A Sheltered World:

Remembering the Great Depression in Rural Québec and the Prairies

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ABSTRACT

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The Great Depression has been immortalized in song, film, photography, and novels. Much of this cultural production is American, spilling over into Canada shaping how we see our own history. This thesis examines the depression-era experiences of nineteen rural people from Québec and the Canadian Prairies whose life stories were either recorded for this project or whose earlier interviews were archived for future use. The eight men and eleven women seemed well aware that they lived sheltered lives during these hard times, at least compared to the experience of others and to the dominant narrative of the period. Some were even apologetic. They noted that they had a roof over their heads and were never hungry, as they were able to grow their own food or forage and fish in nearby woods and waters. Again and again, they insisted that they "didn't starve." Still, there was pride in what their families had to overcome. Resilience is a key trope in the interviews, confirming historian Michael Frisch's suggestion that people remember the history of the 1930s as biography. In both sets of interviews, conducted decades later when rural life was in sharp decline, and where mass consumption had changed our eating patterns, stories of food and eating together around the dinner table resonated: harkening back to a time of self-sufficiency, family ties, and local community.

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I would like to acknowledge my supervisor Dr. Steven High for his incredible patience and guidance. Throughout this process, he has posed thoughtful and insightful questions that repeatedly challenged me to rethink my framework to the material and asked me to consider different approaches and fresh perspectives.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Norman Ingram for his countless support, my good friend Elizabeth Reed for editing help, along with the clergy of the Anglican Diocese of Montréal who constantly encouraged me to keep writing.

I would also like to especially recognize my family and the numerous amazing people whose stories I drew upon in my research. This MA project is, in part, conducted as a service to those who experienced the Depression first-hand, and whose lives continue to be shaped by it years after. These are their stories!

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List of Abbreviations

(MBE)	"Memory of a Bygone Era," a Québec-based oral history contest
(PFRA)	Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration
(QAHN)	Québec Anglophone Heritage Network
(SHOMI)	"Spoken Heritage Online Multimedia Initiative" Database

Preface:
"Do this in memory of me"

I will keep the memory of your name living through all generations;
and because of this the people will give you praise for ever.
- Psalm 45:17

This MA thesis aims to undertake two tasks. Firstly, to broaden the history of the rural Great Depression on the prairies and in Québec through the use of oral history interviews and a cross-regional analysis. Secondly, and more important to myself, this MA thesis is a venue for engaging with my own family narrative. My research is part of my story of origin, part of who I am. I come from farming folk. I grew up hungry for my family's stories of immigration and pioneering on the Canadian prairie. Yet, many unknowns exist within my family story: I know little beyond names and some biographical details.

All four of my grandparents were born in Saskatchewan and had some experience of the Great Depression. My father's father, Edwin Leif Røsberg was born on a farm near Dunblane, in the southwest of Saskatchewan in 1919, the son of a Norwegian immigrant who had arrived in Canada three years earlier. His father--my great-grandfather--had left a small, rocky farm in the northwestern part of Norway, drawn to the Western Prairie by the promises of *Gratis Gårder for Millioner* in Canada's *Den Siste Beste Vest.*[1] Unbeknown to him, he settled in what would become the heart of the Canadian Dustbowl. He spent his first years in Canada laying the foundations of his homestead and in 1918 returned to Norway to marry my great-grandmother,

[1] A Norwegian translation of: "Free Farms for the Million" in Canada's "Last Best West."
Such immigration advertisements were translated into a plethora of European languages and disseminated widely to promote western settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Ragna Vegsund. Together they had four children: Agnes, Ralph, Gladys, and my grandfather Edwin. I know nothing of their life before the Depression.

During the Depression, my grandfather "rode-the-rails" west in his late teens, taking up work in a Boeing factory in Vancouver, and later heading into the northern interior of the province to join the British Columbia Police in 1941--a career he stayed with until his retirement as a staff sergeant in 1981. The rest of the family remained on the farm until 1939, when my great-grandfather finally took the advice of his son and moved west to British Columbia, taking up residence on an orchard near Oliver.

Generational remembering is particularly important within my father's family, as neither he nor myself knew our grandfathers; both died before we were born, my great grandfather died suddenly in 1946 (ten years before my father's birth), and my own grandfather in 1980 (eight years before I was born). All knowledge about the man has been transmitted to me by my father. Evidently, my grandfather never talked a lot about his early life, which my own father always understood to be a product of the hard times he had experienced.

In 1949, my grandfather married my grandmother, Olive Theresa Lamoureux, who also had prairie roots. She was born in Regina in 1926, the daughter of a French-Canadian Métis woman, Alice Mioux, and an unknown father. My grandmother's childhood nickname was "Bidon," the French word for an old steel milk can. Otherwise, complete mystery surrounds the family tree here; little is known about the early life of my grandmother or her mother, other than that both also went west to British Columbia sometime during the hardships of the 1930's. She never talked about her past.

My mother's family also has origins in rural Saskatchewan, as both of her parents were born into predominantly immigrant German-speaking communities near Leipzig, close to the Alberta border. My grandfather, Andrew, was born in 1936, and my grandmother, Rose, in 1939--admittedly years late in the Depression. In 1926, Andrew's father's family immigrated from Löbsing, Germany, where he had previously been a blacksmith struggling in the tumultuous post-war economy. In 1931, he married Bertha Kolenosky, the daughter of Polish immigrants, who farmed in the nearby Pascal district; together, they had eight children.

Rose's (née Bitz) family immigrated first to North Dakota and then to Canada from Ukraine, then still part of the Russian Empire; though subjects of the Russian Empire, the family was ethnically German, being of the 'Black Sea' Germans who settled in the Ukraine at the invitation of Catherine the Great as part of her modernisation campaign. Her father, Longinus, married Rose Marie Goetz in 1929, and together they too had eight children. My grandparents were married in 1956 and together, like my father's family, went west to find better employment opportunities. A common trope that runs through my grandfather Andrew's stories about the farm is that of wanting to get out. Indeed, when I told him that I intended to do my MA research on Saskatchewan farmers he said to me, "Why the Hell would you want to study that? There's nothing out there but sun and dust." None of my family members have returned to the prairie, but my research feels like a coming home.

Farming and the prairie are parts of my heritage. Indeed, even in my own life, in the two years prior to commencing my graduate research, I lingered between embarking on a MA History degree or pursuing agricultural studies and horticulture at Alberta's Olds College. And now two years later, as I finally finish this thesis, I am also taking seminary studies at the

Montréal Diocesan Theological College with heart keenly set on rural ministry. Clearly, something calls me to the soil, back to a way of life abandoned in the upheaval of the 1930's. By examining the experiences of others, my research aims to fill in some of the silences around my own family's story. Telling and re-telling stories is important to me.

I learned an enormous amount from my interviewees. Some of my interview subjects have since passed on in the two years since we sat down at their dining room tables and I recorded their stories: Ruth Aitken died six months after our interview, and I had the profoundly moving experience of speaking at her funeral. Likewise, Wanda Weiss, another one of my interview subjects, born in 1915, has since died. She never married and had no children or family of any kind; it pains me to know that her amazing stories about dairy farming in Saskatchewan will otherwise go unheard. All of the interview subjects whose stories I draw upon for my Québec chapter, recorded in the 1970s and 1980s, are all dead as well -- their raspy voices preserved on computer hard drives.

My family narrative of the Great Depression is one of struggle, farm abandonment, and migration; however, it is not unique. The catastrophic collapse of the grain market, debt, drought, and plagues of grasshoppers decimated farms on the Canadian prairies. Saskatchewan, whose economy depended on grain exports, saw income plummet by 90% in the devastating first two years of the Depression. Nearly three quarters of the rural population was forced into accepting relief aid.[2] Others abandoned their farms altogether: forty thousand farmers from Saskatchewan (and 25,000 from southern Alberta) left the prairie during the 1930s, reversing the flow of population for the first time since 1870.[3] In Québec, the story was different; indeed, the

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[2] Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 386.

[3] Friesen, 388.

amount of land under cultivation in Québec increased in the 1930s as people fled unemployment and starvation in the cities for the self-sufficiency of the countryside.[4] Of course, this is not to say that farmers in Québec were without hardship: times were still hard. This MA project is, in part, conducted as a service to those who experienced the Depression first-hand, and whose lives continued to be shaped by it years after. It is good to remember. These are their stories. This is my story.

[4] Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec Contemporain: Tome II: Le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 1989).

Introduction:
Story, Memory, and History

Ruth Aitken, born in 1924 in Mekawin, Manitoba, was the first person that I interviewed about the Great Depression. Conducted in 2012, it was also one of the first oral history interviews that I ever conducted. At the time, I had no idea that our conversation would become such an important source for my graduate research. Aitken had recently fallen, breaking her hip, an injury which never fully healed; yet, with a smile, she still raced around her room in the retirement home to unearth photograph albums and other things she thought would be of interest. When it came to discussing the 1930s, she leaned in across the table and said:

> It really hit home, the Depression that is. It was hard. I remember really wanting a pair of new knee-high socks and I didn't even ask for them because I just knew that there wasn't any money for them...Everybody was having trouble in those years. It was hard, but we were lucky.[5]

Her sentences were slow and drawn out. The Depression-years were clearly a formidable decade in her life. Times were tough but they were better off than others. Gradually, over the course of the interview, it emerged that her family's rural life provided a measure of shelter from the worst. They were therefore "lucky."

Since then, I heard many others recall the 1930s in similar terms. This was also true of the digital audio recordings that I listened to from English-speaking communities in rural Québec, part of the *Spoken Heritage Online Multimedia Initiative* (SHOMI) Database. Irene Mulvhill's family had a farm in the Gatineau Valley during the 1930s. While her date of birth was not recorded, the interview makes it clear that she was a young mother at the time. As I

[5] Ruth Aitken, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 14 Jan 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 27:00-28:02.

listened on my headphones, her gentle voice reached out to me across time and space. Mulvhill recalled that:

> Money was pretty tight, but we managed. It was worse in the cities. But, in the country, well, we could grow all of our own produce, even if the prices weren't good to sell it...The Depression though, it wasn't so bad in the country. We didn't have starvation like in the cities. We didn't know anyone on relief.[6]

Despite being separated by vast geographic distance and regional difference, Mulvhill and Aitken present remarkably similar recollections of rural life during the Depression. Farming provided a degree of shelter for her family in the Depression.

This cross-regional project examines the depression-era experiences of nineteen people from rural Québec and the Prairies. These interviews reveal two overarching themes. Firstly, virtually all of the interviewees insisted that others were harder hit than they were. They had a roof over their heads and they did not know hunger, as they grew their own food and foraged and fished in nearby woods and waters. Secondly, these interviews provide strong Canadian examples of the resilience trope identified by historian Michael Frisch in Great Depression interviews in the United States. Canadians interviewed also spoke to the difficulties of the decade, while simultaneously noting how fortunate they were. In both sets of interviews, conducted decades later when rural life was in sharp decline, and where mass consumption had changed our eating patterns, stories of food and eating together around the dinner table resonated: they harkened back to a time of self-sufficiency, family ties, and local community.

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[6] Irene Mulvhill, Interviewed by the Gatineau Valley Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI database. 3:55-9:20. The SHOMI Database is available to researchers at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.

Michael Frisch and the Survival Trope:

Michael Frisch's work on memory and the Great Depression provides a useful framework for my own research. His article "Oral History and *Hard Times,* A Review Essay" examines interviews conducted by American historian and broadcaster Louis "Studs" Terkel pertaining to the 1930s. Terkel's best-selling book *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970) is seminal, both in the history of the 1930s and the field of oral history.[7] *Hard Times* contains first-hand accounts of 150 people from varying socio-economic backgrounds, including turned-out Oklahoma farmers, prison inmates, politicians, artists, and businessmen. In his review of Terkel's work on the Depression, Frisch notes how Terkel's research subjects do not remember the 1930s as an abstract historical period, but as biography -- as important chapters in their lives.[8] Frisch states that the question of memory -- "personal and historical, individual, and generational" -- is the central object, not merely the method, of oral history.[9] The questions that emerge are ones focused on process and change: "What happens to experience on the way to becoming memory? What happens to experience on the way to becoming history? As an era of intense collective experience recedes into the past, what is the relationship of memory to historical generalization?"[10] These questions, according to Frisch, are the sort that oral history is "uniquely able to penetrate."[11] These are also questions at the heart of my own research project.

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[7] Studs Turkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

[8] Michael Frisch, "Oral History and *Hard Times,* A Review Essay," *Red Buffalo: A Journal of American Studies* 1.2 (1972): 69-79.

[9] Ibid, 74.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

In responding to these questions, Frisch makes two important observations. First, despite the generalized nature of the Depression, interview subjects tended to view their problems in alienating ways: "Shame, a sense of personal failure, unavoidable obsession with personal concerns, paralytic insecurity in several dimensions -- all these are repeatedly described as the predominant personal responses."[12] In so doing, history becomes biography. Turning "the general into the particular" reveals how interviewees retained deeper validation of their life and society in the aftermath of the Depression. The hardships of the Depression are noted in almost all of the nineteen interviews of my thesis, but is understood within an overall trope of resilience that turns hardship and hurt into something positive. Emphasis on survival, or resilience, elevates personal and biographical generalizations into historical terms, "a self-validating message and a culturally validating legacy for the next generations."[13]

In the nineteen interviews examined in this thesis, stories of hardship, failure, and pain are largely absent. Indeed, as Charles Bullock of Graniteville, Québec insisted, the Depression was a time when "We never had it so good."[14] The Québec and Prairie interviews offer precious details about the strength of rural life in a time of want, but their value is deeper and more enduring. They speak to a way of life that was rapidly disappearing by the time that the interviews were being collected. Their understanding of their depression-era experiences were no doubt shaped by their lives since, but also wider societal changes. During the intervening decades, Canada went from being a predominantly rural country to an urban one. Rural communities were in slow decline in both regions. This was particularly the case for English-

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[12] Ibid, 76.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Bullock, Charles. SHOMI Database. 14:40-18:54.

speaking communities in rural parts of Québec, as the political uncertainty that accompanied the Quiet Revolution and the election of a sovereigntist government in 1976 led to large-scale outmigration to other parts of Canada. The interviewees were therefore looking back to a way of life that was fast disappearing.

Research Evolution:

Initially, the only interviews that I intended to use in my research were those conducted by James H. Gray for his seminal work on the prairie Drybelt, *Men Against the Desert* (1969), that are now in the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives. My intention was to analyse these interviews, alongside my own family stories, and examine memory of home during the depression years. Since the 1970s geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph have stressed the "affective bond between people and place" and how place is such a fundamental part of our human experience.[15] In farming communities, attachment to place runs very deep. Relph argues that notions of "home" and "roots" are crucial in constructing our cultural identity.[16] Likewise, in the 1990s, theorist Doreen Massey deepened historians' use of place as a research methodology, in so far as place can be understood to be an envelope of time and space.[17] For her, places were not limited to single temporal moments, but rather are tied together in a complicated and overlapping web of histories spun by individuals and various collectives. More recently, in 2007, geographers Mark Riley and David Harvey recognised the unique potential for place-based oral history to provide insights about self and about relationships between others and

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[15] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception* (Toronto: Prentice Hall of Canada, 1974), 4.

[16] Edward Relph, *Place and Placeness* (London: Pion, 1976), 12.

[17] Doreen Massey, "Places and Their Pasts," *History Workshop Journal* 39.1 (1995): 182-192.

place.[18] Places are repositories of memory; they have stories too, told through the voices of those who were there, then.[19]

At the outset, I wanted to conduct my research to explore place-based memory during the Depression years. In particular, I was drawn to the methodology of mental mapping: the visual representation of the connections between story and place. I hoped to recreate memoryscapes of rural life. However, I soon discovered two substantial problems. Although Gray's collection consisted of twenty hours of interview material, only one interview was with someone who had direct experience with farm life: the interview with Dorothy Daniels, whose family farmed near Robsard, Saskatchewan. The rest of the interviews were with government officials and agricultural experts, often based in Ottawa. Clearly, Gray's intention of recording the history of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration's efforts to combat desertification and drought did not coincide with my own project. Secondly, and perhaps more definitively, I realised that it was only possible to build mental maps if I conducted the interviews myself.

