

# History in the Hills: Some hard times

My dear wife is a great cook. She works hard to provide wonderful nutritious meals to us every day regardless of how tired she is, how much work she did that day or despite the natural fact that sometimes our kids are less than excited about finishing their peas and carrots. She has sometimes made our pantry stretch between trips to the grocery store. We try to make do with what we have and do our best not to waste anything. In the summer we have a garden and, as a result, can much of our produce; we make maple syrup from maple sap in the early spring; in the fall we make apple sauce from our local trees; and in the winter, we hunker down and enjoy the fruits of our labor throughout the year. I find it extremely gratifying to be able to make our own food and preserve as much as possible without buying it. We may save a few pennies here and there, but usually it is well worth it. I will never forget trying our first homemade maple syrup-let's just say it has ruined me for store-bought.

In a small way, doing these things makes me think of my grandparents and great-grandparents. These folks knew how to make things stretch because they lived in times when life was a little harder and it wasn't as easy as it is now to run to the grocery store, or as I have done many times, ordering groceries to be delivered on my front porch. My wife and I have inherited almost all of our canning jars, canners and enough pots and pans to cook for a small army. These are things that our family had to make sure we could sustain ourselves when life got hard. The skills to do these things also needs to be passed on. I don't remember my grandparents canning, but my wife remembers hers and learned from them. That skill has proven invaluable.

I would imagine that these skills were honed and developed during our nation's Great Depression. The depression hit our area hard, as it did most places in our nation. Many were out of work and money was tight. Luckily, for us here in Weirton, times were not as hard for some if they worked in the mill. Right around the time the stock market crashed that fateful day in October 1929, Weirton Steel, along with Great Lakes Steel, Hanna Iron Ore Co. and Hanna Furnace Corp., joined forces to create National Steel. This firm would be a fully integrated steel firm which realized founder E. T. Weir's dream to operate this type of corporation. The

timing was unfortunate, but during the Depression, Weirton Steel never ceased operations.

In fact, Weirton Steel and National Steel, more specifically, repeatedly reported gains throughout the Depression years, the only steel corporation in the nation to do so. The hardest years for Weirton Steel during the Depression were 1932, 1933 and 1938, according to historian David Javersak in his book "History of Weirton." Javersak explains that in these years specifically, Weirton Steel's percentage of steel making operation was reduced substantially. Javersak says 1932 is regarded as the worst of the Depression years. The year 1933 saw the only strike and subsequent work stoppage in Weirton Steel's history. In 1938, Javersak reported that the nation "experienced a very steep economic decline, sometimes called Roosevelt's Recession. It resulted from serious reductions in government spending on programs like PWA and WPA." The labor issues that resulted in the 1933 strike are complex and deserve an article all on their own, but the national atmosphere that precipitated the strike was fueled by the economics of the time. Weirton Steel did need to slow operations during the Depression and this resulted in the closure of the Steubenville plant.

Lewis Truax, in his memoir about growing up and living in Weirton in the early days, related about working in the tin mill at that time. He says "the terrible Depression was upon the whole nation, it was now growing worse. Many more people being out of work. But the tin mill was still working full time, although the Pope Tin Mill at Steubenville shut down and the hot mill men that worked there were transferred to the Weirton tin mill and everyone worked six-hour turns, which was an important thing to do, as we all should share and share alike. With times like that upon us, others had to live the same as we do. I could still receive about \$4 or \$4.50 a day, which was very good at that time."

Weirton Steel never did shut down completely, but times were hard. Mary Shakley Ferguson, in her book "The History of Holliday's Cove," had this to say about those years: "In the year 1929, the stock market crashed, and banks all across the country failed. The little A&P Store, there on Buchanan Block on Main Street, was not a pleasant place to be. There, parents bought a three-pound bag of Eight O'Clock coffee at 29 cents a bag, a 25-pound sack of flour at 39 cents a sack, a peck of potatoes and perhaps a few cans of milk. The farmers, who had stayed on their land instead of being lured away to the city by tempting daily

wages, maintained they kept the country alive through these lean years. Any man who had two day's work per week at the mill was lucky; many had only one and many more had none. Race, color and creed were forgotten as the residents of the twin-cities pooled their meager resources to help one another. The farmers donated fruit and vegetables; harvest time found the Cove women busy in the Presbyterian Church basement, canning peaches and tomatoes to distribute to the needy.

The community came together to help one another in a big way as their resources allowed. In December 1930, employees of Weirton Steel came together to raise \$13,000 to operate a soup kitchen in North Weirton.

Nationally, programs set up by Roosevelt alleviated some hardships. My grandfather, Paul M. Zuros, was 10 years old in 1929 and came from an immigrant family with several other siblings. After he graduated eighth grade, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corp, a program designed for young, unmarried men to work and learn a trade. My grandfather served in southern West Virginia, building state parks as a mason. My wife's great uncle also joined the ranks of the CCC to build parks in Pennsylvania. Tomlinson Run State Park in New Manchester was a park built by the CCC. Thanks to Roosevelt's program, we can enjoy these beautiful parks today.

Another program called the WPA, or the Works Progress Administration, contributed to the public library in Weirton, according to the History of the Mary H. Weir Public Library on its website. By the mid-1930s, the books that made up the library's collection were in poor shape and work was needed to repair them. The WPA and the National Youth Administration paid for a librarian assistant, who worked with library staff to clean and rebind many of the books.

Finally, in Weirton, we have two post offices that not only were built during the Depression, but had art commissioned by the Arts Program of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts. This program was established in 1934, to commission artwork for federal buildings. The most well known in our community is the mural painted in Cove Station Post Office in 1940. This mural depicts the 1777 expedition to Wheeling of Capt. Bilderbock from Holliday's Cove. Their goal was to save Fort Henry from a Native American attack. The piece was painted by Charles Chapman and is a masterpiece of local history. (*See image on next page*)



(Mural from Cove Station Post Office of Capt. Bilderbock's expedition to Wheeling)



The second post office is the former Weirton Post office located on Pennsylvania Avenue, across the street from the MAB Building in downtown. The art that was in this building was a stone relief also completed in 1940, called "**Pony Express and Rural Delivery.**" (*The image is directly to the left*) This piece was made by artist Vincent Glinsky and, unfortunately, is no longer in place in the building.

All in all, the Depression brought changes and hardship to our community. Work was scarce, but the mills of Weirton kept running despite the national story. Many found work through New Deal programs like the WPA and the CCC, while some stayed on the farms and helped those in need.

What is clear is that our community came together to help one another in hard times. Hopefully, those lessons that have been passed down from generation to generation will prepare us for anything that may come our way in the future.

—Paul Zoros (*the two images were added and were not in the article by Mr. Zoros*)

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