**Topic:** Life and Lessons Learned During the Era of the Great Depression

**Abstract:** Growing up during the era of the Great Depression, one boy experienced firsthand the struggles and hardships of that difficult decade. He watched as his family worried incessantly over financial issues and increasing unemployment rates. He experienced days without food, holidays without many gifts, and winters without warm clothes or properly-fitting shoes to wear. However, what this man remembers most about the Great Depression is not the financial struggle of his family, but rather the important life lessons learned during that difficult era. During those rough years, he realized that the importance of friends, family, and community is much greater than the importance of material wealth.

**Key Words:** community, economic hardships, family, financial crisis, Great Depression, life lessons, money, realizations, wealth

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**A Family’s Struggle through the Great Depression**

It was a difficult decade, the 1930’s. My friend’s grandpa remembers how his life had changed dramatically in just a split second with the beginnings of the Great Depression. Her grandfather recalls being in his early pre-teenage years at the time of that difficult era. He was young and carefree, and cared little about the financial matters of his family. He remembers the time when his parents could afford everything he wanted; he thought they were millionaires. Their family owned a car, a house, everything he could have imagined. He led the ordinary life of a young boy. However, everything was soon to change.

With the stock market crash of 1929 came the beginning of the Great Depression. The start of this difficult era was the beginning of many drastic changes to the lifestyle of his family of that of his entire community. At first, life was different, but not too bad for his family. He recalls when his parents were not able to buy him the toys he wanted, including toy cars and a wind-up toy airplane that he
had long yearned for. However, his family’s inability to buy him toys and other luxury items was nothing compared to what was to come. The sudden and disastrous economic downturn came as a huge surprise for the American people, as the “Roaring 20’s”, a decade of economic prosperity, had just ended. Nobody could have anticipated how devastating the financial crisis would become. “At first, it was just something. We thought it would pass; it was just something we had to live through.” Unfortunately, however, it did not pass; years went by and their economic hardships were only worsened.

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, the United States economy hit rock bottom, and their family’s financial troubles were increased. He remembers his parents worriedly discussing the increasing unemployment rates, as well as the increasing crime and suicide rates in both his community and the entire nation. His parents never discussed these issues with him, but he could sense that things weren’t the same in their family anymore. He knew that their lives weren’t the same as they were before, and he understood that there was something bad going on with the economy. Luckily for their family, his father was employed throughout all of the Great Depression. He was a laborer, and his weekly salary was what kept their family alive; it paid for the necessities of their family—food, clothes, shelter—and nothing more. However, although his father had been able to retain his job, severe salary cuts were very common, and his father’s weekly salary soon diminished to less than ten dollars a week.

There came a time when even the need for food, clothes, and basic necessities became a burden to his family. They often went for days without food.
Starvation and hunger were not uncommon. Thus, he had no complaints even when he received rotten food—milk that had turned sour, molasses with ants crawling in it, cornbread that had turned hard. Also, their family often had to go through winters with no warm clothes or properly-fitting shoes to wear. He never complained about anything because he understood that his family was going through a lot just to support him. His father worked long hours every day in order to make enough money for the family to buy food and necessities for the week. And even then, money was often too scarce.

Those difficult and trying times brought his family closer together, as they needed each other more than ever. His father’s weekly salary and his mother’s daily tedious labor were what supported the family and kept them alive. The Great Depression had completely altered his views of the world, his future, everything. It was during those years that he realized how much his family really meant to him. They cared about him more than they cared about themselves. They didn’t want to see him too hungry or too cold; they gave their portions of food to him when food was scarce and gave him their blankets to keep him warm during the night. They never forced him to go out and get a job because they didn’t want him to carry the burden of supporting the family.

He also recalls that during those desperate years, community ties were strong. “Times were different then. Our community was like a close-knit family. If someone in the neighborhood needed help with anything, we would all give a little something to them to help them out.” He states that those dreary years had shown to him the importance of having family and community. The Great Depression had
taught him that when times get tough, you can always count on your family and your community to help you; if they themselves were doing okay, then they would always be there for you when you were in need. The Great Depression had strengthened the bonds that tied his family together and increased the unity among his community. And even today, he values his family and community more than anything else in the world.

Holidays during the Great Depression were always difficult for his family. He remembers how his family had always tried to make Christmas a memorable day for him, and it always was. They would cut a tree down from the nearby woods and place it as a Christmas tree in the front yard; it didn’t matter to him that it was lopsided and decorated only with homemade streamers—it was beautiful to him and to his family, and that was all that mattered. His parents would buy him simple gifts for the holidays, usually just one or two each year, but they made him happy. “The most memorable part of our holiday was always the food. On Christmas Day, my mother would always prepare a wonderful dinner for our family—usually chicken, with frosted cookies for dessert. It was wonderful.” His family had been able to create their own happy family memories during that difficult time, and looking back, he sees how lucky he was as a child to have had such loving and caring parents.

He remembers that there came a time when his family nearly lost all hope and surrendered to a bleak future. They had lived for so many years a life with only the basic necessities—food, shelter, garments—completely devoid of luxury items; that kind of life soon began to seem like the norm in their society. “Days went by,
and every day was the same....At first, we thought that maybe things would change. But they didn’t, and we soon began to feel that this was how it was going to be. This was how we would have to live the rest of our lives.” There was not a single beacon of hope that they could turn to, no light that could guide their way through those dark years.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected as president of the United States in 1933, he recalls seeing a faint glimmer of hope amidst the darkness. Roosevelt’s plans for rebuilding the nation’s economy were dubbed “The New Deal”. The plan was split into three parts: relief, recovery, and reform. It consisted of financial assistance for the people, recovery of the economic prosperity of the nation, and reform of other institutions. Roosevelt’s innovative approach to the financial crisis was a relief to many, as President Hoover’s many attempts to rebuild the industry and economy of the United States had been futile.

My friend’s grandfather remembers how his parents would tune in to the radio station every night to hear Roosevelt’s “fireside chats”, during which the president would inform the people of his plans for reviving the economy. He recalls that “there was something in his voice that made everything better. His confidence that America would be able to recover from the Great Depression and his optimism about the future of our nation was a huge morale booster for the American people. He gave us hope of a better future.” It was this newfound hope that motivated the American people to live through those remaining dark years with optimism, with a new outlook for the future.
After the Great Depression was over, he remembers how everything was different. Not only was there a sounder economy and more financial security, but people had changed. People had experienced what it was like to live with only the basic necessities, and they learned to be appreciative and grateful of everything they had in life. “You could tell, afterwards, that people had changed. They didn’t look at things the same way anymore, because they knew what life was like without all of those luxuries and goods that they had once had and wanted.” Also, the Great Depression had strengthened their sense of community. It had brought unity within their families and their communities, because they had all gone through those rough times together; they understood the importance of helping one another during times of need.

My friend’s grandfather was greatly affected by the Great Depression in more ways than one. Though he had lost his opportunity to live a happy childhood, he gained something much more important. During that difficult decade, he had learned valuable life lessons that he will cherish for the rest of his life. He says that the most important lesson he had learned from the Great Depression was: “Life isn’t about material wealth. It’s about appreciating what you have, and nothing more. It’s about discovering the importance of family, friends, and community.” He had many chances during the economic crisis to give up and lose all hope of a better future, but he chose to be optimistic about the future and make the most of what he had. And today, he feels that those rough years and that experience are what make him the person he is today.