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Tough Going

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Tough Going

Alumni who made it through the Great Depression give perspective on dealing with today's economic challenges.

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09



Illinois Wesleyan University faculty and staff (above) prepare to coat the walls in Hedding Hall during Paint Day. The group helped maintain the campus facilities during the Depression years.

remember the Great Depression are glad to share their wisdom.

Thick burgers and bad haircuts

Although he was barely scraping by on his salary as an Illinois Wesleyan music professor, R. Dwight Drexler made room in his budget for one vital expenditure.

“My father always told me never to get the cheapest of anything,” says Drexler, who began teaching in 1934, the same year he graduated from IWU’s School of Music. “I was tall, and I couldn’t get a store-bought suit to fit, so I went to a tailor. His cheapest was \$18, but I got the \$23 suit.”

There is a glint in the 96-year-old Drexler’s eyes as he recalls Depression-era Bloomington. It is a reminder that, despite the hard times, life was more colorful than the black-and-white photos of bread lines and migrants that appear in middle-school history books.

He allotted himself 15 cents each day to buy lunch in the restaurants downtown. “In those days, hamburgers were about this thick,” he says, holding his fingers two inches apart, “and sitting in a puddle of grease. You could buy them by the sack or for five cents apiece. I could either get two of those or one pork tenderloin and a carton of milk.”

Almost eight decades later, Helen (McNicol) Sheldon ’40 still recalls the first loss she suffered during the Great Depression.

She and her grade-school classmates looked forward to “bank days,” when they could bring their carefully-hoarded nickels, dimes and pennies to school to be deposited in a savings account.

“When the banks crashed, I lost \$3,” she says ruefully.

The Great Depression made an indelible impact on everyone who lived through it. By 1932, wages had fallen an average of 60 percent during the previous three years and nearly a quarter of Americans were unemployed. Although today’s economic crisis hasn’t reached those depths, in past months economists and politicians have resurrected the specter of the Depression, warning that the U.S. economy is suffering its worst crisis since the 1930s and comparing President Barack Obama’s first 100 days in office to those of Franklin Roosevelt. But the similarities, and differences, between the 1930s and today can also help reassure younger generations. Americans are turning to their parents and grandparents for advice on how to weather tough times — and Illinois Wesleyan alumni who

Drexler was working part-time at W.B. Reed and Co. in Bloomington, Ill., in the days following the stock market crash of 1929.

“These salesmen would come in from the East Coast and tell us about these awful things that were happening, but we didn’t feel it here for another three years or so.”

Drexler worked afternoons at Reed and attended college class in the mornings. Midway through his education, as hard economic times trickled down to Bloomington, he took a year off to work there full-time, earning 25 cents an hour. He also earned extra money performing as a pianist.

He and his fellow students found creative ways to make ends meet. During Drexler’s days as a resident of the Phi Mu Alpha house, a fellow student set up a barber chair in the basement and started offering haircuts to his fraternity brothers.

“He liked to cut it short,” Drexler says, smiling. “One time I got a haircut and I said, ‘Cut it close.’ When I’d looked in the mirror and saw how much he’d cut off, I realized the only thing I could do was to talk a bunch of other PMAs into getting their hair cut that short, too” — especially since it was the day before the Sigma Alpha Iota formal.

Meanwhile, across town, his future wife Maxine (Lebkuecher) Drexler, now 84, and her family were also feeling the pinch of the Depression. “I only had one pair of shoes,” says Maxine, a 1946 Wesleyan music graduate. “The same pair I wore to Sunday School I had to wear all week.”

Roosevelt’s New Deal touched Bloomington in many ways, such as when laborers from the Works Progress Administration repaved the city’s brick streets. Dwight Drexler recalls watching the workmen and recognizing “former insurance agents and men about town who were out of a job.”

Drexler earned \$800 per year as a member of Wesleyan’s music faculty. Local grade schools generally paid their teachers \$900-\$1,000, he recalls.

