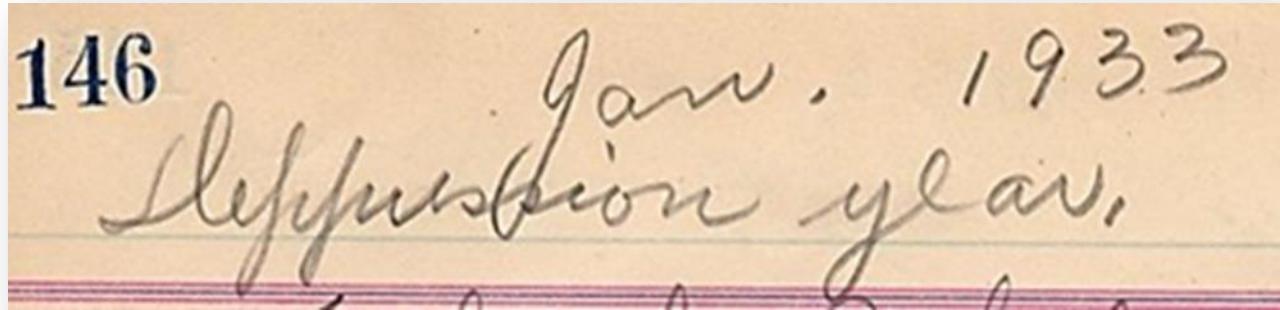


“Depression Year”



Tonie Claas wrote sparingly about this historic event, the Great Depression. That crushing economic meltdown spanned the decade of the 1930s. But she did acknowledge its presence in the lives of her family. There were joy and beauty found in those years. Maybe everyone had to look a little harder or dig a little deeper to find it. But it was a time when neighbors helped neighbors, when recycling was the expected way of life, when small joys and accomplishments were celebrated, when the family made the best of what they had. Tonie labeled those lean years as the “Depression Years.”

History would tell us that the Great Depression was triggered by the collapse of the American stock market on October 29, 1929. Ironically, only a very small percentage of Americans (2-3 percent) even owned any stock,

WALL ST. IN PANIC AS STOCKS CRASH

And yet, the Depression which followed created financial hardships that spread throughout the American and world economies. It affected the lives of just about everyone for the next decade. But this pervasive economic calamity began much earlier for American farmers.

From Wikipedia:

“While most Americans enjoyed relative prosperity for most of the 1920s, the Great Depression for the American farmer really began after World War I. Much of the Roaring '20s was a continual cycle of debt for the American farmer, stemming from falling farm prices and the need to purchase expensive machinery.

After World War I, farmers were left with the heavy debts they were encouraged to take on during the war. They owned more land and more

equipment than they needed, while demand for their product significantly decreased. Market surplus led land and agricultural prices to plummet.

Farmers continued to produce more, expecting demand and prices to remain stable. As Europe began to recover from the war, however, the US farm economy began a long downward trend that reached a crisis during the Great Depression.”

The Depression had a definite impact on the lives of American farmers. But because of the diversity of commodities grown and produced by Harry and Tonie Claas on their Fussville farm, and their creative methods of distributing and selling their products, they were somewhat insulated from depressed market prices for farm products. They were not dependent on “middlemen” to help with the sale and/or delivery of their products or for the collection from their sales. They did those things themselves. They created their very own customer base, providing farm to door service. As Tonie described it, they were delivering the products from their farm on regular trips “to town.” They were full service.

The Children Were Growing Up

The period from the 1920s into the 1930s found the five Claas children maturing from adolescence into adulthood. The family dynamic was changing.



During the decade of the 1930s, all five of the now adult Claas children would marry and the next generation of the family would begin to arrive. But before all that would occur, the family would experience the impact of the Great Depression and adapt in very real terms.

While this time may have been painful in many ways, there were many lessons learned. Clothing was worn until it was worn out. Tonie found ways to extend the useful lives of clothing and materials through mending, patching, darning, “hand-me-downs” or repurposing.

Entertainment was found in a

gathering of relatives and friends, in listening to the sounds of early radio, in music played and sung by children, performed in the living room or under a warm sun on a summer afternoon.



Celie, Roman, Tona Claas

There was a difference between not having a lot of money and being poor. The Claas family didn't have a lot of money, but that didn't mean they were poor. That was the attitude of the family during the "Depression Years."

The "Crash"

On the days and weeks leading up to the October 1929 stock market "crash," there was nothing in Tonie's journal to signal that anything was amiss in the local economy.

92	Oct.
27	To Con. In church in the evening. Fine day.
28	Very cold. Rosie plowing. Hauling manure. Tona cleaning chicken house making butter.
29	To town buying overcoats. Raining.
30	Making butter. Plowing. Foggy all day.
31	Raining. To town with butter.

October 27, 1929 - "To Con (confession). In church in the evening. Fine day."

October 28, 1929 - "Very cold. Rosie plowing. Hauling manure. Tona cleaning chicken house, making butter."