To address the lack of relevant interview material in the Gray collection, I turned to a small body of oral history interviews that I had conducted as part of *Resounding Memories*, a project that I undertook after completing my undergraduate degree. It was intended as a way to fill in the gaps in my own knowledge about my family's history on the Canadian Prairies. So, with the addition of another interview and the inclusion of Dorothy Daniels' interview, *Resounding Memories* became chapter one of this thesis.

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[18] Mark Riley and David Harvey, "Talking Geography: On Oral History and the Practice of Geography," Social & Cultural Geography 8.3 (2007): 345-351.

[19] See also: James Opp and John C. Walsh, Eds, *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); and Candace Savage, *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012).

However, there was still not enough Prairie material to sustain an entire thesis, so I incorporated a large interview collection focussed on Québec's Anglophone communities conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Over two hundred hours of archived interviews had been incorporated into a searchable database by the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), as part of the SHOMI project of the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN). I soon narrowed my focus to thirteen interviews that had much to say about the 1930s. This collection brought two substantial benefits to my research. Firstly, these interviews offered insight into adults' experiences of the Depression: while all of the interviews I conducted were with people who had grown up on prairie farms during the 1930s and thus reflected children's memories. These archived interviews thus allow narrative memory of the decade to be pushed further back in time, as this generation is no longer living. Secondly, by bringing in interviews from rural Québec, my research expanded into a much richer discussion across regions that are rarely if ever studied together. That said, this master's thesis does not aim to be a comparative history, but rather a cross-regional one: exploring the individual and collective experience as remembered by interviewees from the Prairies and Québec. The two region-specific chapters of this thesis allow us to delve into each in its own terms.

Historiography and the Depression:

Scholars in the United States have been particularly attuned to the horrors of the decade as experienced in the southwest; several significant comprehensive studies of the region appeared on (or shortly after) the 50th anniversary of the great stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression in that country, including: Paul Bonnifield's *The Dustbowl* (1979), Donald

Worster's *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930's* (1979), and Douglas Hurt's *Dustbowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (1981).[20] The fascination with the Depression years has inspired many others since such as filmmaker Ken Burns who released a two-part documentary, *The Dust Bowl* in 2012. All of these projects drew from oral history interviews to varying extent. Clearly, the Dust Bowl holds a powerful place within the American imagination, and an equally integral place in both the historiographies of the Great Depression and the American West. Yet, scholars in Canada have been more muted in their explorations of the 1930s.

Indeed, most recent academic research on 1930s Canada focuses on the economic and political landscapes of the Depression years.[21] As Lara Campbell states in her introduction to *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression*, "for such an important and dynamic period in Canadian political, economic, and social history, there are simply few monographs that specifically address the impact of the Great Depression."[22] She identifies social history, domestic life, and family history as the largest gaps within the historiography of the Great Depression. For her part, Denyse Baillargeon's 1999 *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (originally published in French as *Ménagères au Temps de la Crise* in 1991) are the only published monographs that

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[20] See: John Farris' *The Dustbowl* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 1989), James Gregory's *American Exodus: The Dustbowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Charles Shindo's *Dust Bowl Migrants and the American Imagination* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997), and Ronald Reiss' *The Dustbowl* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2008).

[21] See: Michael Horn's *The Dirty Thirties: Canada in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Clopp Clarke Ltd., 1972) and *The Depression in Canada: Response to Economic Crisis* (Toronto: Clopp Clarke Ltd., 1988); A. E. Safarian's *The Canadian Economy in the Great Depression* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1959), Allen Seager's *Canada: 1922-39: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), and Evelyn Dumas's *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec* (Montréal: Black Rose Publishing, 1975).

[22] Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 8.

deeply explore domestic and family life in Canada during the 1930s.[23] Baillargeon's work is of particular importance to my chapter on Québec, providing an urban point of reference with which to compare my rural interviews. This proved essential in my core argument that rural families understood themselves to be sheltered from the worst hardships of the Depression.

By and large, the historiography of the Great Depression in Canada is an urban one, centred on industrial labour, unemployment, and city life. What work has been done on the rural experience is almost exclusively focused on the Southern prairies – an area that was already known as the Drybelt. Popular history writers such as James H. Gray and Barry Broadfood, both of whose research is grounded in oral history, have helped shape the public image of the Depression on the Canadian prairie.[24] Gray and Broadfoot were part of a North American-wide wave of oral histories and primary source collection about the Great Depression published in the 1960s and 70s, the most famous of these efforts was headed by Studs Terkel in the United States.[25]

Here, in Canada, James H. Gray is perhaps the greatest contributor to the historiography of the Canadian Dust Bowl. Journalist-turned-historian, his seminal book *Men Against the Desert* represents the first sustained analysis of the Canadian Dust Bowl, and later heralded by

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[23] Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999) and *Ménagères au Temps de la Crise* (Montreal: Remue-Ménage, 1991).

[24] Gray's methodological approach is particularly noteworthy. It represents one of the first Canadian academic oral history projects: his work utilizes sixteen tape-recorded interviews with ranchers and farmers who lived through the worst years of the prairie Depression and officials from Experimental Farm stations and the Agricultural Improvement Association.

[25] See also: Victor Howard, *The Great Depression: Essays and Memoirs from Canada and the United States* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969); Studs Turkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Linda Grayson and Michael Bliss, *The Wretched of Canada: Letters to R.B. Bennett, 1930-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Ronald Liversedge's *Recollections of the On-to-Ottawa Trek* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973); and Sydney Hutcheson, *Depression Stories* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976).

historian David C. Jones as one of "the two most important works on the prairie disaster."[26] Written with a strong conviction and viewpoint, Gray's work is of particular importance to this MA project. However, Gray's work tells us little about the lived experiences of Depression-era farmers.

While farmers' stories do not frequent Grey's pages, the work of Barry Broadfoot, another popular historian of the Great Depression and of the West more broadly, is deeply concerned with the stories of farmers.[27] Oral history is at the centre of Broadfoot's book, *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Great Depression,* published in 1973. In the book's preface, Broadfoot suggests that there has been a "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the Depression in Canadian historiography, that "By the time the 1970s rolled along probably 75 percent of Canada's 20,000,000-plus knew nothing, or very little, about those important years--1929-1939."[28] Broadfoot's research is an attempt to tell this story through the memories of a few hundred Canadians with whom Broadfoot conducted oral histories.

Ten Lost Years became a bestseller, selling over 300,000 copies, and was even transformed into a hit musical by George Luscombe which "blended music and dialogue to evoke with clarity the suffering of so many people."[29] Resenting the public attention of Broadfoot's work, some prominent university-based historians slammed the credibility of his oral

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[26] David C. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Publishing, 1987), 301. Jones indicated that the other text of importance is Jean Burnet's *Next Year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta* (1951).

[27] See also: Barry Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914: Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West* (Markham: Paperjacks Publishing, 1978) and his, *Next Year Country: Voices of Prairie People* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988).

[28] Broadfoot vii.

[29] Steven High's "Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case of Oral History," in *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, Christopher Dummit and Michael Dawson, eds. (London: University of London Press, 2009): 21-46. 30.

history, calling it a "'curious mishmash' of remembrance."[30] It is true that Broadfoot taped over past interviews after he took detailed notes, apparently to save money and not thinking about the posterity of his interviews.[31] He also edited interview material included in his book, rearranging words and abridging stories to improve flow.[32] Nevertheless, his work is grounded in the rich memories of those who experienced the 1930s, and provides a vital window for comparing rural memories of the decade, particularly regarding themes of food and starvation.

By contrast, academic historians have been slow to explore the Depression experience in the rural West. While Gerald Friesen, R. Douglas Francis, and Bill Waiser have all contributed significantly to the historiography of the Canadian prairie,[33] these are large regional studies which only address the Depression in a single chapter. Even so, these studies provide valuable economic, political, and cultural context for my own prairie interviews. Their work also speaks to the prominent place of the decade in the overall narrative of prairie history, providing a clear understanding of the catastrophic collapse of the agricultural economy as compared to earlier periods. While these works do not focus much on the lives of rural families, they do provide considerable insight into the wider social history of these years. Similarly, Pierre Berton's book *The Great Depression: 1929-1939*, published in 2001, almost exclusively details the social history of the Depression across Canada, and again provides a useful backdrop to my own interview data from the prairies and Québec.[34]

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[30] Ibid, 33.

[31] Ibid, 31.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishers, 2005), R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Changing Perceptions of the Prairies, 1690-1960* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989).

[34] Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression: 1929-1939* (Winnipeg: Anchor Publishing, 2001).

Another historiographic field of relevance to this discussion relates to studies of Canadian westward expansionism by Doug Owram, Carl Berger, and Suzanne Zeller. These works foreshadow the crisis to come with the settlement of the prairie Drybelt.[35] Centred on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these works do not directly address the experiences of Depression-era families. Rather, the authors critique government policies put in place during the settlement period, which ultimately had disastrous consequences for some. In so doing, they situate my interviews in history.

As it stands, the only two significant monographs devoted to the experiences of the Canadian Drybelt crisis are those written by historians David C. Jones and Curtis R. McManus. Despite the expansiveness of the title of David C. Jones' *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (1987), his focus is on Alberta almost exclusively, with much of his primary research originating from the Glenbow Archives in Calgary, Alberta. Countering Grey, Jones criticizes the agricultural experts and engineers of the Dominion Experimental Farms System who refused to acknowledge the complaints of farmers, and continued to preach, erroneously, that dry-land farming was fail-safe if done properly. Jones also complicates the notion of the Great Depression as a unique phenomenon in the history of the prairie, showing how destitution, hardship, relief aid, and farm abandonment long predated the 1930s.

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[35] Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). Owram's book examines the suitability of the region for agriculture and settlement. Also noted is the desire of central Canadian expansionists to foster the emergence of a 'British' moral character on the prairies. Owram elaborates on the problematics associated with settling Palliser's Triangle and particularly the work of John Macoun, a botanist and surveyor for the CPR whose interpretation of the Triangle caused many hardships for future settlers. See also: Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Idea of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970) and his, *Science, Nature, and God in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); and John Wadland, "Wilderness in Canadian Culture" in *Consuming Canada: Readings in Environmental History*, Chad and Pam Gaffield, eds (Toronto: Clopp Clarke, 1995).

Similarly, Curtis R. McManus' *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* approaches the Prairie crisis as an event exterior to the Depression itself.[36] He argues that the experience of the "Dry Years" have been eclipsed by the much more grandiose worldwide economic collapse of the Depression; his too is not so much a history of the Great Depression, but a broader history of the region, with drought and crop failure in the southern plains beginning as early as 1914. McManus's work moves beyond the economic and political events of the Dirty Thirties, and penetrates deeply into the social existence of the time. His work details the societal breakdown and problems tied to the Dustbowl: the drunkenness, domestic abuse and separation, suicide, the casualness of affairs and pre-marital sex, elevated crime rates, and the corrosion of moral codes. His book is perhaps the only to be centrally focused on the experiences of farmers, and of key importance to my own chapter on the prairie. In particular, his research reveals the hardships of the Depression, something which is largely absent in my own interviews, thus providing insight into how the Depression has been remembered in the preceding seventy years.

Similar historiographical patterns can be seen in Québec, where little has likewise been written about the depression years in rural areas. A half a million Anglophones lived in rural Québec at the time, but their stories have been largely excluded from the mainstream English and Francophone historiography of "la Crise" as the Depression is referred to in the French-language literature. Two points need to be made. Firstly, that the decade does not carry the same cultural weight in Québec as it does on the prairie: most of the existing work done on the 1930s is in the form of fairly cursory chapters within larger historic surveys. Secondly, there are important

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[36] Curtis R. McManus, *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011).

linguistic differences in how survey histories of the province are written, with Anglophone historians such as J.I. Little tending to emphasize the early history of settlement and English immigration.[37] Like the regional histories of the prairies, Little's research provides historical context for the fourteen interviews explored in my chapter on rural Québec.

Francophone historians, by contrast, emphasize the making of modern French-Québec. "La survivance" is a foundational narrative for French-Québec; it is a national survival against Anglophone linguistic, cultural, and economic domination.[38] Accordingly, the conquest, rebellion, and particularly the Quiet Revolution loom large in Francophone narratives. For example, the Quiet Revolution is a central part of Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard's 1989 book *Histoire du Québec Contemporain: Le Québec depuis 1930.* Remarkably, in the thirteen short chapters devoted to the years between 1929 and 1945.[39] The political and economic context is emphasized, but one chapter provides important insight into the agricultural economy of rural Québec and the immediate context surrounding my interviews.

The *Les régions du Québec* series of edited volumes on Québec regions produced by l'Institut Québecois de Recherches sur la Culture provides glimpses into rural life in various places and at different historic points. Here again, the post-1945 period is largely the focus,

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[37] See: René Hardy and Normand Séguin, *Forêt et Société en Maurice: La Formation d'une Région* (Montréal: Boréal, 1984); J. I. Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization in Nineteenth Century Quebec: The Upper St Francis District* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1990); J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1991); J. I. Little, *State and Society in Transition: The Politics of Institutional Reform in the Eastern Townships, 1838-1852* (Montreal: McGill University Press); J. I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); and J. I. Little, *The Other Quebec: Microhistorical Essays on Nineteenth-Century Religion and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[38] See: Ronald Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

[39] Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec Contemporain : Tome II : Le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 1989).

though the 1930s are covered in some detail. In particular, Marc Desjardins and Yves Frenette's *Histoire de la Gaspésie,* published in 1999, helps to provide insight into the agricultural economy of the Gaspé region and a framework for exploring my interviews from that region.[40] They also detail the programs that the government introduced to decrease rural poverty, a theme that is present but not directly spoken of in the interviews that I consulted directly.

Peter Gossage and J. I. Little's *An Illustrated History of Québec: Tradition & Modernity* focuses heavily on the history of urban Québec after 1850, conveying nothing of Depression-era farmers. Their discussion of the 1930s centres around electoral and political themes; like Linteau, Drocher, Robert, and Ricard, they trace the importance of the Depression (alongside the Second World War) as a catalyst for the Quiet Revolution that followed and the creation of modern Québec. They do, however, make an observation that is at the very core of my thesis: they note how the wage reductions, layoffs, and plant closings of the 1930s led to urban struggles to pay for rent, electricity, or groceries.[41] They suggest that while rural families also had their incomes cut dramatically during the Depression, home-ownership and the ability to produce their own food and fuel allowed many to stay off of the relief rolls.[42] The nineteen interviews that form the research foundation for my thesis support this theory, both on the prairies and in Québec.

For his part, Ronald Rudin's *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (1985) traces the history of Anglophones in Québec since the early

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[40] Marc Desjardins and Yves Frenette, *Histoire de la Gaspésie* (Sainte-Foy: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1999).

[41] Peter Gossage and J. I. Little, *An Illustrated History of Quebec: History and Memory* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press Canada, 2012): 197-203.

[42]Ibid, 199.

eighteenth century.[43] His work is primarily a detailed statistical history, written articulately in percentages and numbers, and further illustrating the social framework surrounding my interviews, specifically in the regions settled by Anglophones outside of Montréal and Québec City: the Eastern Townships, the Gatineau Valley, the Gaspé, and the Magdalen Islands. In particular, his description of how farmers on marginal lands sought to compensate their incomes through forestry work or fishing is reflected in many of my Québec interviews. Robert Sweeny's chapter "A Sketch of the Economic History of English Quebec," further contextualizes these interviews within the history of Anglophone settlement across Québec.[44]

Several other works devoted to the Great Depression in Québec informed my research, mostly from an urban perspective. These include: Elizabeth St. Jacques' *Survivors: The Great Depression, 1929-1939,* which focuses on the experiences of those in Montréal and Québec City, with no reference to Anglophone communities;[45] Andrée Lévesque's *Virage à Gauche Interdit: Les Communistes, les Socialistes, et Leurs Ennemis au Québec 1929-1939*, which focuses on the political landscape of the decade;[46] and Jack Jedwab's article, "La Dépression Politique des Anglo-Montréalais lors de la Crise des Années Trente," which offers a mirrored Anglophone study to the work of Baillergeon and St. Jacques, but is again limited to the urban experience of

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[43] Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (Québec City: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1985).

[44] Robert Sweeny, "A Sketch of the Economic History of English Quebec," in *The English of Quebec: From Majority to Minority Status,* Eds. Gary Caldwell and Eric Waddell (Montréal: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1985): 74-90.

[45] Elizabeth St. Jacques, *Survivors: The Great Depression, 1929-1939* (Sault Ste. Marie: Maplebud Press, 1991).

