

AFTERMATH OF WALL STREET CRASH RECALLED IN LOCAL HISTORY

By Ellen Knight¹

In the fall of 1929, the stock market began a downward slide culminating in the cataclysmic Wall Street crash which ruined the economy and plunged the country into the Great Depression. A look at the local newspaper for that November indicates no immediate change in local life. There were no screaming disaster headlines, just the usual committee reports, club news, sports scores, and social news. Yet hard times had indeed arrived. Over the coming years, mortgages defaulted, companies struggled, some workers went on strike while others lost jobs, the Town had to cut employee salaries, the hospital had to close its nursing school, and the police responded to cases of suicide.

Lingering on for years, the Depression hit people hard. "We didn't have any money," Robert Sanborn recalled when interviewed by the Winchester Historical Society in 1981. "You don't know what wages were in those days. I started at \$12 a week and during the Depression, it was down to \$8."²

"Just the thought of it makes me depressed," resident Norman Simons said. "Jobs were scarce. I had a little job of some kind during the Depression—it didn't amount to anything."



Mildred Allison, who taught school in Winchester, said, "My father had a degree from MIT. He was a radio engineer. During the Depression we lost everything. The landlord [in Arlington] evicted us because we got three months behind in the rent. My father did everything he could to support his wife and four children. He also was helping to support his own parents. He ended up starting a business sharpening lawn mowers and skates. When he had some money coming in, he paid back every penny of those three months that we were behind."

"You wondered how you would pay your bills," Martha Speers recalled. "Father worked for a Cadillac-Oldsmobile dealership on Commonwealth Avenue, and he had an elegant job. But then the Depression came and that pretty much took care of automobile sales for a while."

People had to sell their houses and cars and often used up whatever savings they had. They took what jobs they could find and looked for any means to make money. "There used to be a number of skunks near the north side of the stone wall next to St. Eulalia's Church," Werner Carlson remembered. "During the Depression, when my brother Oscar was about 22 years old, he used to trap skunks, skin them, and sell them in Boston. I think he earned about \$1 or \$2 per pelt."

Among the memorable Depression-era events was President Roosevelt's declaring a four-day national banking holiday on March 6, 1933, which kept all banks shut until Congress could act on the Emergency Banking Act.

"I remember my Dad was away," George Hebb said, "and I was home, and mother said, 'Would you stop at the bank and get me some money?' The banks were closed. It was a bank holiday because things were so bad during the Depression that Roosevelt closed the banks. I remember that particularly. We couldn't get any money."

"I remember when Roosevelt declared the bank holiday during the Depression," Simons said. "I remember Harvard Square. I stood there, and a crowd of people was milling around a bank, and there seemed to be a great commotion at that time. I hadn't read the morning paper, I guess. I asked a gentleman who was standing next to me what all the commotion was and he said, 'Where have you been? The banks are all closed.' I felt in my pocket, and I think I had \$4.00."

The local and federal governments initiated programs to create jobs and help people obtain necessities. "During the Depression we had all kinds of professional men working in ditches, 56 cents an hour and three days a week. It was a help, but it wasn't a cure. It was a relief," Nicholas Rosa said about the back-to-work program in Winchester.

"We ended up on food stamps," said Mary McLaughlin. "Then we had to go over to the Noonan School to get our oil allotment for the house. They gave you how many gallons of oil you were allowed."



During the 1930s many infrastructure jobs were created to put unemployed men, many of them professional men, back to work. These men were photographed on Jan. 20, 1934, working on filling in what had been the town dump at the upper end of Judkins Pond for a play field. The project was supported by the Civil Works Administration, a short-lived job-creation program which preceded the WPA.

People helped one another as well. “Mickey” Meurling, a teacher at the junior high remembered, “It was the height of the Depression, and there was very little money around. There were very few jobs. My salary for the first year I was here was the munificent sum of \$1,800, and that was a good job. However, after a year, I was informed that I didn’t have a job for the coming year. It wasn’t that I had been fired, but the town was short of money, and they were cutting back. Now being out of a job, there was only one alternative, and that was to go into the WPA, which were jobs made by the government.”

However, his job was saved by Helen Niedringhaus who offered to split her salary with him. “And I recall her saying, ‘Look, Mick, it can’t last forever. In a couple of years we’ll be back to where we started.’ Well, it took us seven years to get back to \$1,800.”

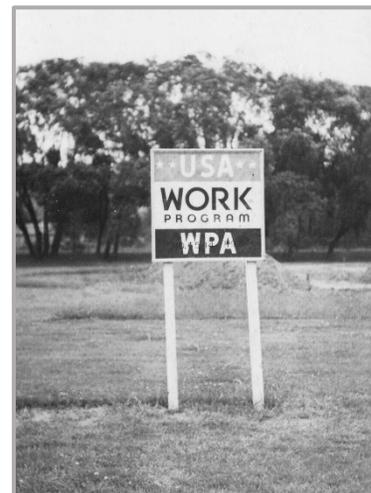
The crash also destroyed lives, whether due to despondency over the inability to find work or to the immense liabilities of failed companies. “Poor Mr. [Merton] Grush across the street was a stock broker and he committed suicide,” Speers recalled. It was 1937, when she was age 15. “Something across the street must have attracted my attention because I went down and hid in the bushes outside his garage door when the police were down there and that’s how I found out that he had committed suicide. And his partner Mr. [Bowen] Tufts over on Stratford Road did the same thing [in 1935]. And interestingly enough they were in despair because they had lost their clients’ money, but neither of those families were anything but prosperous at any time.”

PERSEVERING

Despite the hardships, the Town accomplished much during the 1930s. Relief programs were instituted with local, federal, and state funds. The Board of Public Welfare helped people find work.

Construction projects which created jobs included a new junior high school, new library building, the Aberjona River improvement program from Judkins up to the Woburn line, new park at Wedge Pond, new playfields and courts, and more.

Playing a role in the back-to-work projects were various “alphabet agencies” that were part of FDR’s New Deal, notably the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Over eight years, the WPA put roughly 8.5 million Americans to work. Winchester projects ranged from the Aberjona River improvement program to the “Beginning of Winchester” mural at the public library



In June 1936, this WPA sign appeared at what is now the site of the high school.

HISTORY PRESERVED

It was also during the Great Depression that Town Meeting passed an appropriation for a town history, enabling Henry Chapman’s *History of Winchester* to be published in 1936.³ When the

new library opened in 1931, a room was dedicated to local history and a new Winchester Historical Society was created which became the custodian of the historical collections.

Over the decades these collections were rehoused several times, finding their current home in the Archival Center at Town Hall. Historical records kept in the archives which may be used to learn more about the Depression years in Winchester include:

- Records of the Unemployment Relief Committee
- Oral histories, including the interviews which provided the quotes above
- Photographs documenting the original junior high school building, the creation of Elliott Park, and the progress of the Aberjona River Improvement program
- Photographs and the first program of the Winchester Theater, which opened in 1937
- Program, photographs, and clippings of the 1930 Massachusetts Tercentenary.

¹ This article © 2021 by the author is a revision of an earlier article by Ellen Knight published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Oct. 29, 2019. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² All quotations from residents are taken from the Oral History Collection now housed in the Winchester Archival Center. The interviews were conducted by the Winchester Historical Society.

³ The volume was reprinted and paired with a second volume in 1975 and is still available for purchase at the Public Library.