't sell their catch. Their families ate as much fish as they could. Men continued to go to the woods in winter. The wood that was cut was not sold because all the mills were closed. It was used mainly for firewood. Some men worked for the Canadian National Railway, but the pay was very small. To make ends meet, people had to take in boarders.

People often became sick because of the poor food. Many times all they had to eat was bread or potatoes. Hospital care was not free then. If poor people got sick, they often didn't have the money to go for help. Some fathers had to steal to feed their families. It was not thought wrong to steal for them.

CHAPTER V

Even with no money, there was lots to do to pass the time. Church picnics were held most Sundays. People often visited their neighbors' homes at night. They might play cards. Usually a small lunch was served. They sometimes would drink homemade beer. They played their own music. Neighbors were much closer then than they are today.

In those days show houses only charged ten cents for adults and five cents for children to see a movie. The show houses became known as "dime operas." Many people often saved the money for the movies just to get away from their troubles for a short time. Shirley Temple was the biggest star of the 1930's. But here was no money left to buy a chocolate bar, even though it cost only five cents.



Picture of Shirley Temple

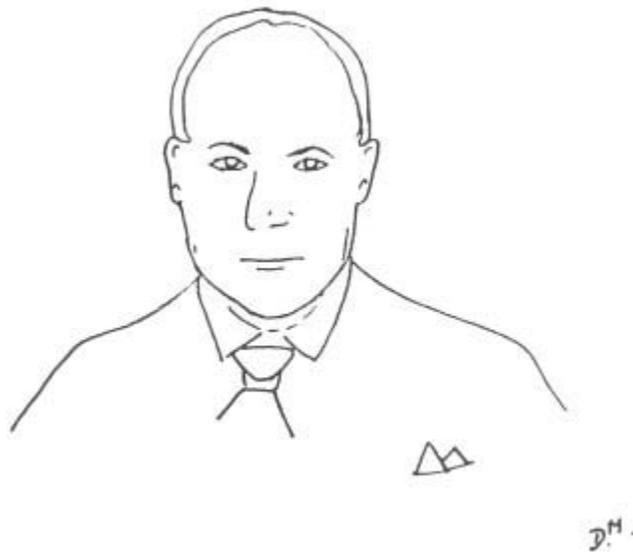
Many people played sports in those days. Hockey and baseball were often played. The Miramichi Basketball League had seventeen teams in 1930. It didn't cost much to play any of these sports. "Hockey Night in Canada" was listened to every Saturday night by anyone who had an electric radio.

CHAPTER VI

Many of the things we can easily get today were owned only by the rich during the Depression. Most homes had no indoor bathroom or electric lights. The houses were poorly heated. Water was often drawn from a well. There were no school buses. Children had to walk many miles in the cold winter to get to school. Many got no education at all. There were few cars, and very little gas for them.

Most women could not buy new dresses. Every Saturday was used for making over old clothes. This following sad story was written by a Miramichi girl to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett. It shows how hard times were. She wrote:

“I am a girl thirteen years old. I haven’t got a coat to put on. My parents can’t buy me anything for this winter. I have to walk to and from school four miles every morning and night. I’m cold every day. Would you be so kind as to send me enough money to get a coat?” Mr. Bennett sent her five dollars for her coat.



Picture of R.B. Bennett

Maybe the hardest time of the year for a parent was Christmas. There was never any money for toys. Children would window shop at the stores. But only the rich children would find electric trains and Shirley Temple dolls under their trees. Most children were happy to get an apple for Christmas. There would often be no meat with the Christmas dinner.



General Store

Even in hard times, Miramichi people were very kind. They would give to the needy families. Even things like blankets were given away. Stores gave food to the poor. People were closer to each other. They were willing to see to their neighbors' needs. Here is an example of such kindness. A mother was heard saying to her daughter, "that little girl has no dress—you don't need three."

CHAPTER VII

The Great Depression came to an end with the start of World War II. Old factories and new ones opened to make war products. Within eighteen months any man or woman wanting a job had one.

But the people who lived through the Great Depression did not quickly forget it. For years, they would pay for anything they bought. They would work very hard because it felt good to have a job. Also, they wanted the best of everything in life for their children. People did not want their families to face the same hardships they had.

But perhaps the saddest thing about the Depression was the fear it caused. There was the fear of the tax man taking away your home for not paying your taxes. There was the fear of having no food the next day. And there was the fear that a neighbor might drop in for the evening and there would be no lunch for him to eat.

Life cannot be easy when you are always in fear. Yes, the Depression left lasting marks on many people—marks that can still be seen and felt even to this day.

WORD LIST

fear

relief

dole

value

mill

Acknowledgement:

The information for this book was obtained from newspaper and magazine articles from the Chatham Public Library and from Barry Broadfoot's book, "Ten Lost Years."