[46] Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à Gauche Interdit: Les Communistes, les Socialistes, et Leurs Ennemis au Québec 1929-1939* (Montréal: Boréal Presse, 1984).

English Montrealers.[47] Many other academic articles discussing Québec in the Depression years follow this trend.[48]

My hope is that the oral history interviews that form the basis of my research can revisit and broaden the history of the rural Great Depression, and particularly ground it in the stories of those who experienced the decade. Two prominent themes arise from these interviews: that the self-sufficiency of farm life buffered some of the worst effects of the Great Depression and that interviewees compose their stories of those trying years using the trop of survival and resilience, much as historian Michael Frisch has found in the United States. Interviewees note the hardship of the decade, yet emphasize how fortunate they were. In both sets of interviews, these themes become particularly apparent in memories of food and meal-times. Over time, these specific memories have come to symbolize self-sufficiency, family ties, and local community.

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[47] Jack Jedwab, "La Dépression Politique des Anglo-Montréalais lors de la Crise des Années Trente," *Bulletin d'Histoire Politique* 9.2 (2001): 63-72.

[48] See also: B. L. Vigod, "The Quebec Government and Social Legislation During the 1930s: A Study in Political Self-Destruction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 14.1 (1979): 59-69; Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit: les communistes, les socialistes et leurs ennemis au Québec, 1929-1939* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984); Michiel Horn, "Lost Causes: The League for Social Reconstruction and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Quebec in the 1930s and 40s," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 19.1 (1984): 132-156; Allain Gelly, "L'Arsenal Fédéral de Québec 1933-1945," *Revue d'Histoire Urbaine* 20.3 (1992): 97-108; Emile Talbot, "L'Ecriture Dramatique et la Crise des Aneées Trente au Québec," *Revue de la Societe d'Histoire du Théatre* 55.3 (2003): 231-244; Golzalo Arriaga, "Beaucoup de Bruit Pour Rien: Sur l'Italie Fasciste et le Québec des Années 1930," *Bulletin d'Histoire Politique* 12.1 (2003): 211-234; Maude Roux-Pratte, "Les Élites Drummondvilloises et la Crise des Années 1930: Une Étroite Collaboration Autor de l'Assistance aux Chômeurs," *Revue d'Histoire de L'Amerique Francaise* 58.2 (2004): 217-244; Charles-Philippe Courtois, "Le Séparatisme Québecois des Années 1930s et les Non-Conformistes," *Bulletin d'Histoire Politique* 16.2 (2008): 287-302; Caroline Durand, "Risques Collectifs et Responsabilités Individuelles dans les Conseils Diététiques au Québec, 1900-1940," *GLOBE: Revue Internationale d'Études Québecois* 16.2 (2013): 49-73.

Chapter I

"We didn't have money to buy things. But, we never went hungry": Remembering the Great Depression on the Prairie

> *It really hit home, the Depression that is. It was hard. I remember really wanting a pair of new knee-high socks and I didn't even ask for them because I just knew that there wasn't any money for them...Everybody was having trouble in those years. It was hard, but we were lucky*.[49]
>
> - Ruth Aitken, Mekawin, Manitoba

> *We were well off because we could grow our own food, but we didn't have any money to buy things! But, we never went hungry.*[50]
>
> - Fred Jenkins, Alberta Grasslands

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Prairie farmers during the Great Depression. Ironically, despite being the chapter that I most wanted to write, it became the hardest to actualize. I wanted to tell my family's story, which became a seemingly insurmountable ambition. In *Terrain of Memory: A Japanese Canadian Memory Project,* Kristen Emiko McAllister writes overtly about her difficulty in tracing her own family's narrative of Japanese internment during the Second World War.[51] There is something inherently challenging about telling our stories from an academic perspective; and the task is made even more difficult when one lacks the stories themselves. Silence lingers in my family, and as I have said already, my research aims to fill in the gaps in my own history.

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[49] Ruth Aitken, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 14 Jan 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 27:00-28:02.

[50] Fred Jenkins, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 9 Feb 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 4:30-4:45.

[51] Kristen Emiko McAllister, *Terrain of Memory: A Japanese Canadian Memory Project* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

This chapter is based on a deep listening to the recorded life stories of six people, three men and three women. These interviews are a mix of pre-existing interviews found in archives as well as interviews that I conducted myself. These include interviews with Dorothy Daniels (from Robsard, Saskatchewan) that was conducted by James H. Grey in 1969 as well as my own conversations with Wanda Weiss (born in 1915 in Latvia, and whose family immigrated to Saskatchewan in 1917); Ruth Aitken (born in 1926 in Mekawin, Manitoba); Fred Jenkins (born in 1927 in the Alberta grasslands region); Hal Zerbin (born of German immigrants to Saskatchewan in 1930), and Colin Low (born 1926 in the Alberta foothills).[52] My interviewing occurred between 2011 and 2012. My grandparents' stories are also woven into this chapter.

As noted in the introduction, two main themes emerge from these sources. We see in the interviews not just how key a subsistence lifestyle was in sustaining rural families through the Depression, but also how important those aspects of life became in subjects' recollections of the time. Uncertainty and hardship are overshadowed by fond feelings of resourceful and supportive community, qualities that are particularly demonstrated in recollections about the preparing and sharing of food.

Importantly, however, we should not imagine a universally positive experience of the Depression on the prairie. Statistics showing farm abandonment and out-migration from the Prairie clearly suggest that conditions were in such a dire state that many families were willing to give up everything in hopes of better opportunities elsewhere. There was also an influx of

[52] I also conducted an interview with Joyce Image (born 1924 in northern British Columbia), yet because she did not grow up in either of the two geographic regions that my research focuses on, her interview has been excluded from this project.

migration from rural areas to urban ones as people sought employment or relief.[53] Indeed, in my own family story, things must have been pretty dire on the farm that "riding-the-rails" into the unknown seemed like a good idea for my teenage grandfather. Secondary research reveals that food shortages, malnourishment, starvation, and disease were common afflictions faced by many families across the prairies.[54] Drought and plagues of grasshoppers ravaged the south country, preventing farmers from even keeping a garden, let alone bringing in any substantial crop.[55]

The Interview Process:

Admittedly, there are limitations with my own interviews, particularly the *Resounding Memories* interviews, which were among the first I ever conducted. While I had conducted oral history interviews in my undergraduate honours thesis research, I was still relatively inexperienced in the process. Inspired by my work transcribing interviews for Reynoldston Research & Studies (interviews conducted in the 1960s and 1970s about upstate New York), I approached my own interviews with a thorough, detailed four page set of standardised questions: Can you describe the house you grew up in? How was it heated? What kind of lighting? What kinds of foods did you eat? Did your mother make anything fancy for special occasions? What kinds of home-remedies did she have for when you were sick? These strict questions always provided ease and control in the interview, however fall far from good oral history practice. Such questions sought to intensively gather personal testimony and description from my

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[53] See: Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression: 1929-1939* (New York: Anchor Publishing, 1990): 47-54 and 130-137; Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years: 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1997): 74-89; Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987): 394-400; and Curtis McManus, *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011): 138-142 and 223-226.

[54] See: Broadfoot, 89-102; and principally McManus, 133-142.

[55] *Ibid.*

subjects, rather than being concerned with the rich nuances of story and lived experience -- the qualities that, according to historian Alessandro Portelli, are "what makes oral history different."[56] For him, narrative and subjectivity are the great strengths of oral history as a discipline: he states, oral history tells us "not just what people did, but what they intended to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did."[57] Moreover, as Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky suggest, in "genuine" interviews there is a relationship between interviewee and listener; there is a "working relationship -- a collaboration in the literal sense of labouring together."[58] A good interview is didactic and interactive, while testimony is "simply given by one side, and gathered up the other."[59] The interviews I conducted, both as part of the *Resounding Memories* project and for my later graduate coursework at Concordia, definitely fall into the category of testimony.

The rigid structure of my questions limited the space for any real detailed reflection or story-sharing. They were more like a survey than a life-story. The resulting content proved challenging to analyze at times. Yet, I take comfort in the words of historian Anna Sheftel. Reflecting on some of her own interviews Sheftel writes that, "Oral history is such a messy methodology in that it is so based on people, who are messy by nature, that there will always be

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[56] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?," in *The Oral History Reader, Edited by Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32-42.

[57] Ibid, 36.

[58] Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, "When is an Interview an Interview? Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors," *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2006): 431-449. 439

[59] *Ibid.*

constraints, things that don't go quite as planned, and that needs to be ok. I am not sure any interview ever reaches its 'full' potential."[60]

I am not certain that my interviews ever reached their "full potential" either. However, in spite of their limitations, these interviews have important strengths. A core set of questions in common provided comparability between interviews, and the specific, structured questions reliably elicited exactly the detailed descriptions of daily life I needed for this research. As Edward Coffman states, in order to get "contemporary colour, [and] contemporary atmosphere one must seek it among the impressions which can only be obtained from those who lived a life amid particular surroundings."[61] My interviews produce a unique remembering of the rural 1930s, hinging around daily domestic and social life -- topics which are largely absent in the Gray collection and also remain muted in the current historiography of the period.

The Drybelt vs. The Prairie:

Before analyzing the interviews, a brief statement should first be made about the geographic origins of my interview subjects. The Canadian Prairie can be divided into two principal landscapes: the fertile plain of the north and the Drybelt of the southwest extending into the United States. While both regions experienced drought and crop failures, and interviews from both regions speak to some similar experiences of rural life, the histories of these two regions should not be entirely conflated.

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[60] Anna Sheftel, Interview Reflection on interview with Sidney Zoltak; Sidney Zoltak interviewed by Stacey Zembryzycki and Anna Sheftel, 11 and 18 March, 14 June 2009, Transcriptions and Chronologies Folder, MLSA, COHDS.

[61] Edward Coffman, "Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History," *Journal of American History* 87.2 (September 2000): 582-592.

Importantly, a history of any part of Canada's geography should begin with a recognition of indigenous territory. When European settlers began to penetrate the prairies, they were entering into a landscape long occupied by the First Nations. Treaties 1, 2, and 4 through 7, signed between the reigning monarch of Canada (Queen Victoria) through 1871 and 1877 recognised 162 distinct First Nations signatories on the prairie. The Métis, the descendants of mixed European and First Nations heritage, were also active in the region beginning in the Fur Trade. When settlers entered into the region it was specifically because the MacDonald government had removed the First Nations from the land only a generation before.[62]

With the decline of the fur trade in the 1860s and 1870s, and with pressure from the Dominion government, the Prairie was finally opened to settlement. By 1905 thousands of immigrant families had responded to the government's efforts to attract people and nearly all the land deemed suitable for agriculture had been claimed.[63] However, until 1908 the south plains were still administered largely as cattle-ranching preserve: only Swift Creek, Maple Creek, and Moose Jaw served as the Dryland's principal communities.[64] The rest of the territory south to the American border remained, for the most part, devoid of European settlement. It was thought that settlers would eventually be allowed in, but that settlement would occur gradually and only after agricultural advances and improved irrigation practices had been introduced.[65] Under insistent pressure from expansionist promoters of settlement, and blessed by Victorian "experts"

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[62] See: Gerald Friesen, "Canada's Empire: The Regional and National Policy, 1870-1900" in *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987): 162-194; J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996); and principally James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013).

[63] Curtis McManus, *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 18.

[64] McManus, 16.

[65] *Ibid*.

who believed themselves to have overcome the issue of Dryland farming, the region was opened for homesteading by the Dominion government in 1908.

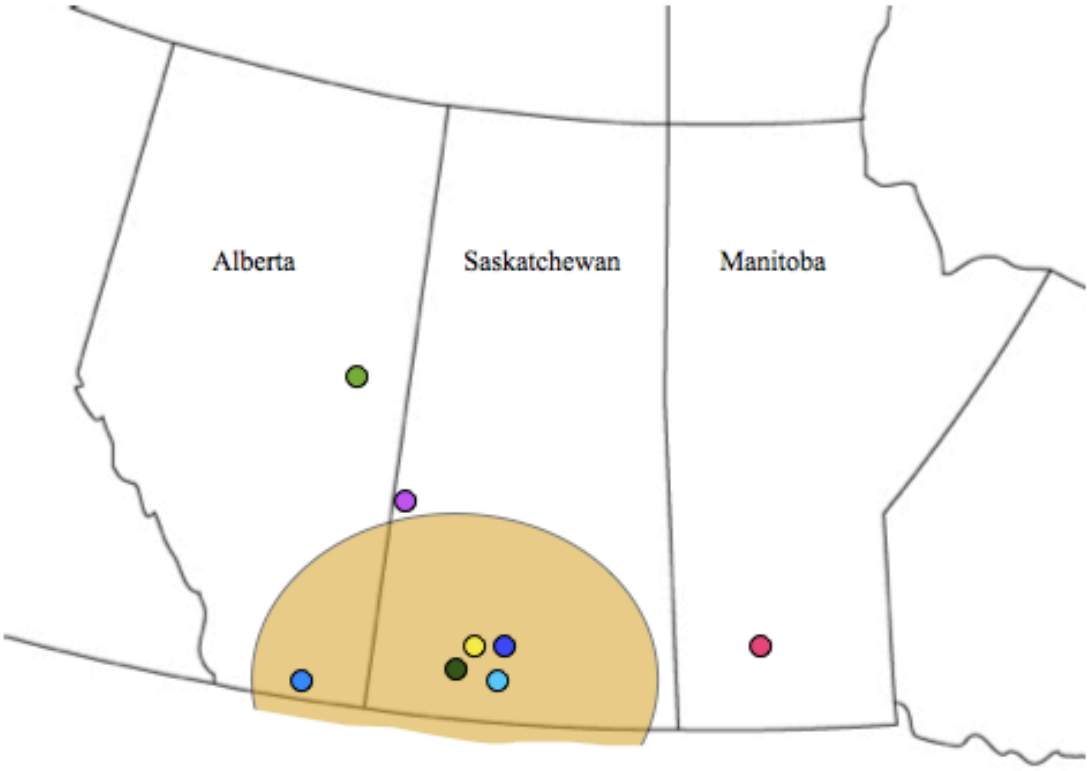

Figure 1: The Drybelt and the Communities of my Prairie Interviews

Historian Curtis R. McManus identifies this rapid change in territorial policy with Frank Oliver, an expansionist and imperialist, who became Minister of the Interior and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1905. Oliver adamantly believed in settler's rights and unrestricted

settlement. According to McManus, Oliver "cleaved to the idea that the yeoman farmer somehow represented man's essential goodness."[66] At the same time, Oliver began taking back reserve lands granted only decades before to the First Nations. He bought or removed from First Nations' reserves thousands of acres of land, making already small reservations smaller and their people less inclined, or even able, to pursue an agricultural existence.[67] These land surrenders were not insignificant: in southern Saskatchewan alone, 53,985 acres of land were lost by the First Nations under Oliver's land surrender policy.[68] Reserve lands, Oliver argued, "retarded settlement" because the First Nations made no "practical use of the land," and that the land should thus be taken away, settled by Europeans, and put to agriculture.[69] According to McManus, Oliver even flirted with the idea of settling the lands without the consent of the reserve population.

With the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act in 1908, and the opening up of former reserve lands to settlement, multiple thousands of wishful pioneers flooded into the region, filing homesteads of 160 acres for a small ten-dollar fee.[70] My paternal great-grandfather was one of those settlers to file into southern Drybelt. The Districts of Alberta and Saskatchewan were given provincial status in 1905. After the 1908 land rush, the Drybelt yielded mammoth harvests in 1915 and 1916, offering farmers false expectations of what was yet to come, and incentive to further settlement.[71] The population of Drybelt Alberta hit a peak in 1921 with 800,000, while in

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[66] *Ibid.*

[67] Ibid., 19.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] Ibid, 20.

[71] *Ibid.*

the same year Saskatchewan's Drybelt population reached 675,000.[72] Drought afflicted the region beginning in 1919 and, in the worst hit regions, no crop of consequence was reaped again until 1927.[73] Jones provides statistics that suggest that drought and crop failure occurred throughout the Prairie region during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was the southern Drybelt that was particularly hard-hit.[74]

The catastrophic collapse of grain prices (10 to 15 cents per bushel, as compared to $1.20 and $1.30 per bushel in the early 1920s), coupled with drought spelled calamity for Prairie farmers.[75] In Alberta, between 1921 and 1926, 138 townships in the southeast, lost at least 55% of their population; by the end of 1926, 80% of the area was permanently evacuated.[76] In Saskatchewan farm abandonment for the period was equally high: between 1917 and 1924, some 30,000 farmers fled the southwest because of drought, crop failure, and starvation.[77] In both provinces, farm abandonments in the 1920s was on par with, or even exceeded, those of the Great Depression ten years later, which became a bitter sequel to the preceding decade. An additional 25,000 farmers fled from the same region of Alberta during the 1930s, while 40,000 abandoned homesteads in Saskatchewan.[78]

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[72] David C. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Publishing, 1987).

