

Maynard in the Great Depression

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The chorus of a popular song which came out in the early 1930's goes like this:

"Once I built a railroad
Made it run, made it run against time,
Once I built a railroad, now it's done –
Brother, can you spare a dime?"

That song should have been made then our national anthem, for it spelled out in simple unmistakable terms the anguish of the times – from the promise of "a car in every garage and a chicken in every pot" to the well of despair of not knowing from where the next meal would come.

Of course, we were in rather a fortunate position in Maynard, for all during the decades of its existence the residents had experienced this feast or famine economy due to the reliance on one industry, (and textile at that, notorious for its cycles and poor wages). This experience came in real handy when the big thing came along.

Those lean years brought the Veterans Bonus Marchers to Anacosta Flats in Washington from which they were routed by MacArthur, the Hunger Marchers to State Capitals and Washington, and the destroying of pigs to raise the price of pork. It also brought back a feeling of community togetherness – (call it what you may) and a realization that we are all human beings, not brute animals.

Let us see what the records tell us about Maynard and its people.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 was actually the climax to a process of disintegration of the economy that started in 1926-1927. The result of that crash, however, triggered a sudden gigantic retrenchment that affected all parts of the American economic structure. The people that were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder felt the impact of this where it hurt the most – no money equals no food or shelter or clothes. The myth of "prosperity 'round the corner" could not feed mouths that were hungry or provide shelter from the elements. With only reassurances, but nothing else coming from Washington, by the end of 1930 most communities were in dire straits – and we were no exception.

The Welfare Department did what it could but was far from meeting the needs of Maynard's wants. Under those conditions a Citizens' Committee on Relief called an organizational meeting at the High School auditorium, January 2, 1931, with James A. Coughlan, Rev. M. A. Vance, Chairman and Harold Morgan, Treasurer. The purpose of the committee was stated as promoting the general welfare of the town and to receive and disburse funds committed to it. An initial fund of \$1,000 and commitments of \$50

weekly started the committee on its work. Harry Templeton, agent of the mill, stated that about \$400 of that amount had been donated by the salaried officials of American Woolen and a representative of the American Powder Mills reported \$450 coming from its employees. A long list of general committee members is listed. The committee will publicize all contributions but not names of those receiving aid. (Jan. 9, 1931)

This committee reported (May 13, 1932) that it is in distress with no funds -- that a letter had been sent to all recipients that there would be no aid after May 9, 1932. \$3,200 had been spent in food, clothing and other necessities of life. Flour received though Maynard Chapter of Red Cross has been distributed.

On July 8, 1932 the Committee reported for one year of operation; -- it had co-operated with the town welfare secretary -- aided over 200 families, organized vegetable gardens throughout town; 19 on Fowlers Field, 40 behind Alumni Field (Salo Farm), 20 on Thompson Street, and other places, spent \$600 for plowing, fertilizer and seed (goods given by stores). Committee members are Rev. Matthew Vance, James A. Coughlan, Harold Morgan, Harry Templeton, F. Allen Hall, K. Paul Helander, B. J. Coughlin. The committee endorsed a field day put on by the Sunset Intertown Baseball League which drew audiences of 200 to 500 fans, about 80 players on the teams from which will be picked the cream to play West Concord. Businessmen contributed prizes for this affair. A parade to Crowe Park was also part of the day's festivities. (July 22, 1932)

The Committee on August 26, 1932 reported that it would conduct a minstrel show with Jim Farrell in charge. He will run the show entirely with women.

November 10, 1932 news note reports that the Committee will distribute 200 bags of onions, tons of squash, and bagged flour. These are stored at Coughlan's Garage on Summer Street. (Present site of Fine Arts Theater)

The Committee reported on May 4, 1933 that it plans to have 6-8 acres of land for private gardens. Last year it had 250 gardens, spent about \$600 and raised possibly \$2,000 worth of produce. It is asking for 50 cent donations to defray expenses.

The Citizens' Committee reported (May 11, 1933) that it has been working all winter getting donations from mill employees and overseers, from the various town departments, from the usual parties held by the Golf Club, from the Drama Group, The Maynard Players, and from the Little Theatre Group.

The last news note we have of the Citizens' Committee is November 24, 1933, indicating that a new drive is starting. Last year it raised \$2,190. We are not sure, but assume that the Committee carried out its individual garden plots in 1934 in conjunction with the community gardens that were instituted by the town in 1933 with aid from the state and federal levels.

A new state law was passed in 1932 (May 20) allowing towns to accept advance payment of taxes from individuals and firms. This would assist communities in less borrowing – consequently less interest would be paid.

A good barometer of the increasing hard times was indicated on July 15, 1932 by the local public Welfare Department when it reported that in 1931 welfare costs were about \$35,000, but by mid-year of 1932 that sum was already expended. It asked the selectmen to call a special town meeting to vote additional funds for the remaining five and a half months of the year.

January 5, 1933 The School Department cuts wages by 10%.)

January 12, 1933. Special Town Meeting, George Gutteridge, town Treasurer reports that until the annual town meeting he would be only able to pay town employees but no other bills – B. J. Coughlin said \$50,000 outstanding in taxes year ago, \$65,000 now, plus water bills, sewer etc. amounting to another \$50,000.

