

Title: Better Opportunities on the West Coast

Abstract: As a child in the 1930s my grandfather lived in Kansas and his family felt the hardships of the dust bowl and The Great Depression. After being laid off from the WPA his parents moved the family to Hollister, California. There my grandfather worked on a ranch and picked fruit to earn money. After graduating from high school he was drafted into the army during the Korean War. Without the move to California my grandfather would not have had the family he has today and they may not have had the success they had, but he did lose touch with some family due to the move.

Key Words: Great Depression, Dust Bowl, WPA, ranch, picking fruit, army, family, successful

My grandfather was born in 1933 in Kansas in a town that was strictly a farming town. The Great Depression and dust storms of the 1930s, which became known as the dust bowl, affected many families in the area where my grandfather lived, including his own. Even though The Great Depression began in 1929 the affects were still being felt for years to come. Both his mother and father came from farming families and the woes of The Great Depression were only made worse by the effects of the dust storms that were occurring during the 1930s. My grandfather can remember when the dust storms would come his mother would take his younger sister and place her in the crib and place a wet sheet over the crib to keep the dust out and his sister would be able to breath easily. These dust storms were being caused by the drought and wind blowing the top soil from the farmland causing huge clouds of dust to blow across the area. The dust clouds from these storms where so bad that you wouldn't be able to see even five feet in front of you. School would be canceled and people would be forced to stay in their homes when these clouds would blow into their town. His father picked up any work that he could get and eventually got work through the federal jobs program known as the WPA. In the winter of 1939-1940 people who were currently working for the WPA were laid off to make jobs for

others to find work on the program. My grandfather at this time had already begun school and was attending the first grade in Kansas.

My grandfather's family was living a "hand to mouth" existence by this time. My grandfather can remember this one time that his father told him and his sister that they had exactly one dime to spend. They could either use the dime to buy a block of ice and make homemade ice cream. A block of ice at that time cost exactly ten cents and they already had the cream and eggs to use to make the ice cream or they could put a dime worth of gas in the car, make a few sandwiches at home and drive down to the lake and have a picnic. But, they could only choose one because they only had the one dime to spend. My grandfather had aunts and uncles living in California and after being laid off from his job with the WPA his father received a letter from a relative living in Hollister, California regarding a job that was available there. The letter came from one of my grandfather's uncle to let his father know that if they could get to Hollister that there was a job that would be waiting for him to handle horses on a ranch.

After receiving the letter my grandfather's parents debated on whether or not to move the family to California. In February of 1940 his parents decided to move to California and move onto the ranch in Hollister where his father would begin working. Even though my grandfather had already started school and had friends in Kansas he was not upset about the move. They loaded everything they owned into their car and set off from Kansas to California. It took four and a half days in a Model A for them to complete their trip. My grandfather says that he can remember his father taking out the backseat in the car so that they could fit all their belongings and him and his sister sitting on top of their bedding and clothing. They would stop to buy bread and bologna and that is what they would have to eat on their trip. The day they left Kansas it was five degrees below zero and the ground was covered with snow. Once they arrived in

Hollister they moved into a two bedroom shack on the ranch. My grandfather only returned to Kansas once as a young boy to visit his grandfather who stayed and lived on the farm until it had to be sold. He can remember there being an auction for the farm and equipment and with no one really having any money at the time everything went fairly cheap. His grandfather even after having to sell the farm still decided to stay in Kansas and that is where he lived until he passed away. My grandfather only went back and saw his grandfather that one time, his mother and father did go back a few times to visit, but always left my grandfather in Hollister with family.

Even though my grandfather lived in a farming town in Kansas life on the ranch was a little different than my grandfather was used to. Part of the ranch was an orchard and part was used to raise sheep and horses. Living on the ranch was like a “new world” he was not used to seeing fruit on trees and walnuts were only something that he was used to seeing in a store or at Christmas time. School was also different for him, in Kansas they had different classrooms for each grade, but now the school he was attending was a one room classroom that taught all eight grades. My grandfather can remember not only learning subjects at his grade level, but also picking up on the things being taught to the older kids. Most of the kids that he went to school with were born in the area and my grandfather was considered the “okie” from Kansas.