October 29, 1929 - "To town buying overcoats. Raining."

While a crisis was unfolding on Wall Street, the members of the Claas family went about their business. They were occupied with the routine of farm chores.

October 30, 1929 - "Making butter. Plowing. Foggy all day."

October 31, 1929 - "Raining. To town with butter."

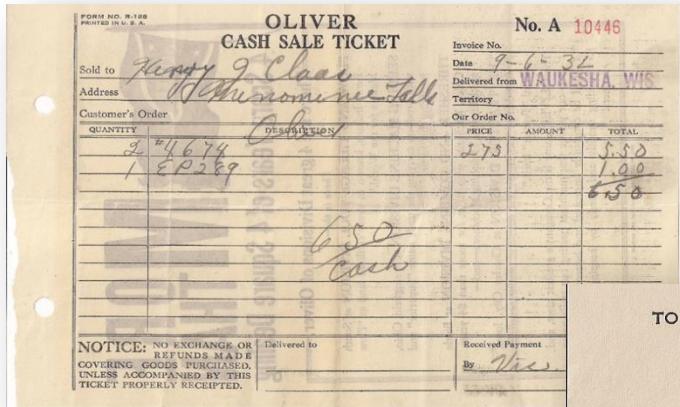
All of the children, except for youngest daughter, Cecelia had completed their formal education at St. Anthony School. It was "business as usual." But the big local news headline on that day, Oct. 29, 1929, centered not on Wall Street, but around the Lake Michigan steamship "Wisconsin."

13 Die As Lake Steamer Sinks Off Wisconsin Shore

The *Wisconsin* was making a trip from Chicago to Milwaukee when it foundered off of Kenosha and sank during a furious storm. Then, as now, those fall gales could be deadly. Incredibly, 52 of the 68 passengers on board would survive.

The story of the loss of the *Wisconsin* was the big news. What was happening on Wall Street may as well have been taking place on another planet. The “bank runs” (desperate and panicked withdrawals of cash money from banks) were not an issue for Harry since his finances were not intertwined with any local bank, at least not until a few years later. His farm enterprise was primarily a “cash” business. When it came time to

pay bills, Harry didn’t write a check, he paid in “cash.” Whether it was for a tractor repair ...



... or the phone bill ...

TO MENOMONEE FALLS TELEPHONE COMPANY, DR.

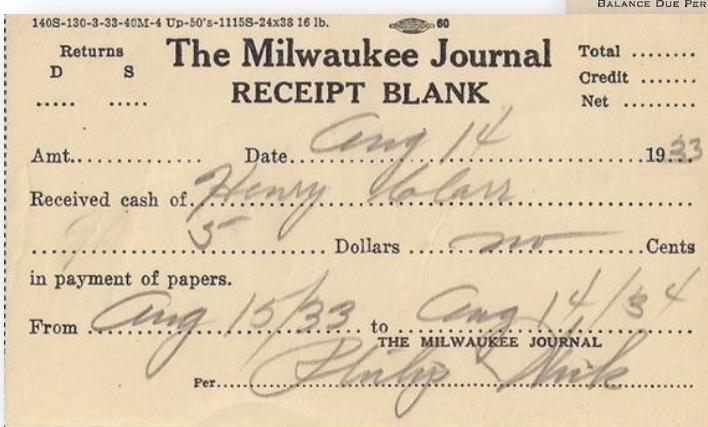
IMPORTANT
THIS BILL IS DUE NOW. WE APPRECIATE PROMPT PAYMENT AS IT
ASSISTS US IN ELIMINATING UNNECESSARY COLLECTION COSTS

LAST DISCOUNT DATE, SEPTEMBER 15, 1933

17 X	
HENRY CLAAS	G 1.75
R. 2	D 25
MENOMONEE FALLS, WIS.	N 1.50

EXCHANGE SERVICE,	..	FROM	TO	\$	SERVICE CONNECTION CHG \$	
ADDITIONAL LOCAL MESSAGES						
TOLL SERVICE AND OTHER CHARGES (STATEMENT HEREWITH)						
BALANCE DUE PER BILL PREVIOUSLY RENDERED						

9/11/33



... or the Milwaukee Journal newspaper subscription ...

... Harry's cash was “king.”

But unlike many farmers who counted on successfully producing a crop of grain or beets, or were dependent on a herd of cattle, the Claas farm was diversified. It produced a seemingly endless variety of dairy, garden and “cash” crops. If one crop or animal failed in any given season, there were always others to bank on. The unique nature of Harry and Tonie’s business plan relied upon having a direct relationship with their customers, the consumers on their sales route in Milwaukee.