[73] McManus, 20.

[74] Jones, 258-265.

[75] James H. Gray, *Men Against the Desert* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishing, 1967), 66.

[76] Jones, 250.

[77] McManus, 7.

[78] Jones, 254.
McManus, 7.

This image of the Prairie Drybelt is prominent in public perceptions of the Great Depression, no doubt fuelled by cultural representations of the American "Dust Bowl," including those of John Steinbeck, Dorothea Lange, and Woody Guthrie. Yet, this does not reflect the experiences of all farmers on the Canadian prairie, and a distinction should be made between the hard-hit Drybelt and the rest of the region. While the Drybelt narrative fits with my own families' stories of farm abandonment, it does not correspond to the lived experiences of my six interviewees. Of those, only Dorothy Daniels, whose interview I acquired from the Gray collection, Wanda Weiss, Colin Low, and Hal Zerbin were from communities in the Drybelt. The other subjects came from elsewhere on the prairie, outside the hardest-hit regions. Nevertheless, despite their different geographic origins, interviewees recall the decade in similar terms.

Remembering the Depression:

Ruth Aitken was born near Mekawin, Manitoba, in 1926. Her parents were English immigrants who came to Canada in 1913. Her father had previously been a banker and initially had a rough adjustment to the new rigours of pioneer farming. They had a quarter section homestead (160 acres), which was primarily put to wheat cultivation, but they also kept sheep, pigs, and poultry. Aitken recalls that there was also a significant orchard on the farm, but that some fruit trees were notoriously difficult to overwinter on the prairie. She remembers her father's daunting stories of coming West across Canada, of "mud up the axels wheels as they went through Manitoba," and of how her father nearly died whilst clearing land on their homestead in his first year on the land.[79] Of the 1930s, Aitken tells:

[79] Ruth Aitken, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 14 Jan 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 2:58-3:40.

> It really hit home, the Depression that is. It was hard. I remember really wanting a pair of new knee-high socks and I didn't even ask for them because I just knew that there wasn't any money for them. And, I remember one time dad was all dressed-up to go to town and his suit was all frayed at the bottom, and I thought, 'oh boy, I bet he wishes he could have a new suit.' But, there just wasn't the money. Everybody was having trouble in those years. It was hard, but we were lucky.[80]

In this section of the interview, her sentences are slow and drawn out. Her tone is serious, whereas the rest of her reflections are light, jovial, and full of humour. The 1930s was a decade that "really hit home" for Aitken, and she repeats the phrase "it was hard." Even as a child she recognised the financial difficulties her family faced in those years; she remembers the hardships of the decade within the framework of a child, wanting "new knee-high socks," yet knowing "that there wasn't any money for them." She also conveys the nature of universal hardship associated with the decade, when she notes that, "Everybody was having trouble in those years." She foregrounds the decade as one of hardship and survival: "It was hard, but we were lucky," she states. It is not clear from this quotation alone as to how her family was lucky. Only in listening to the rest of her interview is it clear that her family was lucky in that even when they had no money, there was always food on the table. The family managed. Her story is a clear example of the resilience trope that Frisch identifies. The 1930s is not an abstract historic period for her, but a chapter in her own life story -- a chapter that, in her jovial tone and laughter, was remembered fondly. Resilience is the overlaying theme of her story.

The most obvious way in which my interviewees describe the poverty of the 1930s comes across in the descriptions of their living conditions. As mentioned, the Gray interviews from the Saskatchewan Provincial Archives provide little insight into the social experiences of the decade.

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[80] Ruth Aitken, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 27:00-28:02.

Only the interview with Dorothy Daniels of Robsart is particularly useful in gleaning access into the social realm of the period; her stories appear later throughout this chapter. However, another interview from the collection provides a tiny glimpse into the poor state of farm housing during the Depression -- that is an interview with Gordon Tagger, conducted by James Grey in Ottawa in 1966. Tagger was an agricultural scientist running an experimental farm at Swift Current in the early 1930s; he is credited with the invention of the Community Pasture Project, which sought to reclaim eroded lands and designate them as non-arable, communal grazing areas, similar to the Medieval system of Commons.[81] After 1934, Tagger entered into Saskatchewan politics with the Farmer-Labour Group (FLG), meeting with farmers and hearing their stories, during which time he got a clear understanding of farmers' experiences.

During the interview with Grey, Tagger describes the dilapidated nature of the farmhouses he came across in the Drybelt region during the 1930s. Many of these homesteads, he explains, had been settled during the land rush of the 1910s, and had been under cultivation for around twenty years before the Depression hit. Most were the standard quarter section size, and largely planting wheat as the central crop. He does not detail the nature of settlement progression in the region, but we can imagine that early settlers in the region made do with simple make-shift dwellings of sod or wood until the first major harvest could provide the income to construct a proper housing.[82] This was certainly the narrative of my own family history on the prairie: my paternal great-grandfather spent his first year in a tent before building a

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[81] In the end, the program included 61 community pastures in Saskatchewan, 23 in Manitoba, and two in Alberta. These pastures remained active long after the Depression. Only in 2014, did the Harper government announce that it would begin to phase out the program and transfer the 900,000hectares of land back to the provinces by 2018.

[82] See: Barry Broadfoot, *Next-Year Country: Voices of Prairie People* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart): 26-67 and *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914: Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West* (New York: Doubleday, 1976): 43-107; Francis, 155-192; Friesen, 242-274; Jones, 5-42; and McManus, 14-45.

wood home, while an upturned wagon and some canvas tarping provided shelter for my maternal great-grandmother's family during their first year on the land. Tagger does not speak of this progression in farm housing, but he does note the dilapidation and disrepair of the houses he witnessed; for him, these farmhouses provided a "typical image of the times," as he puts it.[83] He recalls:

> I must have seen hundreds of those little houses in the southern country. Bare and barren, unpainted. Small. Very small. Falling apart. Not a very good dwelling at all. They weren't insulated on the inside; there was very little finishing on the insides. Not storm-proof by any means.[84]

Tagger's memory further suggests something of the universality of the hardship of the decade, that he saw "hundreds of those houses in the southern country," all standing with a similar appearance. He notes how farmers at the time often felt as though they were perpetually trying to keep up: any income brought in went towards mortgages, paying off debts from purchasing new machinery, and never into housing. Indeed, while Tagger never speaks directly to the progression of settlement housing in the region, he here suggests that the dilapidated farmhouses he witnessed were not new constructions, and that farmers had been more interested in investing in their actual agriculture -- in new machinery, in higher yields, in putting more land under cultivation -- than in their housing. The farmhouses he saw likely dated from around the earlier period of settlement, in the 1910s. Indeed, many of my own interview subjects remember their housing from the period as having been built by their parents upon first arriving on the land decades earlier, often with few modifications or improvements. Tagger's description of farm

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[83] Gordon Tagger, Interviewed by James H. Gray. 1965, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. 8:50-9:11.

[84] *Ibid.*

housing, “bare and barren,” is a clear and obvious identifier of the rural poverty affecting farming families during the decade.

This bleak description of farm housing strikes close to my own family’s recollections of the decade. My mother’s father, Andrew, while born late in the Depression years, has often told me about the difficulties his family faced in those years. He has also shared with me the stories told to him by his elder siblings and parents. The family worked two quarter sections, shared between two brothers, near Leipzig, Saskatchewan, well north of the Drybelt region in which Tagger was operating.

My grandfather remembers the 1930s as being hard-times, but that his father had been lucky enough to be able to stay on the farm working throughout the whole decade. He recalls his childhood home in terms strikingly similar to those of Tagger -- another real descriptive image of the poverty of the times. As he recalls, the whole family lived in a meagre two-room wood and sod house, lined inside with beaverboard (a plywood-like material formed out of wood fibre pressed into sheets), which his father had built with the help of neighbouring farmers when he first arrived on the homestead in 1926. As my grandfather recalls, the house was very cold as the wind blew in and out without hindrance; scrap cloth stuffed into the wall cracks offered the only insulation against the elements. The roof leaked when it rained for more than two days in a row. A well had been dug by hand in the 1920s, but during my grandfather’s childhood it had become just a dry hole for most of the year, providing only enough water for home-use; water for the livestock had to be hauled from the neighbour’s where a more successful well had been dug, and in the winter months when blizzards limited visibility for two to three days at a time, the livestock went without. He has also told me of when the farm finally got electricity, in the late

1940s: coming from a deeply devout Catholic family, he remembers returning home to workmen running yards and yards of cable everywhere, and that the end result was like a hundred angels dancing around the farmyard and house.

I do not know why the farmhouse was in the state that it was in during my grandfather's childhood; whether it was always a simple and rough pioneer dwelling, or whether it had it fallen into particular disrepair during the 1930s. They had filed their homesteads in 1926, after immigrated from Löbsing, Germany. By the time of grandfather's childhood, the family had already been working the land for at least a decade. Perhaps, as Tagger suggests of farmers of the time, my great-grandfather had been more concerned about improving farm productivity and had not invested in improving the house in the decade before my grandfather's birth; or perhaps it was the poverty of the Depression specifically, and the lack of money for repairs, that caused the house to fall into a state of disrepair. This ambiguity, this silence in the interview, appears not just in my family history, but also throughout many of the interviews analysed in this chapter.

Born in 1927, nearly ten years before my grandfather, Fred Jenkins also remembers the house that he grew up in during the 1930s and which his father and older brothers had built together before he was born. His description bears many similarities to my grandfather's childhood home, although the Jenkinses settled in the grasslands region of middle Alberta where trees were plentiful enough to construct a log home. From Alberta's grasslands region, his memories also speak to geography considerably northwest of the Drybelt. Jenkin's father had a quarter section, yet large parts of the farm were still woodland and never worked agriculturally; they had a mixed farm, primarily devoted to cattle ranching, but with some grain production.

The family belonged to the Latter Day Saints movement, and with many others, came north from Montana to settle in Alberta.

Of his house, Jenkins recalls that the building had a small parlour, kitchen space, and bedroom on the main-floor, and an attic where Fred and his brother slept. Like my grandfather Andrew's childhood house, Fred's home was also draughty and he remembers how the family solved this problem:

> I remember everything about that house. It was a log house that my dad built himself, and I think my two oldest brothers helped him build it too. To fill the cracks between the logs, well, they used mud and cow manure and water -- that's how they stuffed it to keep the air from blowing in between the logs -- that was on the outside, and any bedding or cloth that was not any good any more, mom would stick it in between from on the inside. In the winter, we had to get the woodstove red-hot just to keep the place from freezing-up. It was rough, but we got by.[85]

Here again Jenkins' story conveys a striking image of the hardships of rural life during the 1930s. The family lacked adequate housing. More importantly, his recollection here provides another example of the resilience narratives that Frisch speaks of as tropes in memories pertaining to the Depression; for Jenkins that time was not a historic abstraction, but an important chapter in his life, a chapter of determination and survival. His memories about the family home reinforces Frisch's argument that memories of the period often lack details of hardship or pain, and instead focus on themes of survival. Jenkin's family lacked adequate housing, but they were persevering and made do with what they had: "it was rough, but we got by." This last detail perfectly encapsulates the trope of survival that Frisch connects with Depression-era memories.

Moreover, the ambiguity that exists in my family history and the recollections of Tagger, also appears here in Jenkins' story: it is not clear whether the family home had always been

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[85] Fred Jenkins, 0:31-1:17.

make-shift and inadequate, or whether it had fallen into particular disrepair in later years. Perhaps, as Tagger suggests, Jenkins' father had also put more investment into stock and equipment than into housing. Jenkins does say, however, that the house had been built by his father and older brothers, and thus was a relatively new construction close to his birth.

Sadly, we have no real stories about my paternal grandfather's childhood on the homestead in Dunblane, deep in the heart of the Saskatchewan Drybelt. My grandfather did not talk much about his childhood. From what my father can gather, his dad had a nasty, brutish, and strict childhood on the farm, and it was no wonder he never talked about it. He was still a teenager when he left and "rode the rails" west to find work in Vancouver. We know that the family lived in a simple wooden dwelling, no doubt very similar to that described by Jenkins, by my maternal grandfather Andrew, or by Tagger. Descriptions of Prairie homes from the decade present a literal and tangible image of the poverty and hardships that farming families had to live with. Yet, memories from Prairie life in Canada also reveal a range of experiences from the decade. While Aitken earlier described how the Depression was "hard" and "really hit home," memories from her childhood suggest that the decade did not *really hit her home* that much.

When she was first born, the family lived in a two-story log house, which her father had built with the help of other local farmers upon first arriving in Manitoba in 1913.[86] The second floor was an open-room where all nine of the children slept. In that house, a small woodstove provided the only heat source, from which the rising stovepipe provided for the second floor. Repeated successful harvests during the latter part of the 1920s allowed the family to build a new house, which was completed in 1929 and which Aitken remembers as her childhood home.

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[86] Ruth Aitken 4:06-4:36.

While Tagger suggests that Prairie farmers had been more willing to invest in farm productivity over housing, this was not the case with Aitken's family. As she remembers, her father had actually "started working on it in 1928, and it was too far advanced -- too much work had been done -- by 1929 when the Crash hit," so he just finished what he could of the project. The resulting building was quite modern compared to the other dwellings described from that area. She says:

> We ended up with everything in it, except we never had a bathroom in there. There was the room for the bathroom, but that was one of the last things you put in when building a house, so it didn't get put in. When the new house was put up, dad had it wired for electricity -- he had it programmed for electricity. And, we had Delco lighting, because of course the hydro hadn't gone through there yet. But, we had electric lighting.[87]

To an extent, the house was also equipped with running water: as Aitken describes, there was a "little electric pump, but the water had to come up from the cistern. The men had to get ice in the winter and put it down in the cistern, and that gave water in the summer -- plus of course you had rainwater, but you could never get enough rainwater to last the whole season."[88]

Aitken's memories about her childhood home suggest two things about her family's experience of the Great Depression. The decade did have an impact on her family: due to increasing financial restrictions after 1929, the house was not completed as earlier planned. The bathroom was never installed. And yet, the final building which stood during Aitken's childhood is not described in the "bare and barren" terms of other Prairie farmhouses from the decade. While not completed to plan, the home was nonetheless new at the onset of the Depression. It had running water and electric lighting (granted by petrol generator) more than a decade before

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[87] Ruth Aitken 4:36-5:10.

[88] Ruth Aitken 5:36-5:50.

my maternal grandfather's home did. They were "lucky," to use the term she herself uses to describe her family's situation then.

It is ironic that Aitken should earlier speak to the universal nature of the 1930s, saying "Everybody was having trouble in those years. It was hard." She speaks of a universal sense of hardship and of the strong community formed by farmers. Yet, her descriptions of her home do not parallel those shared by Jenkins, Tagger, or my own family narrative. Obviously, Aitken's stories are reflective of solely one person's experience. Yet, they serve as a reminder to the many experiences emerging out of the Depression. There was no single experience. And, in regards to living conditions, Aitkens was "lucky" compared to other farming families on the prairie. The theme of being "lucky" is one common to all the interviews of this chapter, particularly in regards to memories of food. During the decade, food took on an extra special symbolism, evoking stability, home, and resilience.

Food Memories from the Depression:

Food stories occupy a significant proportion of the interview recordings. In part, this was a result of my questioning strategy. I was keenly interested in domestic life, so many of my questions related to gardening, cooking, preserving, and meals. Food-related stories also seemed to be a topic that my interview subjects could more easily remember in rich detail. Scholars such as David Sutton have identified food as our closest gateway into the world of the past.[89]

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[89] See: John Holtzman, "Food and Memory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35.1 (2006): 361-378; Deborah Lupton, "Food, Memory, and Meaning: The Symbolic and Social Nature of Food Events," *Sociological Review* 42.1 (1994): 665-685; David Sutton, "Cooking Skill, the Senses and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge" in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, eds. E. Edwards C. Gosden & R. Philips (Oxford: Berg Press, 2006); David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2001); and David Sutton, "A Tale of Easter Ovens: Food and Collective Memory," *Social Research* 75.1 (2008): 157-180.

