

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

“Work brings its own relief;
He who most idle is
Has most of grief.”

—EUGENE FITCH WARE

The Wall Street “crash” of 1929 was heard in faraway Jaffrey. Its repercussions were felt through the depression years which followed. Although Jaffrey’s position was not comparable to that of many other towns, the memories of those years are still vivid in the minds of those who were involved in them. Had Jaffrey been a purely textile town, the story might have been different, but a diversity of industry proved a blessing for the town. Times in the late 1920’s had become progressively more difficult and before the end of the decade employment opportunities were scarce. The good times following World War I had come to an end.

Fifteen and twenty dollars a week was considered a good week’s pay but it took close figuring to stretch those amounts to cover the necessities and incidentals of life, particularly in the large families. There was not much left for the proverbial “rainy day”, and when unemployment came even the best regulated households found it hard going. Yet, in the dark years of 1933 and 1934, there was a feeling of optimism in all the business reports affecting the town’s major industries. Hardest depressed were the town’s two textile mills — the White Brothers’ mill in the village and the Cheshire Mill. Their employees felt the individual impact of the hard times most severely.

To minimize the effects of unemployment in Jaffrey, town officials adopted a program of spreading the available jobs. During the critical years married female teachers were not hired in order to provide positions for unmarried teachers in the Jaffrey School system. The same procedure was adopted in some of the business offices. Where both husband and wife had been working, preference was given to the head of the family. These practices helped to cushion the effects of the unemployment situation here. They were discontinued as economic conditions improved.

There were in Jaffrey families who were reluctant to go on welfare and tried to make the best of a tough situation. Larders were lean, but somehow they managed to get by. Frills disappeared from din-

ing tables. The times were hard and everyone, including the children knew it and hopefully waited for better times to come. General conversion to oil for heating homes had not yet taken place, and most houses were dependent on wood and coal heating. But these items cost money and money was scarce. There was not always firewood in plentiful supply, but fortunately Bean & Symonds, Inc., manufacturers of box shooks and match blocks, usually had a supply of waste material of pine edgings which were bundled and sold for kindling at five cents a bundle or six dollars a cord. Where finances did not allow purchase in large quantities, it was bought by the bundle to keep the home fires burning through the day. At night the fires were allowed to go out to insure a supply of firewood for cooking and heating the ensuing day. Times were badly out of joint and every precaution had to be taken. Landlords felt the severity of the times, as many tenants were unable to pay their rent regularly. Often, time extensions were allowed and, as one man said in reminiscing, ". . . they paid it all finally."

As in any financial crisis, demands for credit increased, but the retail merchants, in order to remain solvent themselves, had to adopt a strict credit policy. In some stores a five dollar per week credit allowance was the arbitrary limit. No new accounts were opened. Life took on a more austere aspect. Luxuries were forgotten in the quest for daily bread, yet, even so, life here never sank to the depths of the ghettos of some of our cities today. It was still country living, wholesome at core, minus some of the "extras" of more affluent times. It was a depression period and everyone knew it. There was neither panic nor fear, but a strong desire to get along with what was available until better times came. No one looked for a panacea as something like a rabbit from a magician's hat.

The industrial outlook in June, 1933, was described as "brighter than at any time during the past three years," and in a statement to the press, Wilbur E. Webster, head of the W. W. Cross & Co., Inc., said, "Business is good." In 1934 *The Jaffrey Recorder* stated: "Business as a whole is satisfactory. One or two shops have not been able to run full schedule, but one has maintained a pace that is enviable throughout the country." This reference was to the Cross company which in August, 1933, had increased its number of employees by fifty per cent, with a wage boost affecting more than 250 employees. An earlier increase in personnel had occurred in the spring of 1930. (By way of digression, it is interesting to note here that a significant number of long-time employees and recent retirees of the Cross com-

pany began their careers with the firm during these depression years, as revealed in the genealogical section of the present work.) Tacks and nails were essential items even in a depression economy.

In Jaffrey the White Brothers' mill in the village and the Cheshire mill were the hardest affected by the depression. When the bottom fell from the foreign market, White Brothers of Winchendon, Massachusetts, owners of the Jaffrey mills, found it necessary to curtail their activities. The Cheshire mill closed down on July 10, 1933, and did not reopen until the following January, when about fifty employees returned to their jobs. Meanwhile, several of them had been employed on Civil Works Agency projects. White Brothers' mill in the village closed down for two months in the summer of 1935, reopening on August 12 on a short work shift. This situation plagued the two textile mills during most of the depression.

