

Interview with Hester Hirsch

Interviewer: Kathy Hirsch

April 28, 1974

Q: Date of birth? When was it?

A: May 17, 1923. It was in Illinois. McDonough County in Illinois about 12 miles south of Macomb, which is where Western Illinois University is.

Q: Do you remember how long your family had lived in the area - prior?

A: My father had lived in that county all of his life and when my mother and father were married in 1908, she came to that county and lived all of their life there.

Q: How long has your family been in farming?

A: My father's father was a farmer and his father's father was a farmer. In fact, I don't know how far back it goes as to the state of Illinois, but I would assume that they were one of the original pioneers in Illinois in farming.

Q: They have been there for a very long time. In those years. Would you consider, this is prior to the depression, was farming a successful occupation to be engaged in in that area of Illinois?

A: Yes. Very much so because it is strictly a farming area. Grain and stock and its corn, wheat and feeder cows.

Q: Ok. Was there any.

A: Beef cows and then at this time a lot of milk cows. It was more beef I guess now then it was then.

Q: Do you remember what was the direct effect of the '29 crash?

A: No, because I was only 6. Only how personally and we were not aware of what the financial crash was at that time which except what we overheard at home and talking with the neighbors and overhearing our parents, really. Except what affected us personally as children.

Q: What was the first thing you ever noticed about there being a depression?

A: Well, there weren't wealthy families to begin with but there wasn't much to come down to as far as that goes, but we had. My father bought a new car in 1928 and at this time the whole atmosphere was happy and successful and moving forward and he was also breeding beautiful work horse teams. He had about 4 different teams and they were farming. The tractors had just become to really take over farming and we had a new tractor and looking back on it, I know now, that that was a time that they were moving ahead and then all of a sudden there was nothing. All we had was clothing, barely to keep us warm, food, plenty of food, because we raised it. But the first effect that I can remember was Christmas of 1929 and that was when there was just no Christmas and there were two little ones. Me at six and my little brother at two and there was just no presents for Christmas.

Q: And the year before that there had been plenty?

A: Yes. The year before there had been a bountiful Christmas. Yes.

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Q: What did you get for Christmas that year?

A: A raincoat and it cost \$2.98 because I can remember my mother telling about it and my little brother got a pair of red rubber boots. They cost \$1.98 and we also got oranges. I think we got an orange apiece because that was quite a treat in as far as farming trees because it wasn't something you did grow in that area.

Q: What was the social situation in the reaction to school and things?

A: In this area, in the state of Illinois, you still had your community schoolhouses and they were located two miles apart in districts. You had your one-room school where there were the furnace was a stove and the teacher even had to start the fire of the morning when she came to school. All eight grades were taught in the school in one school by one teacher. And if you were sharp enough you progressed listening to the other classes and this community within this school activities were planned. You had potluck suppers and all of the farmers and all the children and all the children usually put on a program even in community sings. We had community spelling bees and at home we played a lot of cards. You had the piano. We gathered around the piano and sang, which in this era people don't do and don't like.

Q: Now the depression didn't really change any of the closeness of the community though?

A: No, in fact, they were at first you didn't realize that one person was wealthier than you were because you were all in it together and you shared. One person didn't have this or that it was loaned to him by another farmer or if he ran out of feed for his cows or feed for his livestock. If my father ran out of corn and the other guy had more corn that he could use maybe they would trade. He would trade bales of hay for corn and keep going this way. And a going on into school there was no social outcast. There wasn't any gap as there is now that my father was wealthier than you are, and we took our lunches to school which was a where everyone butchered in those days and everyone put up their own meat. And one family who were, I know now, were even poorer than my family but this one girls' parents made what they call scrabble. Which was made with corn meal and the pork. You boiled pork bones and heads and hog heads and all this stuff and meal. Mix this all together and you sliced it and fried it and I loved it and I would trade my lunches which my sister had baked home baked goods and chocolate pudding with whipped cream on it for a piece of Scrabble because my parents didn't make it. This was such a big highlight for me because those kids had that, and it was a cheap food was why they had it and they could make the meat go farther with mixing it with meal. So, we would trade lunches.

Q: Before you said some people were more wealthy than others. What kind of reaction did this have?

A: We were tenant farmers and there were farmers who, of course, who had owned their land and most of those that we were associated with lost their properties.

Q: Your father maintained his?

A: No, we didn't own one in the beginning. We were still tenant farmer to start with.