Certainly, Sutton, along with Michael Hernandez, write about the utility of cooking utensils as a form of oral history methodology, as such objects can carry rich personal and family memories.[90] In fact, nearly the entire interview with Dorothy Daniels, conducted by James Grey in 1966, is devoted to stories about food and other aspects of domestic life. It was clearly a topic that interviewees could remember and wanted to talk about.

Memories of food occupy a prominent place in my interviews, even though secondary sources show that food scarcity and malnutrition was common at the time.[91] As McManus notes in his study of Drybelt Saskatchewan, poor nutrition resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of deaths attributed to diseases like beriberi, scurvy, rickets, and pellagra, which particularly afflicted children.[92] In 1936 alone, eighty-seven children under fifteen died from nutritive deficiencies, at least noted in the records of the hospitals; the number of children who died outside the notice of a public official, McManus states, was likely much higher.[93] Many more suffered, but lived. In presenting the stories of eight Prairie lives, all of whom spoke of experiencing "starvation" during the Depression years, Barry Broadfoot introduces a word of caution.[94] He states:

> People have often told me that they starved during the Depression, but starvation is a relative term. Unless you were rich, there is no doubt that you ate less, and

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[90] David Sutton and Michael Hernandez, "Voices in the Kitchen: Cooking Tools as Inalienable Possessions," *Oral History* 67.1 (2007): 67-76.

[91] See: Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years: 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1997), and principally Curtis McManus, *Happyland: A History of the "Dirty Thirties" in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011).

[92] McManus, 135.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] Broadfoot, 89-102.

> were a little hungrier. But, you didn't starve -- although you might have called it that. At worst, you suffered from malnutrition.[95]

People knew hunger, if not actual starvation. Yet, in saying, years later, that they were starving, interviewees provide a basis from which to claim that they "survived" the Great Depression. Historian Michael Frisch was right. Times were hard, food was scarce, yet people managed with what they had, and the dominant narrative of the time is that of perseverance.

Certainly, even McManus and Broadfoot cite instances of fortunate people who managed to keep a garden or reap some sort of harvest, and make it through the Depression years. My interviewees share similar instances of fortunate Prairie families. Interview subjects recall good, wholesome meals, prepared largely from ingredients harvested from the farm. Moreover, memories of hunting and foraging are shared throughout all my interviews. Again, it is not sufficient to say that farmers located outside the Drybelt fared better than their counterparts in the south, as interviews from both areas speak to similar experiences.

Wanda Weiss was born in Latvia in 1915, then still part of the Russian Empire. Her father had fought as a foot-soldier in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, and fled with his family to Saskatchewan during the Revolution of 1917.[96] In Saskatchewan the family owned a quarter section homestead near Assiniboia, in the southern-central part of the province, where they primarily operated a dairy; like most Prairie farms, sections of farmland were also put to grain production. Weiss remembers her mother as always being concerned with her children's diet,

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[95] Broadfoot, 89.

[96] In the interview, Weiss tells a haunting and emotional story of her family's escape from Latvia: she recalls how her parents feared that the advancing Red Army troops would take their children away and hid them in a hole in the barn, which was then covered in straw: "We were never left behind. We got out. We escaped!"

and ensuring that they always had something proper to eat. A typical farm breakfast, as Weiss remembers, was simple but hearty fair:

> We had porridge for breakfast mostly, and mother would heat the milk for us because she didn't believe in us having cold milk in our tummies for going to school. So it was porridge and hot milk for breakfast. It filled us up. We had that almost every morning. Sometimes toast with butter and jam.[97]

Oatmeal was a breakfast-staple, sometimes grown on the farm, but more often than not bought in large burlap sacking, which could be put to use in other ways. Hal Zerbin was born in 1930, into a German-speaking family that had settled near Swift Current just after the Great War. Like Weiss's family, the Zerbins' farm also focused on dairy and grain production. They also kept pigs. He recalls that,

> breakfast was always porridge and a big spoon full of cod liver oil for our health. The porridge used to come in cloth sacks in those days, and after one was empty mother would wash it and fashion a new shirt or pair of pants for us kids. There was no money to buy anything. But, we got by alright.[98]

More than just description about meals, Zerbin's memories here again speak to a trope of survival. His mother innovated clothing from sacking when other cloth was in short supply or when funds were lacking. They made do with what they had. They might have been financially strapped, but they were fortunate in other ways. Frisch's trope of survival is further enforced in Weiss's description of a typical lunch meal. She states:

> For lunch, we made sandwiches. She made her own bread, oh yes. And I learnt to make bread. We took our own grain and we took it to a mill, a flour mill, in Assiniboia and they ground the grain into flour for us. It wasn't really white bread, but it was very nourishing. And, we had lots of butter and I learnt how to

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[97] Wanda Weiss, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 28 February, 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 0:28-0:56.

[98] Hal Zerbin, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 15 March 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 13:43-13:50.

> churn butter! For dinner, well, mother made lovely soups. We ate well. We never went hungry. We were lucky in that regard.[99]

In using the phrase "We never went hungry," Weiss depicts the experience of the Depression as one epitomised by hunger and a lack of food; she responds to the dominant narrative of those years, and further supports the descriptions of the period presented by Broadfoot and McManus. And yet, clearly, her family was not entirely without food during the period: as she herself states, "we ate well." They "were lucky in that regard." Her story here is another clear example of Frisch's trope of survival. The Depression is a chapter in her overall life-story, and a chapter in which the pain and hardship of the decade has largely been omitted. Instead, a story of survival remains.

My interviewees do not just remember the simple, but nourishing fair of porridge and sandwiches. Many of the interviews discuss having desserts on a regular basis, while others recall mothers preparing fancier meals when company was expected or for special occasions. According to Ruth Aitken, her family often had "cream of wheat for dessert sometimes," alongside "baked apples, bread and butter puddings."[100] She remembers that, "We weren't much for pies, although we did manage to do a lot of pies when the threshing gang were there. We would have cakes and pies when the threshing gang was there."[101] In the interview, she also shares a story of having made herself a chocolate cake for her thirteenth birthday -- an event recounted with much pride as her father, "a man of few compliments," commended her on the

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[99] Wanda Weiss, 4:58-5:53.

[100] Ruth Aitken, 20:00-20:25.

[101] *Ibid.*

baking.[102] Likewise Hal Zerbin recalls often watching in awe as his mother prepared traditional German-style strudels. He states:

> My mother was quite a baker. I guess she had been taught by her mother to make the fanciest! She baked pies a lot, and the fine German strudels -- we had them almost every Sunday. I used to watch with amazement at the time that she would spend on the pastry getting it thin, which had to be stretched very thin. It was a mark of honour amongst the women then, who had the best strudel. Yes, the favourite, of course, was the Saskatchewan Saskatoon berry pie -- that was always combined with rhubarb. Dried apples was another favourite thing: they used to bring home a sack of dried apples, and she'd soak them and make a pie.[103]

Zerbin's story here suggests something of the frequency of these special dishes. For his family, "the fine German strudels" were not an occasional treat, but something that was something eat by the family on a regular basis -- "almost every Sunday," he says. Zerbin's family farmed in Swift Current, well within the southern Drybelt, so his family was exceptionally fortunate to have fared the way he recalls. Here, Zerbin also hints at an important theme that comes up in a few of the other interviews: the theme of good food as being "a mark of honour" for Prairie people. So important was the necessity to present respectable fare for guests, that Aitken recalls one situation where she was embarrassed that there was no fresh baking to offer to guests that dropped in one Sunday. She shares:

> I remember one time being embarrassed because there wasn't any baking. I was pretty young then. There wasn't any baking and some people dropped in on a sunday. But, we had some fruit on hand to make a fruit salad, and that's what we did. We served a fruit salad. Of course, in years to come, I learnt that fruit salad was often far superior to a lot of the baking we'd eat. But, I didn't know that then as a kid.[104]

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[102] Ruth Aitken, 16:30-35.

[103] Hal Zerbin, 15:20-17:32.

[104] Ruth Aitken, 19:23-20:00.

Certainly, Aitken's remark speaks to the lack of fresh fruit available to Prairie families during the Depression. McManus notes the common tale that children in the Drybelt grew up having never seen a piece of fresh fruit: he argues that the dramatic increase in children's deaths resulting from nutritive diseases over the period suggest this tale to be likely true.[105] Children likely did go weeks, months, perhaps even years, without eating fruit (rural families did of course have access to wild fruits foraged from the landscape, a topic covered later in this chapter). Aitken's story about the fruit further supports McManus' claim that fresh fruit was a rarity on the prairie, and thus a far "superior" meal to present to company.

Similarly, my father tells that when his own father was a young child he was always given an orange and some hazelnuts as Christmas presents; my grandfather later continued this tradition with his own children; however as my father recalls, fruit did not have quite the same value to a child of the 1950s and 1960s as it did a generation before. Having Norwegian immigrant parents, *lutefisk* was also a delicacy remembered as an extra special luxury on the farm at Christmas; how the family managed to procure it in the middle of the south Saskatchewan Prairie is a mystery. All of my own interview subjects speak of similar instances of receiving extra special foodstuffs like citrus, nuts, and candy at Christmas; it is also an experience paralleled in the research of Broadfoot and McManus.[106]

None of my Prairie interviews talk about why presenting good food was so important, yet an answer may come from secondary source literature -- albeit from a very different context. Gill Valentine and Beth Longstaff explore the meanings and use of food in the institutional

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[105] McManus, 135.

[106] See: McManus, 111-183; and Broadfoot, 89-102.

setting of male prisons.[107] They argue that in an environment where men have limited access to money or material goods, food assumes immense value; it takes on symbolic associations for memories of home and identity. Food, they state, embodies all that was *normal* before incarceration. Certainly, many other scholars note the connections between memories of food and home.[108] Similar themes are present in my oral history interviews. Food was something more important than just having something to eat. Writing about Newfoundland memories of bread, Diane Tye states that these stories "do not evoke painful hardship when there was little or nothing else to eat; instead, they affirm an imagined time and place that no longer exists and that depended on the integrity of the family unit, a subsistence economy, and a close-knit community."[109] On the Prairie, good food, as Zerbin describes, was a "mark of honour for people." It was a powerful sign of stability and normality during the Depression, a reminder of the past and a hope for the future. Interviews speak of a time when food was prepared at home and those who shared it were connected by deep communal ties. In a landscape of shortage and hunger, it is not all that surprising that food should occupy such a significant place within Prairie memories. And again, recollections of fruit salad, citrus at Christmas, and other special foodstuffs further speak to the trope of survival apparent in Depression-era memories: families made do with what little they had, making the mundane extraordinary. Through their resilience,

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[107] Gill Valentine and Beth Longstaff, "Doing Porridge: Food and Social Relations in a Male Prison," *Journal of Material Culture* 3:2 (1998): 131-152.

[108] See: Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Diane Tye, "'Bread for the Road": Intersections of Food and Culture in Newfoundland and Labrador," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 26.2 (2011): 1719-1726; Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, "Memory-Work in Java: A Cautionary Tale" in Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 162-203; and Stacey Zembrzyci, "'We Didn't Have a Lot of Money, but We Had Food": Ukrainians and Their Depression-Era Food Memories," *Edible Histories, Cultural Practices: Towards a Canadian Food History*, eds., Franca Iacovetta, Valerie Korinek, and Marlene Epp (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012): 131-139.

[109] Tye, 189.

rural people not only got by, they nurtured children and shared pleasure through food in even the hardest of times. During the 1930s, even a fondly-remembered Christmas orange became a symbol of survival and resilience.

In a landscape of food shortages and malnutrition, it is interesting that none of my interviews talk about a lack of food or going hungry: as Weiss puts it, "We never went hungry." Indeed, of the six interviews explored in this chapter, all seem to have fared relatively well. One could argue that the reasoning behind this is the very fact that my interviews were conducted, primarily, by people who were still just children during the Depression and thus might not accurately remember details from that early decade -- a valid statement. An interview with someone a generation older from the Gray Collection provides some explanation. During the Depression, Dorothy Daniels and her husband farmed near Robsard, Saskatchewan, in the heart of the southern Drybelt, before finally resettling northward in 1939. Their homestead was devoted almost exclusively to grain production and, as Daniels recalls, they barely made a single harvest during the drought years; yet they were not without food.

Unlike the interviews that I conducted myself, this one records an adult's remembered experience of the Depression. This older generation is no longer with us, so my own interviewees were children during these dark days. The age difference mattered, as children would not have been part of some conversations. They might not have been aware of some of the family struggles. According to Daniels, food was shipped into the Prairie as part of a national government relief campaign (indeed, one of the interviews from Québec recalls sending farm goods west to aid Prairie farmers):

> They shipped in all sorts of things from outside: barrels of apples from Ontario and British Columbia, mettajim potatoes from Alberta, and we got pounds and

> pounds of white navy beets from some other place. They shipped in clothing. They also shipped in great big slabs of codfish from the maritimes -- it looked just like snowshoes. We weren't raised on that kind of stuff, you know, but we made do with it. My mother-in-law learnt to cook it better than anyone else I ever knew, she was resilient that way! I think maybe she learnt from this old Norwegian fellow who farmed near us: you had to get all that salt out of it first. She would soak the salt out, then fry it up. It was the same when we went up north too: food was being shipped in there just the same. We couldn't have gotten by without it.[110]

Daniels' recollection reveals rich details about Prairie life. Her story again speaks to Frisch's trope of survival in Depression-era memories. They got by with what they had: as Daniels' states, they were unaccustomed to salt cod, but they "made do." Daniels even speaks of her mother-in-law's resilience for becoming quite adept at cooking with salt cod. Through her resilience, she was able to provide for her family. Importantly, Daniels' recollection also hints that relief aid was not unique to the southern Drybelt, but something she also witnessed after resettling in the northern prairie: "food was being shipped in there just the same," she states. It is not simple enough to argue that farmers in areas outside the worst struck areas of the drought were better-off than their southern Drybelt counterparts, as Daniel's story reveals a crucial similarity between the two regions.

Secondary research also makes reference to government relief programs in the region and specifically to food being shipped in from across Canada.[111] According to McManus, rail cars of apples from British Columbia, vegetables and bailed hay from Ontario, Québec dairy, and salt cod from the Maritimes helped to feed hungry Prairie families.[112] McManus presents similar

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[110] Dorothy Daniels, Interviewed by James Gray. 11 March 1969, Regina, Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan Provincial Archives. 7:00-8:12.

[111] See: McManus, 111-183; and Broadfoot, 89-102.

[112] McManus, 136.

stories of distrust on the part of Prairie "flatlanders" for whom salt cod was an equally alien ingredient.[113] Much of the distrust with cod, he suggests, surrounded the Prairie mothers' confusion of what to do with it. Indeed, he cites one mother who used to nail salt cod to the barn door and let the cows have it for a salt-lick, because she could find no better use for it.[114] Evidently, as Daniels' story corroborates, food relief from other parts of the country was an essential component to Prairie farmers' survival during the Depression: Daniels speaks to this when she says, "We couldn't have gotten by without it."

With both the importance of food relief and its apparent widespread practice, it is interesting that none of my own interviews say anything about it. Moreover, even within my family history none of my grandparents have recollections of relief. This reveals something about how the decade was remembered by Prairie children and about intergenerational memory. It could be the case that children growing up during the Depression were too young to understand food relief; for them, the lasting memory is not where food came from, but that food was on the table at all. More importantly, however, the silences around relief also speaks to the intergenerational legacy of the decade: running throughout much of the scholarship about the Depression is the theme of shame associated with accepting relief. McManus, Friesen, and Jones all note Prairie fathers went to great lengths finding any means of employment, often working back-breaking hours in road gangs, so as to avoid the humiliation of accepting relief.[115] Moreover, Berton records the tragic accounts of two Saskatchewan men for whom suicide was

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[113] *Ibid.*

[114] McManus, 136.