My grandfather got his first job at the age of seven picking prunes with his aunts and cousins. He had a quota that he needed to meet each day of the number of crates he needed to fill with prunes. Everyone who was capable contributed to their family in some way during this time. He can remember being told that once he filled his quota for the day that he would be allowed to go off and play, but he always just met his quota by the end of the day. He thinks that his aunts and cousins gave him a quota that they knew would take him most of the day to finish. Picking prunes was not an easy job and he worked most of the day to make sure that he filled his

quota before stopping time. The money he earned from picking prunes was given to his mother and used to buy school clothes for him. My grandfather said that his mother would get the money and when they went into town on Saturday to do the shopping they would go to JC Penny's and buy his new clothes for school. From the age of seven to about the age of eleven my grandfather spent his summers either picking prunes or apricots or working in the apricot sheds and the money was always used to buy his new school clothes. It was important for my grandfather to work and be able to contribute to the family.

Even though his father was working full time on the ranch it still didn't pay very well. In 1943 ranch work was just not enough and his father got a job at the cement plant in San Juan Bautista. My grandfather and his family moved off the ranch and into the town of Hollister, which was yet another change for my grandfather. He had never lived in a house that had running water or indoor plumbing this was the first time he experienced that. He moved schools again and was now in a larger school where there was a different classroom for each grade. Things were starting to improve for my grandfather's family financially around this time, but still wasn't the best of economic times. In 1944 at the age of eleven my grandfather got a job as a gardener for a local family. He worked at this job for three years until 1947 when he got a job at the local drug store in town. My grandfather graduated from high school in 1951 and wanted to go to school to become a pharmacist, but there wasn't the money for him to attend school and went straight to work right after high school.

Even though it has been more than eighty years since the start of The Great Depression and some seventy years since the dust storms blew through his hometown and even though my grandfather was young when these events happened the memories that my grandfather has from that time has affected him even to this day and the way he has lived his life. My grandfather was

taught to hold onto what little he had at that time and even though today he may have a little more than he did back then, he still holds on to what he has. The economy of that time caused families to cherish what little money and belongings they had and when economic times got better most families still followed these same beliefs afraid that another economic downturn would happen again. My grandfather has said that the effects of those days even now have a direct effect on how he handles things in the economic crisis that our country is in. He said he could see it coming and most were not prepared for the economic situation to be what it is now. My grandfather took a trip back to his hometown later in life and said that it is still to this day affected by what happened during The Depression and dust storms. There are few jobs to be had and the total population for the county in which my grandfather lived is 33,000 people.

One of the unfortunate results of moving to California is that my grandfather did lose contact with most of the family on his dad's side due to the fact that they all moved to different places as a result of the economic hardships. My grandfather says that one of the biggest and best affects The Great Depression and dust storms had on his life is that if his family had never been affected by these events than he would have never moved to California and would not have the family that he has now. He also learned about diversity by moving to California, the population in my grandfather's town was predominately white and still is to this day. Looking back on those days my grandfather said that he can see how The Great Depression and dust storms affected the many families during that time and even though his own family felt the effects financially and had to move to California he knows now that a move from Kansas would have been inevitable after he finished school.

Things were hard for my grandfather and his family during The Great Depression and the dust storms. Living hand to mouth, only having one dime to spend, taking any job that you can

find and moving to California made things a little better, but The Great Depression was felt everywhere. Things eventually did get better for my grandfather's family, but there would always be some worry that things would turn bad again. The move to California did make a better life for my grandfather and his family. He attended school, graduated from high school, worked in a good job, was drafted into the army, and started a family. Living in California did not only give my grandfather better opportunities, but gave his children and grandchildren a chance to be successful. This is something that may have not been available to them if he had stayed in Kansas.