Mill troubles increased in March, 1936, when flood damaged the White Brothers' Cheshire mill and dam to such an extent that in June they decided to move the machinery from the Cheshire mill to that in Jaffrey village. Work was consolidated there and two years later the Cheshire mill was sold to D. D. Bean & Sons Co., Inc.

Even toward the end of the great depression the outlook in the textile business did not promise much improvement. In April, 1939, the Jaffrey mill ran 159 hours out of an available 160, but shut down at the end of the month. In June, 1939, the mill was reopened, but only for 48 hours and to run out what was left on the machines in April. Then came the final shut-down and the Whites' decision to liquidate their Jaffrey property, except the machines which were moved to Winchendon. (See Manufacturing.)

Meanwhile to alleviate the unemployment problem, the Emergency Relief Administration or ERA was created early in the decade. Under this relief program the town spent the sum of \$4,779.75 on the Turnpike Road construction in 1932 as its initial project. During the following two years over six thousand dollars were spent annually by the town on ERA road work. Included under ERA was a sewing project for unemployed women which was started in October, 1934, and which, under WPA, was the last of the relief projects to be discontinued in Jaffrey.

Under the ERA set-up the State paid the labor costs on approved projects and the town assumed the cost of the foreman's salary, truck hire, and materials used. The men were employed four days a week, starting on Friday and ending on Tuesday. In this way they were able to make up on Wednesday and Thursday for days lost on ac-

count of weather conditions. The rate of pay established for this relief work was 33 cents an hour for a thirty-hour week. Hence an employee could earn \$9.90 a week.

In March, 1935, the selectmen announced that they had secured the immediate approval of three out of five projects they submitted in order to obtain employment for about fifty-five men under the ERA program. The first of those approved was the KK sewer project—an essential one for the town—and Joseph Lemire was hired as foreman in charge of fifteen men. These fifteen men met on March 21st with Casper Bemis, Jr., of the Keene Division Relief office in regard to starting work on this sewer project. Twenty men started on March 22 on a road project on the Dublin Road extending from the Sprague farm (now Jewell's) to the Dublin line. The town of Dublin had appropriated money at their annual meeting to finish the work they had started the previous fall toward the Jaffrey line. The third project approved was brush-cutting along the roads designated by the selectmen.

The KK sewer project was still unfinished in July, 1935, when a wire came from Washington ordering the suspension of all ERA projects. Although the selectmen had been able to secure an extension for the road-building projects until September first, even these were ordered summarily suspended. There followed several weeks of unemployment for those on relief, which added to the burden borne by the town's welfare funds.

Following the suspension of ERA projects, the Works Projects Administration, or WPA, took over the task of spending the Federal money. It was established by Executive Order on May 6, 1935, to cope with the national unemployment problem, and was continued for the duration of the depression. Jaffrey came in for a share of WPA funds. Under WPA the Federal Government paid the workers' salaries and the town furnished the materials used, truck hire, and foremen's salaries. The foremen's rate of pay was \$16.00 a week or fifty cents an hour; subforemen received forty cents an hour. The money thus made available to the town to be used for "back road" improvement, although as one of their first concerns the selectmen made application for the painting of the school rooms, a job that was to have come under the ERA program originally. The wage under WPA was \$11.00 a week, or \$1.10 higher than under the ERA program, with only two more hours of work a week or a 32-hour week. Under the WPA set-up the town was required to file applica-

tion blanks, stating in advance the amount of money desired and the projects planned for one full year.

In August, 1935, the selectmen requested a grant of \$42,000.00 and filed applications for three WPA projects. The first was the KK sewer completion, to employ fifteen men to complete the unfinished work consisting of (a) 200 feet of pipe to care for four houses near Louis Duval's house, and (b) area bordering on the Turnpike Road. The second involved the construction of surface drains in the vicinity of Greyline Garage (now Crocker's junk station) and the drainage of the schoolhouse yard. These called for the payment from Federal funds of wages for 25 men. The third was a sewing project to employ twelve women to carry on the work. While originally scheduled to start about September 10, Washington's delay in processing applications caused delay. In the meantime there was "tightening of belts" in town and a further drain on local welfare funds, which in 1935 were the highest of the entire depression. The grant of \$20,000.00 of Federal money, less than one half of the requested amount, made it possible for nearly fifty persons to commence work on WPA projects that fall.