“Wesleyan was having trouble, as most schools were,” he says. For Drexler and his fellow professors, the 20th of each month was payday. He was supposed to get a check for \$66, but usually ended up getting \$33 with the promise of the rest coming later. “They just didn’t have the cash,” he says.

By 1932, Wesleyan had amassed a debt of over \$266,000. With creditors demanding payment, the school made salary cuts (see sidebar on page 13) and even began paying part of faculty salaries in scrip that could be redeemed at local businesses.

The Drexlers didn’t meet until after World War II, when Dwight returned from his post as a weather forecaster in India with the U.S. Air Force and Maxine was a senior music student sitting in the front row of his class. They continue to live in Bloomington after Dwight retired as a professor emeritus in 1978.

“1932 was a low point in this area,” Drexler says, “but gradually it improved.”

Do they have any advice for students today? “Don’t buy anything until you can pay for it,” Maxine Drexler says, and her husband nods his agreement.



Maxine and Dwight Drexler vividly recall the Depression. Maxine, shown above at a 1931 birthday party, has advice on getting through hard times: “Don’t buy anything until you can pay for it.”

Simple pleasures

“We didn’t know how poor we were because everyone was poor,” says Helen Sheldon. “I don’t remember talking about it that much, but when I look back on it, I don’t know how my parents managed.”

Like many children of the Depression, Helen and her husband Chet, a 1943 IWU graduate, say that their parents tried to shield them from the era’s harsher realities.

“I have a memory of Dad coming home one day and announcing that he was going to have to take a pay cut,” Chet says. His father, who worked as chief engineer for Rock Island, Ill., public schools, was never unemployed. “I didn’t experience anything that drastic,” he says. “But I do remember in Rock Island there were people homeless on the street and bread lines.”

Helen Sheldon grew up in Dixon, Ill., boyhood hometown of Ronald Reagan, who was a friend and football teammate of her older brother. Her father was an osteopath and often bartered for his services during the Depression years. A local beautician was among those who traded her expertise for medical attention, and she gave permanent treatments to Helen and her mother.

“Perms were so tight in those days,” she says, curling a lock of her short hair around her finger to demonstrate. “You had to wait months for it to unkink.”

Children found free ways to have fun, like going to local parks or the library, swimming and roller-skating. On occasions when there were coins to jingle in their pockets, they had a wide array of delights to choose from.



Chet and Helen Sheldon look at photos from their IWU college years.

“There were all kinds of penny candy,” Helen says.

“And ice cream cones were five cents,” her husband adds.

At Helen’s grade school, “the kids who were taking dancing lessons would come back and teach the dances to those who couldn’t afford it,” she says. “Our teacher let us practice in the halls.”

Another favorite activity was listening to the radio. Chet remembers running home from church on Sundays so that he could catch the latest adventures of “The Shadow.”

While in high school, Chet Sheldon delivered the *Rock Island Argus* and magazine subscriptions, and also worked for the National Tea Store. “The first pay envelope I ever got had a silver dollar in it,” Chet recalls, “and I still have that dollar.”

In 1936, when Helen Sheldon arrived at Illinois Wesleyan, the Depression still held the nation in its grip. Like many of her fellow students, she walked downtown twice a day to work an hour-and-a-half at the Village Inn in order to earn a hot meal and a dime tip.

She also had a campus job through the National Youth Administration. In the New Deal equivalent of what, today, would be called a work-study job, she graded papers for 30

cents an hour, with her salary applied toward her \$90-per-semester tuition costs.

But “we were so pleased to be in college,” she says, “that it never occurred to us that we were in hard times.”

The Sheldons advise today’s Americans to live frugally.

“Make it new, wear it out, use it up or do without,” Chet says, quoting an old New England aphorism. “During the Depression, this is how people lived.”

