

## FEEDING A FAMILY OF FIVE: ROLE PLAYING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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In the spring of 1989, I drove hundreds of miles of back roads in Kansas, interviewing survivors of the dust bowl and Great Depression for my doctoral dissertation. I asked these people, ranging in age from their mid-sixties to nineties, many questions about their lives during the 1930s, including work and attitudes toward federal aid, and why they had stayed in Kansas when so many had left and gone to California. I also asked a number of questions about the "nuts and bolts" of life during hard times, such as how they or their parents made family food dollars stretch. Reflecting back on those difficult years, many commented that they, unlike the current generation of young people, had what it took to survive such calamities. Young people today, they reckoned, would collapse under the strain of providing for a family on such meager resources.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1995, I was looking for a new assignment for an intermediate level undergraduate course, "The U.S. in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1945." A number of students had proven themselves unprepared for a major primary source research paper, and had also expressed a certain amount of disdain for the assignment. Although I knew that they were learning important skills, the students saw it as a largely irrelevant exercise, and consequently did rather badly on it. While attempting to formulate a new assignment, I decided to experiment with an idea I had not previously used: role playing. Why not put students in their grandparents' and great-grandparents' shoes, and ask them to respond to the problem of being poor and on relief in the early 1930s?<sup>2</sup>

The result was "Feeding a Family of Five," a role-playing exercise designed to allow students to grapple with the problems of the Great Depression. Students were asked to imagine that they were a parent in a family of five, with two adults and three children. Students could complete the assignment individually, or pair up with another student in the class. They were asked further to imagine that the year and month were February 1933, one month before the New Deal began. In terms of extremely high unemployment and the relative lack of relief resources, this was one of the lowest points in the Great Depression. These fictional families were all recipients of local relief, receiving the best possible relief payment at that time, approximately \$2.50 per week.

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<sup>1</sup>For a larger discussion of family survival strategies in the Great Depression, see Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994). See also Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>For another interesting role playing assignment see Susan Toman, "Through Black and Brown Eyes, as Well as Blue: American History from Students' Perspectives," *Teaching History*, 20 (Fall 1995), 67-71.

Given this scenario, students were to set about the difficult task of feeding a family of five. They were asked to write a grocery list, devise a set of menus, provide ingredient lists for menu items, and a short (two to three typed pages) written justification for the way in which they spent their \$2.50 relief check. They were to reflect on how spending decisions were made, and by whom. They were to discuss what they could and could not buy on a limited budget, and how they planned to meet other expenses not covered by their small relief allowance. If they had any money left over at the end of the week, how would they spend it, and why?

I provided students with a packet of information necessary to begin the assignment. Students received a small selection of grocery store advertisements, dated February 1933. While a number of items were listed in these ads, not everything students might want was available. For example, the advertisements included prices for flour, but not bakery bread. Students were allowed to go to newspapers on microfilm to find advertisements for additional products they wanted. Students had access to Chicago papers, such as the *Tribune*, as well as the local Bloomington, Illinois paper, *The Pantagraph*. If they used any of them in the assignment, they were to hand in photocopies of the ads. I placed a number of cookbooks and selections from cookbooks of that era (including facsimile editions) on reserve at the library. Again, many different types of cooking were represented, but they had the option to go to other vintage cookbooks or their own families for recipes.<sup>3</sup> I encouraged students to gather helpful suggestions from grandparents and other relatives about their experiences during the Great Depression. With their grocery lists and menus in hand, they then completed the project, knowing that a class discussion of the assignment would occur on the day the assignment was due.

Some students required some extra help as the project approached completion. Those with little to no understanding of the mechanics of cooking came to me for additional coaching. Some tried to cut corners, realizing that their budgets were running low. A student wanted to know if he could make one family member a nursing infant, reducing the total amount of food necessary for the family. While that was a bit of creative thinking, I warned him that nursing mothers required at least as much additional food as a small child would eat. In the last week before the project was due, I reserved a bit of class time each day to address student questions and concerns.