At the same time regulations governing Federal aid were tightened and instructions from Washington declared that only those on relief prior to November 1, 1935, were eligible to engage in WPA relief work. The applicant for work was also required to register with the State Employment Office in Keene.

Among the projects approved at this time was the KK sewer project, the painting of the interior and exterior of the public schools of Jaffrey, and some minor projects. The sum of \$2,000.00 was allocated for the women's sewing project. In his annual report as Superintendent of Schools Lewis S. Record stated in February, 1937, that "the high school building was thoroughly painted during the fall term. This work was delayed until after the opening of schools [1936], as it was a Federal Project and the workers could not be transferred to the project until September."

In 1936 the town's own expenditure on WPA projects amounted to \$6,833.43, mostly for road projects. There were only two new projects that year. One was work on the Mountain Reservoir tract under the foremanship of Isaac Parker and Francis Campbell, which cost the town \$113.00. The other involved the building of a retaining wall at the foot of the Baptist Cemetery hill in KK village adjacent to Brook Street. This cost \$562.76. Edwin C. Fletcher served as foreman.

Road projects continued to be the main consideration under WPA during the remainder of the depression, with the exception of 1939. That year the work consisted of brush burning (\$527.23); the sewing project (\$980.72); and the grading of the schoolhouse yard (\$1,817.06).

Two additional sewers involved WPA funds. The River Street sewer cost the town \$293.00 in 1937, and in 1940 the sewer on Main Street and Bradley Court was built. There the town spent \$834.58 for supervisory work, truck hire, and materials.

By 1941 all WPA activity was suspended with the exception of the sewing project for women which came to an end early that year after the town had expended \$268.31 as its final contribution to WPA projects.

Through the courage and business acumen of Delcie D. Bean and his sons, Vernon J., and Delcie D. Jr., Jaffrey acquired a new industry during the depression decade. (See Manufacturing.) This new business was started in 1938 in the White Brothers' old Cheshire mill, which, as we have seen, was a depression and flood casualty. The new industry absorbed some of the slack in the unemployment situation.

With the outbreak of World War II in September, 1939, the situation here as elsewhere began to improve substantially, and with the entry of the United States into World War II, full employment was again reached and even followed by a labor shortage, replacing the previous shortage of jobs. Continued full employment followed the conclusion of World War II in 1945 and has been maintained to the present time. New industries in Jaffrey and neighboring towns have even produced occasional periods of labor shortage.

TOWN POOR RELIEF

Following the lesser depression of 1920, annual welfare costs in Jaffrey were less than \$3,000.00 until the first effects of the great depression began to be felt early in the 1930's. In 1931 the town poor aid costs amounted to \$4,800.00. A year later they rose to \$5,500.00, but dropped in 1933 to \$4,425.00 and in 1934 to \$2,350.19. This reduction was partly due to the Cross Company's increase of its work force by 50% and the employment of 55 men under ERA.

However, the peak in town poor costs was reached in 1935 when the town poor account soared to \$12,906.30. This was a year of "shut-downs" and short employment periods in the textile mills and the ERA program came to an end in July, with the town spending

only \$2,000.26 as its share of ERA relief work up to that time. Its successor, WPA, was not able to begin functioning until fall. Hence there was a period of several weeks when Federal relief was not available. It was a particularly difficult year, with employment at its lowest ebb.

However, with WPA projects in full swing, 1936 saw a drop of over \$3,500.00. A further drop in 1937 brought the town poor account costs to \$8,600.00, but it rose again in 1938 to \$10,100.00 and continued over that figure for the remaining two years of WPA activity. This was a reflection in Jaffrey of the national recession of 1937-1938.

THE WOMEN'S SEWING PROJECT

The distaff side of many a household contributed to the family "bread and butter" needs in the depression period. Many of the Jaffrey women were employed in the town's mills, and consequently felt the impact of the great depression more severely than those who were otherwise employed. Under ERA a sewing project for unemployed women was started in October, 1934, continuing until July, 1935, when a wire was received from Washington suspending all ERA projects. At that time a new set-up under WPA was viewed hopefully for August, but actually did not materialize until fall. Under the ERA program thirty women were employed in cutting, sewing, and padding blankets for the needy, with all materials and equipment furnished and paid for by the State.