Shaking the piggy-bank

Betty (Boulton) Christopher’s hometown of Towanda, Ill., was on the Chicago-Alton railroad line. “Every time the freight train would go through, men would knock on our door looking for food,” recalls Christopher, a 1940 University graduate.

But, Christopher says her father “made everything work and we never talked about it. I realized that people were suffering because of the things my parents did for charity, but I was sheltered by my father.”

Christopher’s mother was a coordinator for the local Red Cross, and as a child she recalls how her family’s front room was filled with clothes collected for the needy.

When Roosevelt took office in 1933, one of his first acts was to declare a “bank holiday” that closed the nation’s banks for four days in order to slow withdrawal of assets and allow time for Congress to pass the Emergency Banking Act. “My father was a cashier in a state bank,” Christopher says. “In 1933, he had to go to the Federal Reserve office in Chicago to prove that his bank was solvent and could reopen.”

Likewise, she remembers having to prove to her father that she had money in her own personal bank.

“Once he had me shake money out of my piggy bank to buy a sweater for Easter,” says Christopher, who now lives in El Cerrito, Calif. “That’s probably my biggest memory of the Depression — the time I got to have a new sweater.”

But her father also taught her that “making do” applies to more than possessions — it also means making the best of hard times.

“Face life as it is and buck it through,” Betty Christopher advises. “That’s what my father always told me — face life like it is.”

Everybody helped each other

Mary (Hartwig) Winn ’43 will never forget the first stories she heard about the impact of the Great Depression.

“We lived near St. Louis, and men who had just had more than they could take went to the city, rented hotel rooms and jumped out the window,” Winn recalls. “That really made the Depression hurt.”

Winn is now 87 and lives in Clinton, Iowa. (Her husband James '41 passed away in 2007.) She grew up in Wood River, Ill., where her parents rented out one floor of their house to a family whose father "had a job but it was low-paying, as many jobs were then. We always bought an extra quart of milk for them."

In addition to Mary and her two sisters, the Hartwigs also had an unemployed uncle living with them, plus Mary's grandmother and another relative who stayed during the winter. Mary's makeshift bedroom in the basement had cardboard covering the concrete walls and curtains to separate it off.

Her father was a chemist with Standard Oil. "He never did lose employment, but he had to accept three cuts in his salary," she remembers.

"We were always talking about money," she adds. "When we needed new shoes, we knew it was expensive."

Almost everyone wore hand-me-downs, she says, and "made-over" old clothes. "Two men's shirts would make one blouse for a woman. ... If the collar and cuffs were bad you could make a short-sleeve blouse."

Winn and her family dry-cleaned their best clothes by filling large bowls with gasoline in the backyard, dipping the clothes in the liquid, rubbing them to remove stains and then hanging them to dry.

A favorite "toy" among the neighborhood children were the family's homemade washtub stands on casters. "We took those things out on the sidewalks and one person sat on it, and one pushed," Winn says. "They were very popular in the neighborhood."

Winn and her sisters seldom went to movies, and when they did, it was a memorable occasion. "I remember we went to a Laurel and Hardy movie and it was so special that the next morning we were all reviewing the jokes."

In her small town "everybody helped each other."

"When the Depression hit, one of the first things people did was have their phone taken out," says Winn. "We kept ours, and our neighbors would give out our number. We'd get phone calls for them, and we kids would have to run next door and say, 'There's a phone call for you!'"

Does the current economic crisis remind Winn of the Depression? "Oh, yes," she laughs. "I don't have any lights on except in the room I'm in, and I'm wearing a sweater because I keep the thermostat low. I don't hire anybody to do anything I can do myself, and I still sew and mend things."

Her advice is simple.

"The cry we always heard at home was 'Turn off the lights!'" she says, repeating the warning she heard many times from her own father. She adds, "Don't drink, don't smoke, and don't gamble, and you'll be just fine."



Mary and James Winn met at Wesleyan during the final months of the Depression.