The result was a highly creative set of student projects. Many had gone to additional newspapers to find advertisements for products they wanted. Although not a required part of the assignment, one young woman had scoured the want ads in the local paper attempting to find apartments and houses that fit relief budgets. She reported to the class

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<sup>3</sup>Some of those I provided included *Good Housekeeping's Book of Menus, Recipes, and Household Discoveries* (New York: Good Housekeeping, 1922), Louis Szathmary, comp., *Along the Northern Border: Cooker in Idaho, Minnesota, and North Dakota* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), Louis Szathmary, comp., *Fifty Years of Prairie Cooking* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), and United States Department of Agriculture, *Selections from Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes and USDA Favorites* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1976).

that they simply did not exist. Several had talked with grandparents and other older relatives, gleaning family recipes. A student of Irish extraction had found an Irish cookbook filled with cheap but filling recipes, dating back to the nineteenth century and earlier. Menu plans were filled with oatmeal, peanut butter sandwiches, many variations on potatoes (baked potatoes, mashed potatoes, potato soup, fried potatoes), and lots of meatless meals. Some students had chosen to limit meals for adults to one or two per day, or to limit meals for the whole family to two per day, and to send everyone to bed early to save fuel and ease the pain of hunger. They argued that the pennies saved would be applied to other family needs. Others planned for full meals for everybody, arguing that keeping the family well-fed and healthy was the best assurance of surviving to see better times.

Their written justifications for their actions were intriguing. Many had carried the project further than I had anticipated, creating entire life histories for their families. One student constructed his paper as an appeal to relief authorities, and titled it "A Father's Nightmare." He wrote,

The roof leaks, the car is broken, our oldest needs glasses, and our youngest is complaining because he didn't get any presents from Santa Claus! The problem is that we need the \$0.50 that we save each week to pay our rent and buy fuel to keep the house warm. There is never any money left over at the end of the week.... All we can do is hope. They say, "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I can only hope that this is true, please pray for us.

He signed his appeal, "A desperate man." Another student wrote as a grandparent looking back from a distance of more than sixty years, reflecting on a life of both good and hard times. In his writing, he captured how many poor but proud Americans had felt about accepting relief dollars. "Let me tell you right now that it wasn't my idea about that whole relief thing. I'd rather have eaten dirt ... but I had to think of the children." Almost exactly mirroring the sentiments of the people I interviewed, the student wrote, "Back then families were different! Everyone banded together in order to survive. You trusted each other more. You just had to or ... or you starved."

Another unexpected result was that the assignments allowed students to incorporate a number of their own life experiences into their projects. One student drew on his own knowledge of African-American survival strategies. In his paper, written as a letter to his children, the student wrote "your uncle and two cousins moved in with us. This made an already crowded houses more crowded but this helped to make paying bills easier." In further explanation at the paper's conclusion, he commented,

I feel that a black family would have relied a lot on extended family members and pulled together to help each other. I feel the women would play a big part in any decision being made. In black families, women's roles are important in every aspect of life.

His knowledge of African-American history and community experiences allowed him to extend his paper beyond the strict confines of the assignment.

Another student, whose family had actually been homeless, brought very strong emotions to the assignment. He had his "family" eating only one meal per day, and saving every last penny. He also declared that, if necessary, he would steal to support his family, and that "real men" would not let their families starve. He had been in a situation that the rest of the students in the class, fortunately, could only imagine. His experiences, and his willingness to share them with the class, brought a degree of reality to the assignment that it otherwise might not have had.

