

# The GOLDFINCH

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## The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a time when business was bad. Many people lost their jobs and most people who did work had very low pay. Some people could not afford to buy the food or clothing they needed.

The Depression lasted a long time. Even people who had savings finally used up all their money. Because the Depression started in 1929, lasted so long, and affected so many people, it is called the Great Depression.

### *What Caused The Great Depression?*

One explanation for the cause of the Great Depression is that more food and manufactured goods were produced than people could buy. This high production of food and goods began during World War I. Farmers produced food and factories manufactured materials to supply both the United States and friendly European nations.

After the war, factories kept right on making more and more things. The only change was in what they made. Factories manufactured cars, stoves, clothes, and new electrical appliances. Farmers continued to produce great amounts of food. They grew more than the nation could use. Food prices dropped. Farmers could not sell their produce for enough money to pay for the manufactured goods they wanted to buy. By 1921, two years after the war, the prices farmers received for farm products were below pre-war prices. It cost farmers more to grow corn than they could get when they sold it. For many farmers, hard times began in 1921.

By 1929, manufactured goods also were in great supply. There were more things to buy than there were people and money to buy them. People stopped buying. Businessmen could no longer sell the things in their stores so factories were forced to produce less. When this happened the factories no longer needed so many workers. Many lost their jobs. Because this happened to almost all businesses, people could not find new jobs.

People who worked in agriculture could no longer earn a good living on their farms. People who had worked in factories and businesses could not find jobs. Life was hard for most Americans. It was hard for most Iowans.



These children had potatoes, cabbage, and pie for their Christmas dinner in 1936. (Russell Lee photo, courtesy Library of Congress)



## Depression Problems in the City

Month after month the Great Depression went on. One by one factories closed. The number of people without jobs grew every week. People in cities looked for jobs, but there was no work.

We can learn how people without work felt by reading the story of a family who lived in Dubuque. The story is a true one. The words in quotes are those of the father, Mr. Park.

Claud and Martha Park were married in 1924 and went to live in Dubuque. Claud found a job as a spray painter at the Iowa Foundry. He did his work well and soon was promoted to foreman of the paint department. He worked 54 hours a week for 50¢ an hour. The Parks' first son, Claud Jr., was born in 1927 and a daughter, Mary, in 1929. With a steady job and income, life must have seemed fine. But as happened with many workers in cities, the Depression changed things.

After the Depression began in 1929, the iron foundry business did not do well. In 1931 many workers lost their jobs. Claud Park was among them. From February 1931 to the fall of 1932 he worked, off and on, for a barge line and at an insulating plant. His salary was \$5 to \$25 per month depending on the amount of work he could find. The family could not pay all their bills. Claud had to borrow \$200 from his parents. When this money was gone, he borrowed \$80 on a \$1000 insurance policy. Later he could not make his insurance payments and lost his only life insurance policy.

By December 1932 the situation was desperate. The temperature fell below zero, and there was little fuel or food left. The Parks owed a coal bill of \$40 and a grocery bill of \$25. They could not ask to buy anything more when they

could not pay the bills they owed. After talking things over one night they could see no solution. They would have to apply for poor relief; yet they both felt that they would be disgraced. Mrs. Park bitterly opposed going on relief, but during that cold night Claud got "scared about the kids," and thought "we can't let the kids starve just because we are proud." The next morning, without telling his wife, he went to the courthouse to apply for relief. "I must have walked around the block over a dozen times—it was 10 below zero, but I didn't know it." Finally he got up enough courage to go in and make his application.

The Park family was "investigated" and after about two weeks "a lady brought out a grocery and coal order." This was just in "the nick of time" as they were completely out of food. The Park family got along on the weekly



During the Depression some families did not have enough money to buy toys. Toy loan libraries made it possible for children to borrow toys just as books are borrowed from the library. (Works Progress Administration Photograph Collection, Division of the State Historical Society of Iowa)

Based on the WPA interviews with 45 Dubuque families published in *The Personal Side*, edited by Jessie A. Bloodworth and Elizabeth J. Greenwood, New York: Arno Press & the New York Times, 1971.

grocery order. Part of the time they were also allowed milk from the milk fund and "this helped a lot." The Parks felt that they were well treated by the relief office and did not find the investigations unpleasant. "It's part of the system and when you ask for relief, of course you have to cooperate. The questions didn't bother us so much as the idea of being on charity."

Claud Park never felt right about accepting relief. "Later, when they let me do some work for it, I felt better." The relief office allowed only \$7.50 a month rent and Claud did odd jobs for the landlord to make up the difference. In the fall of 1933 he worked on a government road construction project at \$80 a month. He was delighted to be paid in cash and didn't feel that he was getting "something for nothing." When the road project was completed in 1934 he worked on the lock and dam project. His wages were cut to \$50 a month and later to \$48. He was employed on emergency work projects until the end of August, 1935, when he got a job at the Mississippi Milling Company. Then the Parks thought the Depression had finally ended for them. However, in 1938, working hours at the mill were cut to 25 a week. The weekly paycheck

dropped to \$11.75 and the family got behind with bills. To make ends meet the Parks cut down to one quart of milk a day for the children instead of two. They bought meat only once a week. Canned and dried vegetables from their garden helped the Parks last through the winter. The biggest problem was warm clothing for the children. Claud Jr. and Mary both needed shoes, over-shoes, and winter underwear, but the Parks could do no more than buy food and pay the rent, coal, and electric bills. In bad weather the children had to stay home from school. Mrs. Park said she felt terrible about that.

Even though times were hard Martha Park took an active part in the Parent Teachers' Association, and Mothers' Club of the church. She believed that her high school courses, especially in home economics, had helped her to live on a small income. She believed that lack of money should not prevent the proper rearing of children. For the sake of the children, she tried to stay cheerful.

All Claud asked for the future was a chance to work and a regular weekly paycheck. He did not ever want to go on relief again.

## Glossary

Note: definitions are for words used within the context of this issue of the *Goldfinch*.

**bankrupt.** unable to pay one's debts.

**company house.** a house built by a company in which its workers may live.

**corn crib.** a storage bin for field corn on the cob.

**foreclosure.** the process by which a holder of an unpaid loan tries to collect what is owed to him.

**husk.** to remove the outer covering on an ear of corn.

**implement store.** a store selling tools.

**insulating plant.** a factory where insulation is made.

**life insurance.** a plan by which money will be paid to someone in the event of the death of another.

**manufactured goods.** things made with the help of machinery.

**mortgage.** an agreement by a borrower to give a lender property, such as a house or land, if the loan is not paid back.

**poor relief.** free help given to poor people, usually money, clothes, and food.

**poultry.** fowls, such as chickens, ducks, or turkeys.