March 16, 1933 The annual town meeting voted to cut town rentals of private office space from \$3,245 to \$1,500 with no provision what happens to the department that cannot pay its rent. During the day of the meeting all tenants of mill houses received notices in the mail intimating that if the town meeting that evening voted in such a manner that taxes would go up that rents in the company houses would also increase. This was the largest meeting up to that time in the town's history.

May 18, 1933 the School Committee voted to move Main Street School children to other schools, thereby reducing teachers by two and saving cost of heat and janitor.

July 29, 1932 The Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary held a parade and a road race to Stow, with fireworks at night, to help raise funds for needy families.

August 26, 1932 – The local Red Cross, Mrs. William Crotty, Chairman reports that it will receive cotton cloth of all kinds and will set up sewing units.

March 23, 1933 – Both Banks in town now open after President Roosevelt's two week bank moratorium to prevent a run on the banking institutions of the country.

March 30, 1933 – The Chamber of Commerce elected a committee of nine to find if work can be found for those on relief and then go to selectmen with the news.

April 20, 1933 – It is reported that the Hunger Marchers are to pass through town going to Boston. They have asked the selectmen for food and shelter. Last year the Communists at Powder Mill Hall helped them. The Selectmen issue parade permit to Crowe Park but no food and shelter. (April 27, 1932) The Hunger Marchers Parade (May 4, 1933) Saturday evening, then stop at the Russian Educational Society Hall where they were guests of the Unemployed Council of Maynard. They were given food and shelter by the Council and resumed their march to Boston Sunday morning. The purpose behind

these marches nationally was to force the government to set up social security and they succeeded.

The summer of 1933 (May 8) saw the start of a community garden effort for welfare men. It was sponsored by the Welfare Department and the Citizens' Committee. The latter committee still remained in charge of the individual gardens that we mentioned previously. Don Lent was in charge of the community garden and the Citizens' Committee plots at Alumni Field (75), Fowler's Field (25), Pond Lot (16) plus backyard plots. The community gardens were situated on Powder Mill Road (opposite the present location of Lund Products) and a canning factory was started in the building there which was owned by the Powder Mill. (August 10, 1933) The cooking tanks and pipes were made and donated by the American Woolen and the land and building and electricity donated by the Powder Mills. The town steam roller was backed up to the building and provided steam for cooking. 23,000 cans were donated by the state. 800 cans of string beans was the first effort, with beans, carrots, chard, and other items distributed fresh to town welfare recipients. As of September 21, 1933 the canning was as follows: 3,849 cans beans, 2,391 cans tomatoes, 253 beets, with this to be stored at the West Concord Cold Storage for distribution during the winter. The field near Alumni Field (Salo Farm) distributed 1,272 pounds beans, 50 bu. chard, 375 bundles turnips, 900 bu. Beets, 1,746 lbs. cabbage, 2,410 lbs. summer squash, 530 bunches carrots and 100 dozen cukes.

The Emergency Relief Act (E.R.A.) passed by Congress allowed the town to start work project with the unemployed. (May 18, 1934) That week 83 men and 23 women received \$1,332.60. Projects approved by the stated included Glenwood Cemetery extension, Florida Road drain, Assessor's map, cleaning the banks of the Assabet, sewing and knitting classes, extension of work on Alumni Field, grading track and tennis courts, erecting bleachers. Don Lent was the local E.R.A. administrator. The work allowance was on a budget plan that allowed \$2.00 a week (not a day) for food for those over 16 and \$1.50 for those under -- \$1.50 for fuel and light -- \$5.00 for rent, \$.75 for clothing.

A June 1, 1934 announcement tells us that two new projects have been approved by E.R.A. the erection of a 20x24 field stone comfort station at Memorial Park with \$3,000 coming from E.R.A. funds and the town contributing \$700. The other project was the Community Gardens on Powder Mill Road. It is announced August 17, 1934 by Don Lent that canning is started at Middlesex House. (Our old town house). An October 5, 1934 news release by Lent tells that \$9,000 will be spent this month, an increase of \$500 over recent months because of heavier unemployment. An 85' x 200' hockey rink at Alumni Field as a project in 1935. (January 11)

The American Legion and Auxiliary (January 11, 1935) will hold a whist social to benefit those in need.

March 1, 1935 press release tells us that a carload of cabbage from the state will be made into sauerkraut and distributed by E. R. A. -- also received 168 cases of canned roast beef and lots of potatoes from the federal supply center.

On June 23, 1938 we discover that the Relief and Soldier's Relief Funds are exhausted and 75 new names added to W. P. A. (Works Projects Administration) – 157 there now, 24 new girls added to N. Y. A. sewing project, (National Youth Administration) – and 12 young men to N.Y.A. Park and recreation projects. \$5,000 unemployment checks a week distributed with 200 families on relief.

On August 4, 1938 W.P.A. has 359 men and 14 women employees.

A W.P.A. sewing project has an Open House (May 17, 1940).

So, the Great Depression continued for 12 years until we were able to get into a war in 1941 – and prosperity of sorts was achieved. It did prove however, that we as a community did not sit passively – we tried long before the federal government was forced by the rising storm of protest to act.