[115] See: Friesen, 394-400; Jones, 156-173; and McManus, 223-228.

the better option than accepting the humiliation of relief.[116] Likewise, McManus notes how the suicide rates in the southwest skyrocketed over the 1930s, often connected with humiliation and a sense of failure.[117]

Evidently, accepting relief was a marker of stigma and shame for proud Prairie families, and it is no surprise that the speakers of my interviews lack any memory of relief from their childhoods: they were either sheltered from the shame of relief during the Depression itself, or later told altered versions of stories from parents who wished to preserve a family narrative without the trappings of shame or failure. Again, even these silences reinforce Frisch's trope of resilience and the ways in which witnesses remember the 1930s as biography, without the details of pain or loss. For them, survival is the dominant memory. Of course, while food relief was a major contributor to Prairie survival, families were not solely dependent upon government aid for their livelihood. Farming families were still also able to grow their own fruits and vegetables, raise animals, and could also rely on the landscape to gather wild foods or to hunt when other things were scarce.

Fruits of the Earth:

In his 2012 documentary about the American Dust Bowl, Ken Burns describes how farmers in the worst-hit regions of the southwestern United States were often unable to even maintain vegetable gardens during the Depression, because of drought and high winds.[118] McManus also notes how drought and plagues of grasshoppers ravaged the Prairie Drybelt,

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[116] Berton, 184.

[117] McManus, 105-110.

[118] Ken Burns, *The Dust Bowl* (Washington: Florentine Films and WETA, 2012).

preventing farmers from even keeping a garden, let alone bringing in any substantial crop.[119] However, he does record the story of one family who were lucky enough to maintain a garden throughout the decade; the success of their garden was not easy and was only achieved as a result of hauling buckets of water from a nearby stream. They were lucky, for as McManus explains, many thousands of other settlers in the south did not have access to water.[120] My interviews present similar narratives of luck in regards to gardening.

The six interviewees of this chapter each recall still being able to cultivate a garden, which provided the mainstay of the larder food supply. In a decade of collapsed wheat economy and with the difficulties of purchasing food, tending to the family garden was one of the most important -- if not, most important -- jobs on the farm. As Fred Jenkins recalls about northern Alberta, "We had a garden. If you didn't have a garden, there was no food! Dad didn't have any money, and even when he did, there was no place to buy food. The nearest town was two days away."[121] Likewise, as Aitkens states, "I remember, especially during and after 1929 when the Depression hit, we were very lucky to have our own meat and to have our own garden."[122] Again, Weiss too recollects that, the Depression "was really difficult for people, but we were lucky on the farm: we could grow our own fruits and vegetables. We managed."[123]

These memories further reveal the trope of survival that Frisch examines. The repetition of the phrase "lucky" suggests the way in which the Depression is remembered as a period of resilience and overcoming hardship. All three speak of the difficulties of the decade, but also

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[119] McManus, 134.

[120] *Ibid.*

[121] Fred Jenkins, 4:30-4:45.

[122] Ruth Aitken, 27:00-27:10.

[123] Wanda Weiss, 5:40-6:01.

how the family managed to persevere: as Weiss states, "we managed." The prevailing memory of the times is not that of hardship, but of how their families persevered despite widespread crop failure, hunger, and limited financial resources. Indeed, Jenkins' memory in particular reveals the unique situation of rural life. Hardship was not just related to finances, but also the realities of rural isolation. The geographic location of rural families on the Prairie made it challenging to purchase food supplies even if money was available to purchase them: "there was no place to buy food. The nearest town was two days away," Jenkins states. Instead, these six interviews recall a world in which gardening and foraging put food on the table.

Depending on family preferences, a variety of basic vegetables were cultivated in the Prairie garden. Beets, peas, beans, cabbage, and tomatoes appear to have been the most popular.[124] Potatoes, carrots, and turnips, with their long winter storage capacity, were also grown in large numbers: as Jenkins, remembers, "We needed to grow lots of carrots and turnips and things like that for winter."[125] Daniels also remembers the prominence of potatoes in her mother's cooking; as she remembers, "We lived off of potatoes! We had a hundred different ways of cooking potatoes: we'd boil them and fry them, and bake them, mix them in with things, put them in bread."[126]

With the garden being of such importance to the family well-being, every member of the family assisted in working the soil. Gardening was not a task assigned solely to women or

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[124] Ruth Aitken, 26:16.
Wanda Weiss, 4:34-5:34.
Fred Jenkins, 5:36-6:11.
Hal Zerbin, 20:54-21:25.

[125] Fred Jenkins, 6:06-6:11.

[126] Dorothy Daniels, 9:11-9:21.

children, though as oral history memories reveal, they did play a key role in garden production. Fred Jenkins describes the details of the gardening dynamic on their Alberta homestead:

> There were nine of us in the family, and as soon as we could get out--before we were even in school--we were out in that garden. We had a plough, it only had one blade to turn the soil over, and dad would bring in the horses and they would pull that to break up the soil so that we could plant in the spring.[127]

Like Jenkins, Zerbin also recalls the family nature of working in the garden, and particularly how he and his siblings helped out. He says,

> My mother was the main gardener, not my dad so much, but he often helped out too. The rest of us all got involved. As soon as we were old enough to hold a hoe, we were out there hilling potatoes, which was a real back-breaking chore. In the spring my father and the men would plough up the earth. Then my mother, she did most of the work in the garden, and my grandmother would help a lot too. They'd plant it up, and us kids would always help. Yes, we got by that way.[128]

Zerbin's memory suggests the multi-generational nature of the family garden. It was an important project in which every member of the family was involved. His story also speaks to Tye's argument that such memories do not evoke hardship when there was little to eat, and instead affirm a time associated with family unity, a subsistence economy, and a close-knit community. His story further embodies the Depression-era trope of survival: families "got by" through their "back-breaking" work and resilience. In his memory, food is clearly symbolic of home, family, and stability in an otherwise precarious time. Indeed, for all of my interview subjects, gardening is recalled as providing a level of shelter.

As interview material conveys, children were particularly involved in the planting and maintenance of the farm garden. Weiss and Zerbin recall to particular stories that speak to their childhood tasks of keeping the garden watered and dealing with pest-control during the growing

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[127] Fred Jenkins, 4:46-5:40.

[128] Hal Zerbin, 20:07-21:21.

season. With rain being a precious commodity on the Prairie during the Depression, keeping the garden watered was a task requiring particular attention and care. Wanda Weiss provides a detailed description of one technique in her garden set-up, her innovative watering system:

> We had a garden. Ich, boy did we ever! And I'll tell you how we did it, tomato tins! We put two holes on each side of the tin, and before we went to school we had to fill those full of water, which would trickle out and water the garden; and that wouldn't waste any water, and that would keep the beets and potatoes and everything nice and green. We made do like that.[129]

Presumably, Weiss' technique also worked in the rare chance that there was rainfall. Her story also speaks to the resilience of Prairie farmers and Frisch's trope of survival: through their ingenious use of resources, the family was able to "make do" and grow a thriving garden.

Alongside keeping the garden watered, Zerbin remembers that as a child he also had chores of pest control, a task that he recalls as both unpleasant and monotonous. He and his siblings having to manually pick potato beetles off of the plants, as chemical pest control was not a viable option for many poor famers. Later on, however, some products became available that made the task of pest control. As Zerbin remembers:

> Later on, when I was a little older, they came up with a product called "Paris Green," which was about 90% strychnine. And, it was totally unregulated; my dad would come home and bring a paper sack full of the stuff, and we'd mix that with water and put it in a watering can to pour out on the plants. That used to kill the bugs and that way we didn't have to pick them off by hand.[130]

Both Weiss and Zerbin's story reveal an insight into the routine experiences of children growing up on the Prairie. Yet, even more importantly, they again illustrate the degree to which Depression era farmers were provided with some degree of shelter. They could still keep gardens which provided a degree of self-sufficiency. Moreover, rural families also foraged for

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[129] Wanda Weiss, 4:34-5:05.

[130] Hal Zerbin, 20:07-20:57.

wild fruits and hunted to supplement the farm larder: as Zerbin recalls, "We'd often go out where we could go pick berries and other wild fruits."[131] Foraged foods provided an important and free source of nutrition to rural diets.

All of the interviews that I conducted contain memories of foraging for wild fruits, particularly berries. On the prairie, saskatoons, cranberries, and blueberries seem to have been the most prevalent and common. However, as Colin Low recollects, his family had a particular preference for chokecherries, a compact shrub native throughout most of the North American plains. As he recalls, his family would often go out in the summer and early fall to "pick berries, different kinds," but that they would "be quite delighted when [they] would come in with a batch of chokecherries."[132] He continues:

> Do you know chokecherries? Well, they have these little pits in them and you'd have to boil them down. When you make chokecherry jam you get the stones out and you boil them up to gel -- you gel them. They were delicious! We thought they were it! There's nothing like chokecherries! And, chokecherry jelly! You have to catch them at a certain time of year. I remember going and picking chokecherries with them; I wouldn't say enthusiastically, in fact I didn't really enjoy it, but it had to be done -- you had to be part of it![133]

Whereas, Low recalls berry picking as being more of a chore, something that "had to be done," Aitkens remembers fondly her experiences of going out berry-picking with her family. It was a real source of entertainment for her as a young girl:

> Oh, yes, I used to love picking berries when I was young! I loved that. And, they used to like taking me because I was quite good at it. I guess I was just fast, I don't know. I loved it. I remember picking cranberries, blueberries, saskatoons. We had to do that if we wanted to eat, but I loved it. And, the only thing was that

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[131] Hal Zerbin, 22:05-22:20.

[132] Colin Low, Interviewed by Tyson Røsberg. 30 October, 2012, Montreal, Québec. 1:1:47-1:2:01.

[133] *Ibid*.

> you had to remember not to eat anything, because if you started then you couldn't stop! So, you never tasted until you had finished picking.[134]

Frisch's trope of survival is clearly evident in both Low and Aitken's recollections about foraging for berries. Both speak to the important necessity of such tasks, Aitken even stating that berrying was a job that "had to do that if we wanted to eat." She hints at a lack of food during the Depression, but that her family managed because they could forage. They were resilient with the landscape around them. Berries were not the only free food that could be collected from the rural environment. Rural families also had access to wilderness areas for hunting.

Aitken describes her father as being "a good hunter; he had a great shot and would bring back deer and partridges, ducks, and things like that."[135] She also remembers that her brothers would often accompany her father hunting, but that he was often reluctant to let his sons fire the actual rifle in case they missed and wasted expensive shot; a situation that was humorously reversed once when their parents went into the neighbouring town for supplies:

> I remember one situation about the deer: dad went into town and he took all the shells with him because he didn't want the boys wasting his shells -- we didn't have the money for that. But, the only thing was, he left forgot one shell. So, my brothers John and Lionel, got out there; John was the better shot and he had the gun. And, he shot a deer right between the eyes, right in the middle of the forehead. So, dad came home from town and there was the deer! And, of course, they had to string it up and bleed it, butcher it. But, it was delicious. Mom fried it with onions out of the garden. Yes, we were fortunate to get wild game often.[136]

Aitken's humorous anecdote not only describes how rural families provided for themselves from the rural environment, but also further evokes Frisch's trope of survival from Depression narratives. She speaks to the financial hardships of the decade and of how her family "didn't

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[134] Ruth Aitken, 28:03-28:43.

[135] Ruth Aitken, 18:00-18:08.

[136] Ruth Aitken, 18:10-18:57.

have the money" to be wasting ammunition. Yet, as Aitken states, they "were fortunate to get wild game often." Through their resourcefulness, the family got by. Secondary sources also speak to the common experience of hunting. Deer and rabbit were common staples, but on the prairie, one of the more unusual forms of game-meat came from gophers.

In his seminal work on the Drybelt, James Gray states that "gophers were used not infrequently for food," but that those who ate gopher were in "a very decided minority."[137] Moreover, McManus lists a number of ways in which gopher was evidently prepared, including stewing, smoking, canning, and a preferred favourite, gopher pie.[138] None of my interviews make reference to eating gopher, if only because they also had access to their own meat raised off the farm. As Ruth Aitkens recalls, "We always had meat, of course, because on the farm we had our own cattle and pigs, and for a short while we had some sheep. My father would just go out and slaughter one of them whenever we needed."[139] Likewise, Fred Jenkins states, "Meat, it was all what we raised on the farm. Dad and my brothers would kill a pig and butcher it up."[140] And, again, as Colin Low remembers, "We always had meat from the farm. We were never short of that. We killed pigs and calves."[141] Hal Zerbin too remembers, "We did our own butchering. We always had our own beef and pork."[142]

Meat production, both in butchering and further preservation, was another chore that rural children participated in--particularly boys--and perhaps with mixed feelings about the activity.

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[137] James Gray, *Men Against the Desert* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1967): 48-49.

[138] McManus, 137.

[139] Ruth Aitken, 17:40-17:57.

[140] Fred Jenkins, 1:48-2:01.

[141] Colin Low, 1:52:10-1:53:00.

[142] Hal Zerbin, 16:20-16:31.

For Colin Low, the experience was an unpleasant, but required task: "I used to help, yes. My father was very skilful at it, he wasn't afraid to kill animals. I didn't like it, though. I used to have to sit on the animals and hold them down, I had to help him. I remember that, yes."[143] Slaughtering and butchering seems to have also been a task reserved to older boys, for both Jenkins and Zerbin note that it was their older brothers and not them who partook in that particular duty. However, they both remember being involved in the preserving process afterwards, for like most all other farm produce, meat needed to be treated to last the winter.

There were a few options available for the Depression farmer to preserve meat: while meat could be canned, and most of my interview subjects recall canned meat, salting and smoking were the primary techniques employed at the time. Hal Zerbin recalls, in particular, fondly remembers salt pork and the process by which it was created:

> Salt pork was good. Properly done, it was real good. When mother took some pork out of the barrel it was always soaked in water, at least the day before and then she cut it up and cooked it. The pork was cut up into fair sized chunks, manageable pieces, 4-6-10", something of that nature. They were then soaked in a salt-soaked solution before being put in a barrel. The barrel started out at the bottom with a really coarse layer of salt, and then the meat was packed in and more salt put on top of it. They must have added in salt water too, because when you dug your hand in to get a piece out, it came out of a kind of liquid.[144]

Hal Zerbin also remembers the process of smoking meat -- a task which he often partook in, and which he talks about enthusiastically as "one of [his] jobs":

> We also smoked our own bacon in there: we had a smokehouse and we hung up slabs of meat to smoke and cure. That was one of my jobs, to keep the fire going. I did that with my brothers. We all helped out when we were smoking something, mother too. Everyone had their job; my younger brother would gather the wood. We had a lean-to up against the house that we'd hang the part of the pig that was

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[143] Colin Low, 1:53:00-1:53:38.

[144] Hal Zerbin, 23:50-24:52.

> designated to become bacon for a few days, and then we'd start a little fire. The meat was hung up at the peak of the thing, because we wanted to direct the smoke up and around the meat. Then a bunch of green wood was put on it to make it smoke. It seems to me that we would smoke meat for something like a week to get it perfectly permeated. I used to have to keep that fire going, and that went day and night. That was one of my jobs! It was good fun.[145]

Like gardening, Zerbin's recollections about preserving meat further reveal the inter-generational aspect of food preparation for farming families. Every member of the family "helped out" and had "their job," including the younger children. Zerbin's stories not only describes the period curing processes of meat, but importantly again encapsulate the bond between food and family that Tye describes in her writings about Newfoundland. His stories speak of a time when food was prepared at home and those who shared it were connected by deep communal ties. Moreover, he also articulates something of the pleasure experienced by rural peoples through food when he states, "That was one of my jobs! It was good fun." Similarly, McManus also records the story of one family in the Drybelt that was lucky enough to have kept hogs, which they would spend days processing into food.[146] Resourcefulness, hard-work, and perseverance allowed the family to get through the decade.

A Sheltered World:

Oral history interviews with Prairie peoples who experienced the Great Depression present a complex remembering of the decade. The historiography of the period suggests the decade to be one of crop failure, drought, and hunger, so much so that some 65,000 farmers abandoned their homesteads in the region. My paternal grandfather was among those to have

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[145] Hal Zerbin, 25:20-27:34.

[146] McManus, 134.

fled their homesteads. The six interviews explored in this chapter speak to these hardships; interviewees recall those years as "hard" and a period of shortage. Moreover, descriptions of farm homes from the period are iconic images of the difficulties associated with the decade.