In the fall of 1935 WPA's new sewing project began functioning in an empty spinning room in White Brothers' mill under the supervision of Mrs. Walter Langevin. The sum of \$2,000.00 had been allocated for the project and the women were paid at the same rate as the men on other WPA projects. They made children's dresses, shirts, comforters, and hospital wear, which were distributed to relief families in town. The superior workmanship of these articles made by the Jaffrey women elicited commendation from the County supervising personnel. The project was later moved from the mill room to Union Hall building and after the building of the grade school into one of its vacant rooms. The project was terminated early in 1941. It was the last of the WPA projects in Jaffrey.

THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

A factor in the life of Jaffrey and surrounding towns for some years during the depression was the Civilian Conservation Corps, or

CCC camp, which was established in the town of Rindge, just over the line from Squantum village. The Corps was a Federal Agency set up in 1933 to provide employment and training for young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three who were in need of employment. Its purpose was to initiate a program for the conservation of the country's natural resources as well as to provide employment.

The 118th Company, CCC, consisting of two hundred raw recruits and officers, arrived at the Annett State Forest Park on June 5, 1933, after a two-week training period at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. Several Jaffrey and Rindge men were included in the corps, but most of the enrollees came from the cities in metropolitan Boston. Capt. Francis M. Flanagan, USA, was in command. Second in command was Lt. Paul L. Carroll, and the medical officer was Lt. Carr E. Benten, USN.

Acting as a representative of the Federal Agricultural Department and as supervisor was Martin Ferry, a civil engineer from Manchester, New Hampshire. He laid out and supervised all forestation work. John Dillon of Jaffrey was assigned as foreman of a twenty-man pine blister rust crew working within a radius of twenty miles. Frederick H. Smith, then of Manchester but now of Jaffrey, was forester-foreman throughout the camp's life time. Ralph Hoyt of Rindge was employed by the State as a forester.

Much reforestation was carried on by the CCC, including the planting of over a million seedlings. Most of them were placed in State Parks. The CCC also engaged in many other features of reforestation. They also built roads in the parks and constructed look-out towers, cabins, and shelters. Only a small amount of work was done on private property.

This camp was one of the largest units engaged in emergency forestry work in the State and comprised twenty per cent of the State's enrollment of enlisted men. The men worked an eight-hour day, five days a week. They were paid a dollar a day, part of which was sent home to their parents. Upon their arrival the men were housed in tents or under canvas, but along in August the building of winter quarters was undertaken, with the work given to local contractors.

The camp was a well coordinated unit. In camp the men were under army supervision, but outside they worked under that of the State, whose forestry department planned the work to be done and issued instructions from its Concord headquarters. In the camp it-

self there were special classes of instruction, including the use of both hand and power woodworking tools, and some mechanics. Social life was provided by varied programs, including glee clubs and groups which provided both vocal and instrumental music.

Although the camp itself was located in Rindge, Jaffrey felt the full impact of it. In the years when the camp operated, trucks carrying the men to their various projects were an integral part of the Jaffrey daily scene. While in command at the camp, Capt. Flanagan made his home in Jaffrey. During the camp's operation lasting friendships were made and many of these men now make regular visits to Jaffrey to renew them. Many of the boys never returned to their home towns but married Jaffrey girls and made their family homes in our town.

On May 7, 1937, Supt. Ferry received orders to make preparations for the closing of the camp, in line with the general closing of the CCC camps in the State. This was to meet the quota set in a proposed bill before Congress regarding CCC work and its continuance. The closing date was set for June 11th. Early on Tuesday morning, June 8, convoys left the camp transporting the enrollees to companies in Pittsburg, Tamworth, Warner, and Danbury, New Hampshire. The government property at the camp was returned to Ft. Ethan Allen, but the barracks were deserted.

In October, 1938, following the hurricane, the camp was reactivated for two years, with 190 men detailed from Arcadia, Rhode Island. Their work was opening up trails and old roads as fire-lanes, forest improvement under State supervision, and some construction work in Jaffrey and surrounding towns. Among their projects was the improvement of the road on Pack Monadnock Mountain in Peterborough. At one time they had over 800 cords of firewood piled for use of families on relief in Jaffrey, Rindge, Peterborough, and surrounding towns. The superintendent during this second set-up was Sidney Hancock from Claremont, New Hampshire. The camp was closed in 1940. Following the permanent closing, the barracks were sold for salvage and taken down.