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Q: Then tenant farmers didn't lost their land?

A: No. And actually, we lost less than those who owned their farms. Because when it was all over with, we had as much to start over with again as the fellow who had owned his farm before that and not as many debts really.

Q: But he did go into debt, didn't he? To put in crop and stuff? In bankruptcy...

A: But that was done with a shake of the hand and paid by when the crops came in or you sold your hogs and my father leased land with paying back with these farms 80 acres. If he planted corn or beans, no it wasn't beans in those days, wheat and corn and oats and they planted 80 acres. The agreement was that he would two-thirds of the proceeds. Like the wheat would make 80 bushels to the acre, we would keep 2/3 of that and 1/3 went to the landlord and then all pastureland and buildings were rented for monetary figures. Like the \$150 a year for the pastureland and the buildings. That is figuratively speaking because I don't remember how much it was.

Q: There were six children in your family?

A: Yes, but at the time of the depression at one there was enough years between that one brother was married in 1929.

Q: And he wasn't living at home?

A: He wasn't living at home. So, there were only really there was four of us left because one sister was married in 1921--1931 and the next sister was not married until 1935 but the farmers in that part of the country. And there was no electricity then because rural electrification did not get started until after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Q: And all of this time there was no electricity or indoor plumbing?

A: But we were fortunate in one respect. My father--my mother had a washing machine that my father had fixed with a gasoline motor and we had one of the mechanized washing machines. So, in this respect it was a ringer type washer, but it was wooden tube and a wooden washer. So, there were some things that we had that some of the others didn't. But there were some farmers who had electricity, but it was done by generators through a windmill.

Q: Nobody was buying new machinery during the depression?

A: No. They were making do with what they had.

Q: Things were falling apart then?

A: ...and there wasn't. At that time the machinery was not like it is now. You had so little machinery compared to what there is now. You had your plows, the horse drawn plows, rakes, discs, corn planters were all horse drawn.

Q: Was the whole family involved then?

A: Yes, and you all worked.

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Q: Even the girls?

A: Even the girls. We carried water to threshers. That was the girl's job because the people out in the fields. We had a little buggy with horse - with a riding mare, a beautiful riding mare, that drew this buggy and we had gallon jugs and they were wrapped in burlap and soaked with water so that they would keep as cool as possible in this 95 degree heat during threshing season and we would make all of the stops all over the fields and around to give the men water and then, of course, the girls were also involved in cooking because we always did for all the people and noon time we had as many as maybe 22-24 people for dinner. For dinner I mean dinner at noon on the farms. That is what they considered dinner.

Q: Did these people come from around the community or were they like traveling pickers or something?

A: You mean the threshing men?

Q: Yes.

A: There were -- they were in business. Only the threshers and they would usually bring maybe there would be maybe 3 men with them who would keep the machines going and the rest of the neighbors you would go from house to house and you would, in fact, we would keep the threshers overnight if they were at our house more than one night my parents would put them up at our house and so did all of the other neighbors and usually it was a person within the county or who owned this one threshing machine. So, the threshing season was like 6 to 7 weeks long. Because first of all, you had cut your grain and bound it into shocks and sheaves really and then in August you threshed.

Q: When did it go to market?

A: Then. Took it direct to market from the threshing machine and usually the farmer kept enough for his feeding purposes for the winter.

Q: Did it go by truck, by train?

A: Yes, by truck.

Q: Do you know where the nearest market was?

A: Twelve miles. And we also, our main source of income during these years was milk cows. And this was by hand. There was no milking machines in our house or in our family and we milked as high as 25 cow's morning and... 1night. I think the most they had milking at one time was maybe 15 and we always had 10-gallon milk cans. And every morning my mother or my father one drove the 12 miles to town to deliver the milk to the dairy--raw. And my Dad would not allow us to skim the cream from the top of the milk cans because it took your butterfat count down and that was what you were paid for. The better your butterfat count was the more you received for your milk.

Q: Then he ended up buying his milk back from the dairy?

A: He bought milk. No, we didn't buy milk. We kept out so much whole milk to use but I do not remember ever making butter from cream. We bought butter and when oleo first came in, we were one of the first to buy oleo because we did not have butter.

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Q: It was a little less expensive too?

A: Yes, much less. We were well off as far as food and housing goes but as far as clothing it was as minimal as anyone can live successfully.