The class discussion of the assignment was "story telling" time. Students related their troubles making their meals fit their budget, and the ways in which they had economized. Only two students had decided to work in a pair, and they related their own particular problems with creating a budget. The woman commented that she did not understand how any married couple stayed together; they had evidently spent the whole week arguing about how their money should be spent.<sup>4</sup> The class came to the conclusion that feeding a family on such a limited budget was possible, but extremely difficult. Not only did the assignment give them a greater understanding of the problems that their grandparents had faced, but also of their grandparents' attitudes today. Many had previously failed to consider that the scrimping, hoarding, and fiscal conservatism of their elders might have something to do with their experiences during a decade of hard times.

My contribution, other than to ask and answer questions, was to bring to the class even more information about how people had stretched their meager budgets during the 1930s. We talked about economizing on housing, making clothes out of feed sacks, and bartering. There are many primary, secondary, and fictional sources available to teachers and students wanting to learn more about the impact of the Great Depression on the daily activities of families.<sup>5</sup> I also told them about cost-cutting innovations in cooking that even they had not imagined. Few had heard of such "delicacies" as fried oatmeal, corn meal mush (fried and otherwise), water pudding (flour and water), Wisconsin gravy (flour, water, salt, and pepper), lamb's quarters, and dandelion greens, not to mention many ways

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<sup>4</sup>One of my colleagues suggested that for this reason, this assignment might be adapted for both high school and college courses on marriage and family life. Instead of having students share the care of a bag of flour, or an egg, to simulate the joys of parenthood, they could work together on a budget, learning the problems of adapting wants, needs, and desires to limited resources.

<sup>5</sup>For secondary materials, see Katie Armitage, *Making Do and Doing Without: Kansas in the Great Depression* (Lawrence: Kansas University Division of Continuing Education, 1983), Dorothy Schweider and Deborah Fink, "Plains Women: Rural Life in the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 8 (Spring 1988), 79-88, and Jeane Westin, *Making Do: How Women Survived the '30s* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1976). An excellent primary source is Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1984). A particularly useful fictional work is Lois Phillips Hudson, *The Bones of Plenty* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984).

to cook beans, rice, and potatoes.<sup>6</sup> Students were predictably disbelieving (and a little disgusted) about some of these menu choices, but it helped them to understand the lengths to which families went to keep fed in the midst of the depression. Given the relative affluence of the post-World War II period, few have much understanding of how people lived and ate in earlier times.

Students responded to this exercise very positively. This was evident in the way in which they wrote and talked about the project. They went to great lengths to complete the assignment successfully, interviewing family members and searching through sources beyond those that I had required. Their papers were well written, thoughtful, and creative. Students performed better on this assignment than any other during the semester. Their in-class discussion of their findings was quite animated, and they were not ready to complete it, even at the end of the class hour. One student chose to remark about the assignment in her course evaluation, writing "projects were very creative!"

I will be repeating this assignment in the near future. It worked far better than I expected, capturing the interest of the students, and allowing students with a large range of abilities to complete successfully the assignment. Normally good students handed in some exceptionally well-crafted assignments, while a number of poorer students also produced thoughtful and imaginative work. As one history education major informed me, a teacher could easily adapt it for use with junior high and high school students.

Whatever the educational setting, I believe that the assignment has great value for students. They are required to call upon their writing abilities, their imaginations, and their problem-solving skills. Some will have the opportunity to bring family and personal history into their work, making the project more meaningful and more interesting to them, and to the rest of the class as well. In their role playing, they will learn that history is made up of the lives of ordinary people, as well as the exceptional. Many ordinary families survived the Great Depression because of extraordinary skills at scrimping, saving, and innovating. Whether their skills were better than those of the current generation is a question that remains to be tested, and hopefully never will be, but exercises such as this one give students an opportunity, on a limited scale, to visit an important time in their grandparents' and great-grandparents' lives.

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<sup>6</sup>These, and many other interesting recipes and stories, can be found in Rita Van Amber, *Stories and Recipes of the Great Depression of the 1930's* (Menomonie, WI: Van Amber Publishers, 1986). This is a privately published compilation. Interested readers should write: P.O. Box 267, Menomonie, WI 54751.