Yet, these six interview recordings also reveal that rural peoples on the Prairie were awarded a degree of shelter against the Depression: they kept gardens, had access to their own farm animals for meat, and could hunt and forage for wild fruits to supplement their diets. Indeed, my interviews are rich with descriptions of food and meals during the period. Importantly, under circumstances where families could not provide for themselves, government food relief was sent into the region from across the country. However, accepting such relief was often viewed with humiliation and defeat, and silence largely surrounds that particular topic within my interviews; none of my interview subjects speak of relief. My interviews also reveal that food took on special symbolic importance during the Depression. In the 1930s, food was a powerful sign of stability and normality, a reminder of the past and a hope for better days to come. Moreover, interviews speak of a time when food was a communal activity deeply connected to memories of home and family. Memories of food (just as nearly all of the content from my interviews) also provide Canadian examples of the trope of survival that Frisch identifies in American memories of the Depression. Through their resilience, rural families got by in even the hardest of times. And now, over seventy years later, my interview subjects recall the history of the 1930s as part of their own biographies, with themes of hardship, loss, and confusion largely absent. Instead, resilience and survival are the dominant experiences repeatedly recalled. Interestingly, the experiences of farmers on the Prairie do not appear to be

entirely unique. Oral history interviews gathered amongst Anglophone farmers some two-thousand kilometres away in Québec reveal a similar narrative of the Great Depression.

Chapter II

"No, people never went hungry in them days": Anglophone Québec and the Memory of the Great Depression

> *We didn't feel it. Not in the same way. We had everything we needed on the farm. We were fortunate. Everybody we knew were quite fortunate...Business was more hit than anything, but farmers seemed to be ok. We didn't feel it.*[147]
>
> - Anne Lust, Gatineau Valley

> *The Depression, it was hard. Money was tight. But, we managed because we had our own meat, our own vegetables, our own wood for heat and cooking. So, it wasn't that bad. We always grew enough to live off of.*[148]
>
> - Opal Crossman, Gaspé

This chapter focuses on the remembered experiences of rural Anglophone families living in Québec during the Great Depression. It draws upon thirteen oral history interviews recorded by regional heritage groups throughout the province during the 1970s and 1980s, five men and eight women. These thirteen interviews were conducted in rural communities in the Gatineau Valley (including interviews with Arthur Brown, Ruby Hodgings, Anne Lust, and Irene Mulvhill), the Gaspé (Opal Crossman and Ken Annett); the Magdalen Islands (Grace Rankin); the Eastern Townships (Ruby Parker, Gertrude Day, Agnes Scott, and Kenneth Hunting); as well as two quarry-workers in the lower Eastern Townships (Charles Bullock and Guilford Redicker). These interviews reveal the same two overarching themes that are present in my Prairie interviews of the previous chapter.

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[147] Anne Lust, Interviewed by the Gatineau Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 34:06-38:35. The SHOMI Database is available to researchers at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.

[148] Opal Crossman, Interviewed by the Council for Anglophone Magdalen Islanders. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 2:00-5:23.

Secondary sources suggest that Depression-era farmers in Québec fared better than their Prairie counterparts, due to two exacerbating factors affecting the Prairie: environmental disasters and a reliance on monoculture. Québec farmers did not face the extreme drought, soil erosion, and plagues of grasshoppers seen on the Prairies. Further, Québec agriculture at that time was not centred on a single crop, but was instead quite varied among mixed cereal crops, including wheat, barley, and rye, alongside dairy, fruit, and meat production.[149] The failure of a single crop did not have the same devastating economic effect in Québec as it did amongst the large wheat-producing farms of the Prairies.

Following from these two factors, Depression-era Québec experienced a reverse of the exodus seen on the Prairies, where farming families abandoned their land at a substantial rate. Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard state that farm numbers in Québec actually increased through the 1930s, reversing a declining trend since the 1880s.[150] According to them, as unemployment rose in urban centres, land offered many a degree of sustainability and shelter that could not be found in cities. Certainly, Denyse Baillargeon's book *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* documents the urban horrors of the decade in Montréal: unemployment, malnutrition, and government aid.[151] Likewise, Peter Gossage and J. I. Little note how the wage reductions,

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[149] See: Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec Contemporain : Tome II : Le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 1989); J. I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004); J. I. Little, *Ethno-Cultural Transition and Regional Identity in the Eastern Townships of Quebec* (Ottawa : Canadian Historical Association, 1989); and J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

[150] Paul-André Linteau, René Drocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Histoire du Québec Contemporain : Tome II : Le Québec depuis 1930* (Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 1989).

[151] Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999).

layoffs, and plant closings of the 1930s led to urban struggles to pay for rent, electricity, or groceries.[152] They suggest that while rural families also had their incomes cut dramatically, home-ownership and the ability to produce their own food and fuel allowed many to stay off of the relief rolls.[153] The interviews of this chapter speak to this trend: none of the interviews directly mention rural repopulation, but they do identify cities as places of unemployment, breadlines, and suffering, places "where the Depression really was," as interviewee Irene Mulvhill puts it.[154]

Importantly, just as with the history of the Prairies, a universally positive experience of the Depression in rural Québec should not be overstated. While there was an overall increase in farm numbers, many farmers who worked marginalised lands, particularly in the Gaspé, abandoned their properties altogether.[155] Moreover, secondary source historiography dealing with the government response to rural poverty during the decade paint a rather grim picture. There was a wide range of experiences of the period, even amongst rural Anglophone communities in Québec. However, the thirteen interviews of this chapter suggest that rural families were sheltered from the worst-effects of the 1930s because of their farming. In addition, these interviews reveal the different experiences of the decade between urban and rural communities.

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[152] Peter Gossage and J. I. Little, *An Illustrated History of Quebec: History and Memory* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press Canada, 2012): 197-203.

[153] Gossage and Little, 199.

[154] Irene Mulvhill, Interviewed by the Gatineau Valley Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 3:55-9:20.

[155] See: George L. McDermott, "Frontiers of Settlement in the Great Clay Belt: Ontario and Quebec," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51.3 (1961): 261-273.

Before analyzing the interviews of this chapter, they should first be located in the context of Anglophone settlement in Québec following the British conquest of 1759. By placing this date at the forefront of this history, one can better understand the subsequent development of Anglophone communities in the province. Such a framework also provides the context both for the Depression experiences referred to in the interviews, for the interviews themselves, and the motivation for recording them.

Anglophone Settlement in Québec

According to historian Robert Sweeny, the initial impact of the conquest was actually quite minimal.[156] Few English-speakers emigrated to Québec, he states, and those discharged British soldiers who chose to stay on in the colony settled predominantly in sparsely populated pockets west of Montréal.[157] Acadian families were also settling in Québec at this time, particularly in the Gaspé region, following the British expulsion of 1755.[158] Ultimately, it was the loss of the thirteen colonies in 1783 that acted as a catalyst for British settlement in Québec: of the approximately 40,000 United Empire Loyalists who came to Canada, half of them settled in the province.[159] Loyalists settled primarily in the Eastern Townships and in the Gaspé, quickly becoming the largest settler group in the region.[160]

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[156] Robert Sweeny, "A Sketch of the Economic History of English Quebec," in *The English of Quebec: From Majority to Minority Status,* Eds. Gary Caldwell and Eric Waddell (Montréal: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1985): 74-90.

[157] Ibid., 75.

[158] See: Marc Desjardins, Yves Frenette, Jules Bélanger, Bernard Hétu, *Histoire de la Gaspésie* (Montréal: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1999): 161-165.

[159] Sweeny, 75.

[160] Desjardins, Frenette, Bélanger, and Hétu, 164-165.

The Anglophone population of Québec increased dramatically as a result of massive immigration from Britain after the Napoleonic Wars. Changing agricultural methods, increasing industrialisation, and the rapid demobilisation of the military after 1815, all contributed to enormous social and demographic dislocation in early nineteenth-century Britain: millions left Britain altogether, with many coming to Canada.[161] Between 1829 and 1859, the number of immigrants from Britain arriving at the port of Québec annually failed to reach 20,000 only six times, though many of these went on to settle in Upper Canada or the United States.[162] Those who stayed in Québec settled largely in the Townships, alongside Loyalist farmers who had arrived three decades earlier. Three townships received the bulk of newly arriving immigrants at this time: Standbridge, Dunham and St. Armand, and Stanstead, and by 1825 each of these regions had more than a thousand residents. [163] The normal size for farms in the Townships was 150 acres, with around twenty-five percent of that being arable land.[164] Beyond farming, the Townships also offered immigrant employment opportunities in the burgeoning textile industry, which remained a prominent part of the region's economy well into the twentieth century.[165]

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, the timber trade also emerged as a prominent sector in the Québec economy, resulting from the expansion of the British Empire and its naval power. In order to guarantee adequate timber supplies for naval construction, preferential duties were imposed within the Empire beginning in 1796. The port of Québec quickly became the

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[161] Sweeny, 78.

[162] *Ibid.*

[163] *Ibid.*, 79.

[164] See: J. I. Little, Borderland Religion: The Emergence of English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[165] See: J. I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991): 156-180; and Gossage and Little, 118-120.

principal export harbour in Canada, from which an influential merchant class emerged who owned the wharfs and who advanced the capital necessary for the construction of shipping projects along the tributaries of the St. Lawrence.[166] The timber industry also provided one of the principal economic incentives for further settlement of the Gaspé and settlement of the Gatineau Valley, especially after the completion of the Rideau Canal in 1832, which connected Kingston and the waterways of Lake Ontario with Montréal.[167]

When construction was completed, these men took up work in the many lumber camps of the region, often coming into conflict with Francophone Québecois who were also looking for employment.[168] The men who worked in these lumber camps were given little compensation for their labour and often took-up farming to provide additional income. The timber trade declined after the 1860s, and many lumbermen in the Gatineau turned to agriculture entirely: by 1871, the region was overwhelmingly made up of farmers, although some still did occasional seasonal labour in the forests to supplement their income.[169] Farmers in the Gatineau were also able to increase the size of their farms during the period, occupying and consolidating lands previously worked by those who left the region altogether with the decline of the timber trade.

The fishing industry created similar circumstances for Anglophones in the Gaspé. In 1861, Rudin suggests that one-quarter of the residents of the Gaspé worked in the fishing industry, scattered among the many outport communities along the coast.[170] The traditional fishing economy remained strong well into the twentieth century, but many also supplemented

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[166] *Ibid.*

[167] Desjardins, Frenette, Bélanger, and Hétu, 215-218.

[168] *Ibid.*

[169] Rudin, 92.

[170] *Ibid.*, 91.

their incomes through working in the forests or in agriculture.[171] Farms in the Gaspé tended to be much smaller than those in the Townships, due largely to inferior, rocky soil conditions.[172] Despite these conditions, farms there reflected the same mix of crops as were grown in the Townships, though on a smaller scale. During the 1920s and into the Depression, the government sought to improve rural poverty in the region by introducing agricultural incentives and loans to farmers. We shall see that the interviews examined in this chapter reflect this history of Anglophone settlement in Québec, in particular in the means by which farmers supplemented their income through additional work off the farm, both before and during the 1930s.

Anglophone Heritage and Oral History:

The interviews of this chapter speak of communities that were still thriving centres. However, by the 1970s and 1980s the demographics of Québec were beginning to rapidly change: between 1976 and 1981, 95,000 Anglophones left the province, due largely to new political fears engendered by the rising sovereigntist movement.[173] The emergence of a powerful, secular state, managed by a new predominantly Francophone bureaucracy, and the acquisition of political power by the nationalist Parti Québécois in 1976 under René Lévesque, fundamentally altered the dynamics of the province.[174] At the same time, changing economic

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[171] *Ibid.*

[172] Desjardins, Frenette, Bélanger, Hétu, 161-165.

[173] Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980* (Montréal: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1985): 31.

[174] See: Eric Waddell, "Place and People" in *The English of Quebec: From Majority to Minority Status,* Eds. Gary Caldwell and Eric Waddell (Montréal: Institut québecois de recherche sur la culture, 1985): 27-57.

realities contributed to migration out of rural Anglophone regions of the province, either into urban centres or out of the province altogether.

By 1981, both the Townships and the Gaspé region saw significant declines in their Anglophone populations, and while the number of Anglophones in the Gatineau Valley remained constant, it increasingly fell under the metropolitan pull of Ottawa. At the same time, an increasing Francophone population within these three areas rapidly changed their linguistic and cultural composition. When the interviews of this chapter were originally collected in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a sense of urgency in the work being undertaken, that the memories of these communities would soon be lost forever. Collecting these interviews intended to preserve Anglophone history before it was too late.

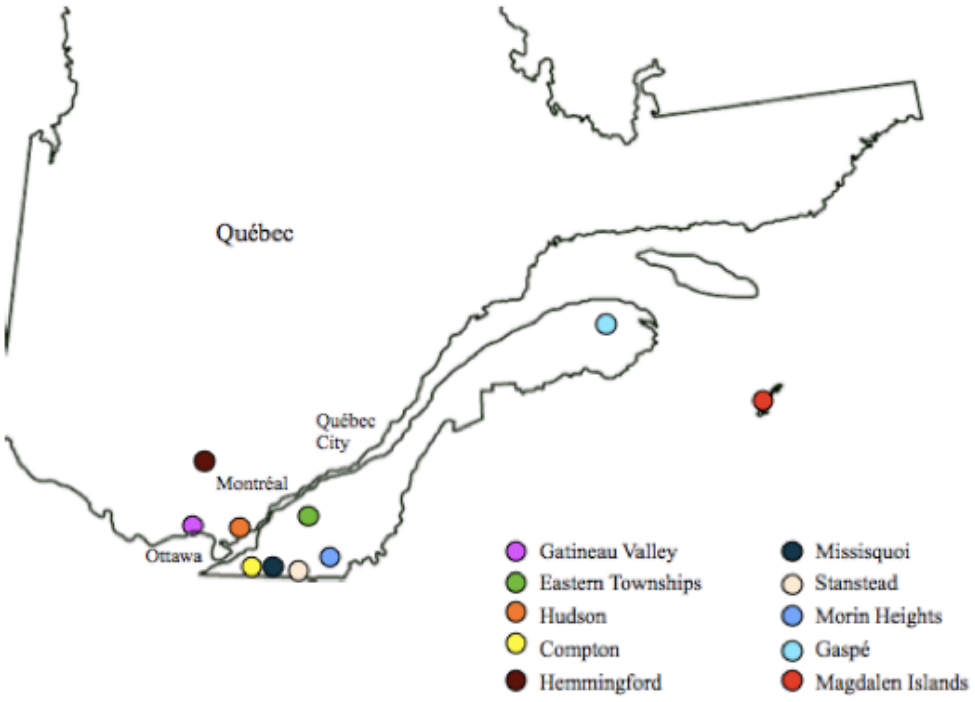

Figure 2: The Communities of the SHOMI Database

This chapter's interviews represent the efforts of twelve regional heritage groups, working independently but sharing a common mandate -- the preservation of Anglophone heritage in Québec. These twelve organisations are: the Standstead Historical Society (founded in 1929); the Committee for Anglophone Social Action (1975); the Compton County Historical Society (1959); the Council for Anglophone Magdalen Islanders (1987); the Eastern Townships Resource Centre (1982); the Gatineau Valley Historical Society (1962); the Greenwood Centre for Living History (1996); the Hudson Historical Society (1986); the Morin Heights Historical Association (1997); and the Missisquoi Historical Society (1971). For each of these organisations, the creation of oral history interviews was one of the primary methods for preserving local history.

All of these regional historical groups joined together to form the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN) in 2001. QAHN is as a non-profit organisation engaged in the preservation of the built, cultural, and natural heritage of Québec, but with a particular emphasis on the history of Québec's English-speaking communities.[175] Members include museums, numerous heritage and cultural organisations, including, but not limited to those above, as well as private individuals. It was this provincial federation that was awarded funding to digitise their analogue collections and to create a searchable database: in 2014, the interviews of province's regional heritage groups were compiled into a single collection, in conjunction with Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS). The result was the creation of the *Spoken Heritage Online Multimedia Initiative* (SHOMI) Database. The database

[175] See: Québec Anglophone Heritage Network, "Mission." http://qahn.org/mission

contains over 300 hours of archived interviews conducted with English-speaking Quebecers. The database can be accessed in COHDS's archives.

The audio files in this database are digitized and annotated, with search tools allowing users to more easily locate audio files related to their research interests. The database utilizes COHDS's Stories Matter software, an oral history database building software that aims to provide the research efficiency of text without jeopardising the aural quality that so defines the discipline of oral history.[176] Within the SHOMI Database, interview footage or audio is clipped into small sub-sections which are grouped and tagged according to theme. Being annotated and searchable rapidly increased the pace of my research within the database, but not without some complications.