Q: Is this the period of time when the goat ate your dress off of the line?

A: That was about 1938. But remember that farmers in that area region maybe I was not as observant as I could have been because we had crop failure year after year. Starting in '34 and '35 and '36 we had crop failures from drought, chinch bugs and some other kind of insect that affected the cows or the corn. It would just strip the leaves from the corn and when you lost your crop.

Mr. Hirsch: Corn Bore.

Q: And this was during a period when you should of been recovering?

A: And lot of places in the country were and this was after Roosevelt had been elected that all of the different programs had been started. Like the WPA and the NRA and this was when your...

Q: And the effect that had was that you got electricity and electricity into the area.

A: You got electricity, but we couldn't get electricity because the person who we rented our farm from it was like maybe a mile that that was in his cost to run it from the main trunk line into the farm and that was why we were so far behind on.

Q: When did your parents start finally getting electricity?

A: The year before we were married, 1946. They did not have indoor plumbing and by this time when they got indoor plumbing, they didn't get that until 1955. But my mother had the money where she bought her own property than and that was when she got indoor plumbing. Now what was the original question, we got off of the track.

Q: When did you start noticing that there was a swing towards better living?

A: Well, I had almost left home at this time because I left home at 17. But during high school no. You asked about the goat--and this was when I was a sophomore in high school and I had worked outside the home for people in the community during the summer and I had bought myself some clothes and I had a good slip, bra, and panties, and hose that I could wear for Sunday and dates. As my mother said Sunday. And I had school clothes, and, on the weekends, I would wash and hang them on the line and my little brother had. There was no way for children in those days to make any money like children do now. Babysitting and cutting grass you did it all for free and you had to do it and my little brother had goats. Milk goats and he had two customers in the little town mile and a half away that he was responsible. Every day he took them a quart of milk and they paid him a dime for it and I had hung all of my clothes out on the line and they were made of those days rayon, which is why the goat thought they were good, but they would also eat the wrappers off of tin cans too. I went out to get my clothes off of the line and all that was there was clothes pins and the goats had eaten all of my nice clothes which might have been four or five articles which I can't believe anyway.

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Q: I believe you had been working in taking care of kids and cooking?

A: Yes. Women had their babies at home then. So, they needed a girl to help them care for the house and, of course, back in those days a woman stayed in bed for 10 days after the birth of a child. So, they would hire girls to come and stay with them and help with the cooking and the cleaning and this sort of thing until they were over the birth of their baby. And that was when I was 13 years old and I made \$2.50 a week for a 7-day week. And the next job I had I was supposed to make \$3.50 a week but they never paid me the other dollar when I left, and I didn't have enough nerve to tell her that she owed me another dollar. So, they didn't have any money either. She owes me that dollar to this day - yes. And then in high school you didn't have the social elite group, you were all. It was a small school, but you were all together. If there was a class play or school play, of course, you had your tryouts and you had so many in it but everybody was involved and specifically there were two girls in the crowd who now I know their fathers had -- were wealthy really but they were part of the crowd because there wasn't anybody else to run around with but the poor kids.

Q: Would you say most of the people were poor in that area because of farming? There was no industry around that area?

A: Yes, there was. You had what makes the little brown jug. It was called. No, it wasn't Haegger Pottery. No, it Haegger wasn't there then. They were made there. One of the main things then was the college and it still is in that area. Big employer.

Q: But didn't the college enrollment drop during the depression?

A: See I wasn't old enough to know. I had a 4-year scholarship to it, but I didn't take it because I didn't have the money to go. But that 4-year scholarship involved about \$100 because at that time the tuition for a full year ran between 25 and 35 dollars for a full year at a state school, which is comparable to Indiana State now. However, they now have an enrollment of 28,000 something like that.

Q: If your father had tenant farmed all of this time, like during the depression and afterwards, when did he finally purchase his farm?

A: 1948. I think it was strictly insecurity. He was afraid to purchase it.

Q: Scared because of the?

A: Created by the depression. He was so afraid he would lose anything, and he was so afraid to go into debt because farming was such an erratic anytime that you could not plan to make so much payment each year because you didn't know what your income was going to be, and my mother never bought groceries. Every week she would take her eggs to town and whatever she got for eggs is what she bought her sugar and staples for groceries with and she did not -- you didn't have the money you didn't buy.

Q: When did you notice the community coming out of the depression? The depression ending and then the crop failure?

