REMEMBERING the DEPRESSION

Editor's Note: Ruth Hutchinson Calkins was just a little girl when the Great Depression hit America. These are her memories of life during this difficult time.

My face was glued to the window as I watched two strange men driving our car away. It was February 1931. I was four years old; my sister, Margaret, was two. Our world was about to change.

Daddy was a successful Fuller Brush salesman, and we lived in a comfortable home in New York's Long Island suburbs. I remember green, unfenced yards, neighborhood kids chasing one another around, and eating homemade crumb cake in a sunny kitchen.

Later that same month, after Daddy lost his job, we lost our home and moved into a Brooklyn rooming house. It was hard to get used to the small, dark spaces after our large, sunny house. We had brought most of our furniture with us, but had half the number of rooms, so everything was cramped. Our first-floor apartment had no door to the backyard. When we wanted to play outside, Mother lowered my sister and me through the kitchen window onto a chair. From there, we jumped to the ground. The backyard was small and bare, but at least we could run around.

We moved again in June 1931. My parents had found an old farmhouse with a big yard in Englishtown, New Jersey. The big house sagged with age. It had no furnace, and the kitchen was without a stove, an icebox, or a washer. It did have a sink and a drain, but the well and hand pump for water were outside. Instead of a bathroom, there was an outhouse 30 feet behind the house. But the price was right the weekly rent was just two dollars.

My parents immediately planted a vegetable garden as a food source. We cooked meals over an outdoor bonfire. To Margaret and me, it was fun. We loved the large, grassy yard it was so different from Brooklyn.

Every drop of water we used we pumped by hand from the well. We needed water for cooking, drinking, washing, cleaning, and bathing. Mother washed clothing in a big round tub. On Saturday nights, the tub became our bathtub, as we were scrubbed clean for Sunday school.

As soon as we were settled, Daddy began job hunting. He walked to New York City and back, 40 miles each way. He was gone for days at a time, picking up any job he could find, such as unloading
vegetables at one of the large markets. Closer to home, he picked crops "on shares" -- that is, his payment would be a small portion of each crop after harvest. Mother kept busy at home, canning vegetables, washing clothes by hand, preparing meals, and taking care of us.

Once, Daddy walked to New York and back without finding any work. On his way home, a dog ran up and bit him on the ankle. The lady who owned the dog gave him 10 dollars not to tell the police. Ten dollars was a fortune in those days!

My parents saved enough money that first summer to buy a woodstove and a washer. And I remember the day Daddy found a hand-crank ice cream churn at the town dump. Mother scrubbed it out, and on very special occasions we feasted on homemade ice cream.

That fall, our small basement overflowed with stored vegetables, including potatoes, carrots, beets, and cabbages. Daddy also brought home apples and peaches that had dropped off trees at nearby orchards. The damaged fruit was sold cheap to anyone who'd pick it up. Mother made it into delicious jams, or canned it. We were lucky -- we never went hungry.

As the days became colder, we closed off all the rooms on the first floor except the kitchen and living room to save on heat. A nearby forest provided all the fuel we needed for the new woodstove, which warmed the kitchen, and the fireplace, which kept the living room cozy. But the bedrooms upstairs were bitter-cold. Margaret and I shared a bed for warmth, and got dressed and undressed in front of the living room fireplace.

Mother's college friends in New York were our lifelines during those years. "Aunt" Harriet sent boxes of nice used clothing. When the Depression was at its worst for us, these packages were our only source of "new" clothes. I remember our excitement as we opened boxes and tried on dresses and coats.

As the holidays approached, I didn't expect much that year. But Christmas morning, we came downstairs to a fairyland. Mother had decorated a tree with our beautiful glass ornaments that she had saved. Hanging with the tinsel on the tree were chocolate Santa Clauses from "Aunt" Alva. "Aunt" Elfrieda had sent us dolls. From mother's other friends came games, toys, coloring books, and crayons. It was truly a magical Christmas.

Slowly, life improved. We lived in the old farmhouse for about three years. Margaret and I started school. Daddy started selling small gadgets to local merchants and got occasional work at a nearby rug mill. When he found a steady job there, we moved across town to a modern house. It had a real kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and three bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. We still had to be thrifty, but we had gotten through the worst years.

During those incredibly hard times, my parents never let us sense any fear.

Whatever was happening around us, Margaret and I always felt safe, and everything was presented to us as an adventure. We didn't think of ourselves as poor, because almost everyone we knew was in the same boat.

**Strawberry Picking**

When I was five, I thought strawberry jam was the best food in the world! So when Daddy asked if I'd like to pick strawberries on shares with him, I jumped at the chance.

It was still dark when we started for the strawberry farm. It was chilly, so we wore jackets. Daddy piggybacked me part of the way so I wouldn't be tired from walking.

When we got to the farm, it was getting light. Lots of men were there already: The farmer showed us to our rows of strawberry plants and gave us little wooden boxes. He told us to just leave the boxes by the sides of the rows when they were full.
The berries were really big and red. Daddy picked faster than I could. Every once in a while, he came over to my row and picked backwards until he came to where I was. Then we both moved to the next row and started again.

We had sandwiches and water for lunch, and I lay down for a while before I picked some more. When the farmer blew a whistle, we gathered all the boxes of berries we'd picked. The farmer counted them, and Daddy and I had picked almost 50 quarts. As payment, we took home more than 12 quarts of strawberries! Daddy piggybacked me all the way home.

Mother was thrilled to see all our berries, and she cut some, up for supper. She said that she would make lots of jam. Daddy said I'd been a big help, and I felt grown-up and proud of myself.

--Ruth Hutchinson Calkins

~~~~~~~~

By Ruth Hutchinson Calkins

Illustrated by Lisa Fields

Ruth Hutchinson Calkins has had an exciting life. A mother of five, she spent 15 years in Sri Lanka and Africa, and has lived in Washington, D.C., West Virginia, Arizona, and now, at the age of 80, Washington State.

Copyright of Cobblestone is the property of Cricket Media and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.