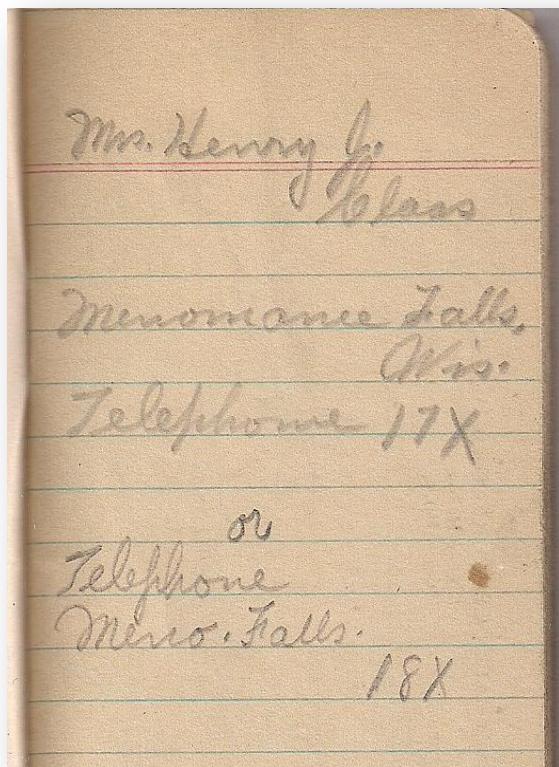
Harry was responsible for plotting the plans of production. His cows produced a steady supply of milk, and that milk was churned into butter (the farm's signature product), along with cheese and buttermilk.

Farm animals, pigs, chickens and beef were raised to be butchered and sold.



While contract “cash crops” such as beets and peas were grown and sold to local companies, an array of garden produce was grown, along with fruit from the family’s orchard. And all of these products were prepared for sale to a steady customer base spread across the northwest side of nearby Milwaukee.

Tonie was responsible for keeping careful records for each of her Milwaukee customers.



		187 98	187 98	2.85
2 548t	2 X			
1 Reinhart	2 X			
2 Rothstein	11			187
Mausgau	1			1 gal.
1 Grabow	3 X			1 gal
Stern	1			B.M.
Schaefer	4 X			B.M.
Wilcome				1 gal.
Becker	2 X			
Schaubacher	2	—		B.M.
Seidorf				1 gal.
Kocher	1	honey 2.00		B.M.
German	3 X			B.M.
Frey	1			B.M.
Fritz	2 X			
Gaenzl	1			1 gal.
Meibler			Rol. B.M.	
4 Hackbarth	1			

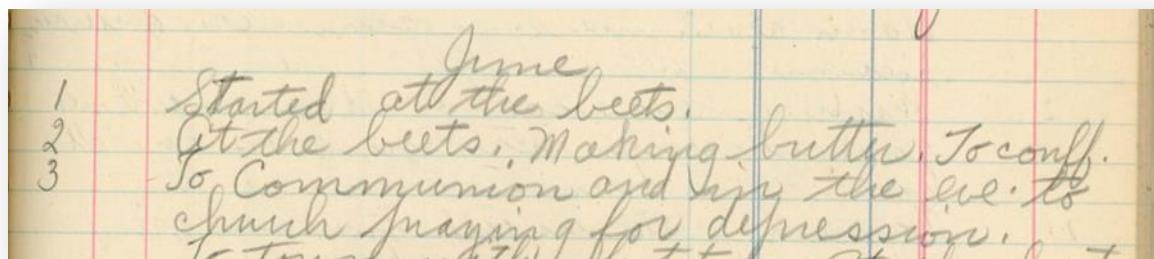
She always knew what they purchased and when they might need to be resupplied. And equally important, she maintained records of the annual farm income. It is astonishing to

look through the list of the sources of the family's income. Even more astonishing is to grasp the planning and the work that went into this venture.

	Income
Purples	114.80
Crab apples	58.15
Apples	130.30
Carrots	13.80
Beets	13.15
Tomatoes	21.00
Onion	15.00
Corn	50.75
Melons	2.75
Cabbage	5.90
Beans	33.90
Kohlrabi	1.05
Pears	10.25
Strawberries	80.00
Peas	128.00
Beets	199.40
Borris beets check	108.76
Calf	39.70
Hogs	113.98
Butter	684.94
Eggs.	253.06
Cow.	94.16
Beet bones	16.70
Hide	1.72
Dog check	27.00

So, while farmers were dependent on the vagaries of the weather, the economy and the demands of the marketplace, the Claas Family had a steady supply of commodities to sell, ready to meet the needs of their regular customers. Harry's diversified production plan helped the family to survive the "Depression Years." The discipline of those lean years was a basic ingredient throughout the years to come.

While it is simple enough for us to read about the Great Depression and try to grasp its impact, perhaps Tonie spelled out for us how everyone in the Fussville community was brought together by this event.



June 1, 1932 - "Started at the beets."

June 2, 1932 - "At the beets. Making butter. To conf (confession)."

June 3, 1932 - "To Communion and in the eve. to church praying for depression."

In the spring of 1932, the priests at St. Anthony Church held a service to pray for relief from the effects of the Depression. The parishioners gathered in community to pray, for farmers and all who were suffering in Fussville and around the country. Most everyone was affected in some way.

Those were the "Depression Years."