A: About 1938 it started coming back again.

Q: Have you already left the area?

A: No. I didn't graduate from high school until 1940 and in 1938 the summer of '38, that would have been after the beginning of my junior year in high school I guess, I worked in a restaurant and I worked in a restaurant all that year and went to school and there was also a program through the government that you worked at school and you were paid so much money through the months. This was the way I went through the rest of the high school years.

Q: You think without that you would of had to leave school?

A: No. Because there was no expenses involved in getting through school of only through school because your books were very minimal, and I think they probably would of, I don't know in what way, but I am sure they would of been furnished in some way. But we were never on like as you knew in the city the people were hungry. This did not happen. And we really weren't aware there were people who were hungry in this community because it was a farm community and there was plenty of food.

Q: You did without a lot of other things?

A: We didn't have a lot of frivolous things, but we had plenty food and really did recreational activities.

Q: What was the difference between the good years and the bad years as far as you can remember it? The major things that stand out in your mind.

A: Relaxation of parents.

Q: Were they tense?

A: My father was always was and I am sure my mother was too. But she was a stabilizer and was always of the opinion that with faith or hard work and that when there is a will there is a way and we will do it because she saw to it that we had our everything else that like during graduation time we did vote out caps and gowns because rental of them then compared to maybe bought. The purchase of a dress that you could wear afterwards, and the gown was gone, or the rental fee is gone, and I had a class ring which she sold chickens to get for me. We had class pictures, our high school senior pictures, like everyone else does now. Really, we really had those things because she saw to them that we did. Actually, and you say when did we start to come out of it? 1936 we started coming out of it again. But my Dad did because then was when he had to buy another new car, but he bought that at so much a month. And in 1936 my mother was operated on for goiter surgery and the Dr. asked my father what he could afford to pay for the surgery, and he was a surgeon. A specialist surgeon. And he said he made he said what would you estimate your yearly income to be? And he said well it couldn't exceed 1,200 dollars and he said well I will charge you one month, and he charged \$100 for that surgery.

Q: Did she have to go to the city?

A: And the hospital room at that and she was in the hospital and she was there for two weeks. The hospital room per day was \$8 per day. That was private room. Speaking of WPA in high school. Is that what you want?

Q: Yes.

A: When I started into high school boys were worse in school were going. It started in '36. They were going into the CCC which was the Conveying Conservation Corps and they were. That was when the parks were built by the government and they were being paid like maybe \$30 a month. I think that was what it was and their clothing in there they were just like soldiers really and this is when the money started coming back in and the WPA projects. People out of work would get the work where they could spend again and back into the field.

Q: And people in your community were getting involved in these two programs?

A: People, the young people, because going out from high school that could not go on to college were getting into this. Yes. (Speaking of wealthy farmer in Community) But did not lose this property because he had money invested in other projects that he could cover everything. And also, there was still money from their family in England at this time. And they were helping from there. And there is one person who was a tenant farmer and some way he never did know who backed him but that is the one man who bought up land and it was bankers who that were doing but they would never but they would use him and he bought up land and he is now a wealthy farmer. Now there were my brother, my sister's husband, father had a very valuable farm. There was no indebtedness against it and during the depression they did nothing to they did not borrow. They could make their own way without borrowing. Therefore, they came out of it unscathed. Because he had inherited all his land and it was free at the time of the depression. But those people who had a mortgage or were very heavily in debt were foreclosed by the bank.

Mr. Hirsch: See, a lot of foreclosures couldn't begin to happen because the banks themselves went broke.

A: That stands out very vividly in 1933 the day that March 4th President Roosevelt was inaugurated and at this time I was going to a very updated school because we had practice teachers from Western Illinois, and this was like. This one year I went through school because my parents had moved, and I was in the 5th grade and those practice teachers every 3 months and we were on a 9-month schedule and most country schools were in those days were on 8-month schedules because of the farming era area and we had formed a toy band. We couldn't afford instruments, so we had the piano and we had toys. We had clarinets and trumpets and saxophones that actually played, and we were on the radio that day the day President Roosevelt was inaugurated, and his inauguration was at 2 o'clock in the afternoon at 4 we were on the radio playing in this small radio station and this was one of the biggest events that I ever went through. Then I don't know how many days later, I can't remember what the date was, that the banks were closed and that was when the bank holiday was declared, and this was when the farmers also panicked because this was where their money was and my father.