For one, neither the database nor the interviews themselves were focused on the Depression experiences of the subjects, which meant that relevant material was somewhat difficult to locate. More problematically, most of these interviews are short, around thirty minutes to an hour, and do not have a life-story focus, and instead concentrate on specific topics; this makes it difficult to explore the significance of the 1930s in the context of subject's entire lives, as Frisch does in his own research. In addition, not all of the interviews in the SHOMI Database list biographical information, preventing their interviews from fully being localised historically. Of the thirteen interviews of this chapter, only four note the birth dates of their subjects, or the name of the interviewer, the date, or location of where the recording occurred.

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[176] See: Erin Jessee, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Steven High, "Stories Matter: Conceptual Challenges in the Development of Oral History Database Building Software," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12.1 (2011): 1-14; Steven High and David Sworn, "After the Interview: The Interpretive Challenges of Oral History Video Indexing," *Digital Studies* 1.2 (2009): 1-19; and Steven High, "Sharing Stories," in *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014): 193-221.

Most of the information surrounding interview creation within the database is currently not known.

Despite the challenges, the SHOMI Database offers one crucial research benefit: while some of the interviews analyzed in this chapter came from children's memories of the decade (like my own Prairie interviews), most of them reflect adults' experiences. Adult experiences allowed me to further extend my exploration of memories from the Depression. In 2015, adult recollections of the 1930s are impossible to access other than through existing archived sources.

Remembering the Depression:

Arthur Brown grew up in Mitch Creek, a small farming community in the Gatineau Valley during the 1930s. He was born in 1919. His family settled in the region in the mid nineteenth century, drawn there like so many others by the prospect of construction work on the Rideau Canal in the 1840s. Brown was a middle child of four, and his father operated a mixed dairy and cereal farm. The farm also had a sizeable orchard with mixed varieties of apples and pears. Of the 1930s, he says:

> The Depression, well in my opinion, I don't think the farmer really felt it. Money was short: my mother would give me fifty cents and say, "don't spend it all!" Money was short, and my mother, she always held on to it as much as she could. But, we always had our own milk, our own vegetables. We were ok. When we needed meat, well, we killed a cow or something. We only bought sugar and other necessities. My mother and other people baked their own bread, but of course you had to buy the flour. We could always pay for those things we needed. No, I don't think the farmer on the whole suffered terribly. We were ok.[177]

[177] Arthur Brown, Interviewed by the Gatineau Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 16:39-22:58.

As he recalls, his family was not particularly hurt by the onset of the Depression: "I don't think the farmer on the whole suffered terribly." Money was in short supply, he repeats twice, paralleling the trend suggested by Gossage and Little. Yet, the family managed precisely because they had their farm: they "always had [their] own milk, [their] own vegetables," and whenever they needed meat they slaughtered one of their animals. His mother baked her own bread, for which the family could still afford to purchase the necessary ingredients. His family's land provided shelter during the 1930s.

Brown's story also reveals a lot about the legacy of the decade in people's memories. Brown's remark about money closely parallels Broadfoot's comment that even though recollections of starvation are strong in interviews, this does not necessarily mean that starvation was rampant. Brown's story makes the same suggestion, although surrounding money. The family had the funds to purchase what they needed, yet poverty is a strong theme apparent in his recollection of the decade. On the topic of money, he adds:

> We had enough that we could carry on. We could sell a cow and maybe get $10 for it, though that wasn't a lot then. And, we had sheep and we'd sell the wool, get a little money for that. Sell them for meat too. We sold some firewood too, that was hard work. And, my mother might sell some eggs. Back then, we also had a contract with a dairy in Hull and we used to ship our milk in; we shipped the milk in on the train. We were ok.[178]

Brown's interview does not mention what farm income was like before the 1930s or how the decade directly affected their finances; as a child he likely was not aware of such details. One other interview from the same region, discussed later in this chapter, does speak to declining agricultural prices. Yet, at least in terms of cattle prices, $10 an animal seems to have been a very good income by Depression-era standards. Historian Denyse Baillargeon states that in 1929

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[178] *Ibid.*

a typical family of five in urban Québec required $20.18 a week simply to cover the costs of food, heating, light, gas, and rent, a figure that had dropped to $14.29 in 1933.[179] At the same time, at least among Montréal residents, an estimated 50 percent of people were living off an annual income of less than $16 a week.[180] Household finances were short for those in cities. Brown does not mention anything about market conditions for farm produce once it arrived in cities, though Baillargeon indicates that farmers frequently threw-out what they could not sell.[181]

While not explicit, Brown's recollections hint at a difference in the ways in which the Depression was experienced between the countryside and in cities, a theme which is far more explicit in other interviews from the SHOMI Database. The domestic expenditures required of urban families did not correspond to their rural counterparts. Heating, as Brown notes, came from firewood collected from the land. The farm also put food on the table or provided the financial means to do so. No doubt Brown's family income declined as per Gossage and Little, but by virtue of their land, as he repeats, "We were ok." The repetition of this phrase also speaks to Frisch's trope of survival: even though money was in short supply, the family managed through hard work and perseverance. The selling of firewood in addition to their farm produce illustrates the ways in which rural families diversified their means of income, a theme common throughout most of the interviews of this chapter.

Anne Lust was also born in the Gatineau Valley, outside of Aylmer, in 1924. Her family owned a cattle farm that shipped beef to Montréal. When the Lusts first settled in the region in the nineteenth century, they owned a few hundred acres of land, which was gradually divided up

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[179] Baillargeon, 94.

[180] *Ibid.*, 94 and 204.

[181] *Ibid.*, 135-36.

over the generations; when Lust was a child, her family's farm was around seventy-five acres. During the 1930s, her father also took-up some additional employment with Hull Electric working on the street cars. She remembers that her father referred to the company as "Hull Elastic" because even before the Depression "they were impossible to get a raise out of."[182] During the 1930s he took a "two dollar pay cut," but as she recalls her father was "very lucky because he continued to have work. Others didn't get that opportunity."[183] Yet, even with a pay decrease, she describes her family as being quite fortunate because they also had the farm:

> We didn't feel it. Not in the same way. We had everything we needed on the farm. We were fortunate in that way. We had our farm. Everybody we knew were quite fortunate. We had our cattle and that; dad was still shipping beef to Montréal. Business was more hit than anything, but farmers seemed to be ok. We didn't feel it.[184]

The differences between the urban and rural experiences of the Depress are made quite clear by Lust. She remembers the city as the place that truly experienced the Depression: "Business was more hit than anything." Indeed, in connection to the city, while her father was "very lucky" to remain employed with Hull Electric throughout the decade, he nonetheless did feel the Depression in the form of pay cuts. She speaks of the high unemployment rates in urban areas, and how others were not as lucky as her father. She depicts cities as the place of real hardship, while on the farm her family "didn't feel it. Not in the same way." Their farm provided shelter and livelihood: they "were fortunate," as Lust insists. They were self-sufficient and continued to ship their beef east to Montreal. Moreover, she speaks to a common shared experience amongst the other farmers her family knew. It is not just that her family was uniquely lucky, but that

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[182] Anne Lust. 34:06-38:35.

[183] *Ibid.*

[184] *Ibid*

"everybody" in her community were equally "quite fortunate." Like Brown, Lust's reflections also further speak to Rudin's comment regarding the ways in which Gatineau farmers supplemented their incomes through off-farm employment, both in the decades preceding the Depression and during it: her father worked on the street cars for Hull Electric. While the decade likely affected their income from farming, this did not hurt the family too much because of the additional income from Hull Electric.

Irene Mulvhill also grew up in the Gatineau Valley, about a half a mile past West Hull. Her birthdate is not recorded in the SHOMI Database, but she shares memories of the First World War which happened when she was still a child. Her parents emigrated from Ireland in the nineteenth century and originally settled in the rocky foothills on the western ridge of the Gatineau Valley, before having the money to move down onto better land. They specialised in mixed grain and cattle production, although they also had acreage devoted to field beans, a cash-crop with a higher market value than either grain or beef.

Her interview is one of the few in the SHOMI Database that speaks directly to the changing experiences of farmers in Québec before, during, and after the Depression. Mulvhill recalls that the period before the 1930s was an era of real bounty for farmers: "During the war years -- the First World War, that is -- prices were very good. Farmers grew a lot of beans then. We got seven dollars a bushel, which was a ridiculously good price."[185] However, market prices fell soon after the war and, according to Mulvhill, were especially bad in the Depression. She remembers that, "Beef prices were particularly bad in the Depression," which had a particular impact on her family as cattle farmers.[186] In the interview recording Mulvhill's raspy voice

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[185] Irene Mulvhill. 3:55-9:20.

[186] *Ibid.*

clearly states that, "We didn't have any money, but we managed."[187] Like Brown recalled, the biggest effect the Depression had on the Mulvhills was on their finances. Yet, despite a reduced income her family "got by" and, as she explains, did so precisely because of their farming:

> The tariffs didn't really hurt the small farmer much, that hurt labour more. And, of course, we never went hungry on the farm. Money was pretty tight, but we managed. It was worse in the cities. But, in the country, well, we could grow all of our own produce, even if the prices weren't too good to sell it. It got better in the 1940s with the Second World War: there were better prices then. The Depression though, it wasn't so bad in the country. We didn't have breadlines like in the cities, that's where the Depression really was. We didn't know anyone on relief. No, we got by. We managed.[188]

Mulvhill's story reveals a lot about both the experience and the lasting memory of the decade for rural Anglophone communities in Québec. Again, she suggests a difference in the way in which rural and urban communities experienced the decade: she illustrates the city as where the Depression "really was." She characterises the period in terms of "relief" and "breadlines," neither of which her family experienced in the countryside. Moreover, she highlights "labour" as the sector of the economy that was particularly hit badly.

While beef prices were lower than they had been before, this does not come across as particularly devastating to the family's livelihood: "Money was pretty tight, but we managed," she says. Because they were farmers, her family was sheltered during the Depression. They "could grow all of [their] own produce, even if the prices weren't too good to sell it." Like Lust, Mulvhill also speaks to a common experience amongst the other farmers of the Gatineau: "We didn't know anyone on relief. No, we got by. We managed." Her description also hints at the survival narratives that Frisch identifies. She stresses how the family "managed" during the

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[187] *Ibid.*

[188] *Ibid.*

decade, repeating this phrase three times in this section of the interview. Any pain or hardship from the decade is largely absent in her story. Instead, a strong narrative of resilience remains.

Such recollections of the Depression are not limited to interviews from the Gatineau Valley. Opal Crossman and Ken Annett also share similar recollections of their childhoods in 1930s Gaspé. Crossman grew up in a large family and was the second eldest of fifteen children. Her parents had a thirty-hectare farm near Bonaventure, on the southern coast of the Gaspé. However, like most farms in the region, only a small portion of this was fully cultivated; the remainder of the property was woodland or rough pasture for livestock, the soil too poor to be arable.[189] The family specialised in dairy, mixed grain, and egg production. They also kept swine, largely for domestic consumption, and cultivated a substantial strawberry patch, which was a profitable cash crop at market. Describing the 1930s, Crossman states that:

> The Depression, it was hard. Money was tight. But, we managed because we had our own meat, our own vegetables, our own wood for heat and cooking. So, it wasn't that bad. We always grew enough to live off of...We had a big garden; we all worked in the garden, even us kids. We picked a lot of strawberries. We never suffered for anything. Dad would go fishing too, that helped. We got by.[190]

Her description of the decade parallels those from the Gatineau region to the west. She states that the Depression's biggest burden manifested in the family's finances, providing another example of the rural experience suggested by Gossage and Little. Frisch's trope of survival is also very apparent in her story, as she stresses the resilience of her family during the decade. She says that the family "never suffered for anything." Apart from financial difficulties, hardship is absent from her recollections. Through hard work and fortitude, they "managed," and did so precisely because their lands allowed them a degree of self-sufficiency; they "always grew

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[189] See: Desjardins, Frenette, Bélanger, and Hétu, 473.

[190] Opal Crossman. 2:00-5:23.

enough to live off of." While times were hard, the family got by. Like my Prairie interviews, Crossman's memories here highlight how tending to the family garden was one of the most important jobs on the farm, one so important that every member of the family "all worked in the garden."

Her story also hints at the different experiences between rural and urban communities. She notes how the farm provided not just food, but also "wood for heat and cooking." At least in terms of domestic living costs, her experience differed dramatically from that described by Baillargeon for urban families because fuel for heat, light, and cooking could be sourced from the farm. Moreover, her story speaks to the ways in which farmers supplemented their income: "Dad would go fishing too, that helped." It is not clear in the interview whether her father took up fishing specifically because of the Depression, but given the marginal lands they occupied, it seems likely that he had always sought income beyond farming.

Annett's father was also a farmer who engaged in fishing for additional income. The family farm was outside New Carlisle, also on the southern coast of the Gaspé, and which Annett recalls as being "probably the most prosperous town on the coast."[191] The community's prosperity, he explains, was because "it was a major railway centre at that point," allowing farmers to ship their produce out to the surrounding areas or to urban centres further west.[192] His interview does not specify the size of the family farm, but he also mentions how little of their land was under full cultivation, presumably because it was also unsuitable to arable agriculture.

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[191] Ken Annett, Interviewed by the Council for Anglophone Magdalen Islanders. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 23:45-29:45.

[192] *Ibid.*

The family kept "cattle, pigs, hens, and a big vegetable garden" that everyone helped to cultivate.[193] Like Crossman's family, they grew a lot of strawberries to be sold at market.

Annett's memories further reveal how farmers were sheltered because of being rurally located. He recalls that,

> The Depression didn't really hit us all that much. Life didn't change all that much, compared to some other places we heard about. No, we didn't suffer all that much. We got by. We had the farm. Fishing was very good then too; dad worked seasonally in the fishing industry, and then farmed also.[194]

Their farm allowed the family to be largely self-sufficient. Indeed, he highlights the degree of self-sufficiency provided to farmers from their land, stating that "Life didn't change all that much" during the 1930s as compared to the years before. Moreover, he again also illustrates the different experiences between cities and the countryside, stating that "compared to some other places [they] heard about," their life continued on in much the same way that it had before the Depression hit. He does not explain where these "other places" were, but again it seems likely that he is referring to urban centres. His story also provides another Canadian example to the survival trope that Frisch sees in American memories of the Depression. Resilience serves to obscure the hardship and hurt of the decade. The family "got by," Annett says, and did so because they "had the farm." They could still grow their own produce and meat, and sold strawberries; his father also engaged in fishing to increase the family income.

It is interesting that both he and Crossman should state that they did not "suffer" that much. In so doing, they reveal an awareness of the suffering of others. They acknowledge the pain and poverty of the decade, while these experiences remain entirely absent from their own

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[193] *Ibid.*

[194] *Ibid.*

recollections. By remembering their circumstances as fortunate they indirectly depict the decade as one of real hardship, further speaking to the trope of resilience in Depression-era memories. This theme of resilience resonates strongly in their reflections: the decade was hard, but with hard work and conviction they got through the decade.

It is also very interesting that both he and Crossman should recall growing strawberries on their Gaspé farms. Neither of their interviews make reference to government relief and, indeed, stress the relative stability of the decade for farmers ("Life didn't change all that much"). Yet, secondary literature suggests that vegetable and fruit production was one effort promoted by le ministère de l'Agriculture du Québec to provide stability to the Gaspé. Desjardin, Frenette, Bélanger, and Hétu state that during the late 1920s, le ministère de l'Agriculture du Québec sought to reduce the rural poverty of the Gaspé by capitalising on the region's late summer and encouraging the growing of market vegetables, and particularly garden peas, as well as fruits, including apples, pears, cherries, and strawberries, because unlike cereal production, such crops could be cultivated on smaller areas of land. These cash crops were then shipped west by rail to markets in Québec City and Montréal.[195] In 1928 alone, 12,000 kilograms of peas were shipped from Cap-d'Espoir in the Gaspé to Montréal. The following year, the first year of the Depression, production multiplied by ten and represented an income of $15,000 for the region.[196] Beekeeping was also encouraged by the government. Later in 1936 (the worst year of the Depression for Prairie farmers, it should be noted) the Québec government further hoped to stabilise the rural economy of the Gaspé with the creation of the l'Office du crédit agricole; this

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[195] Desjardins, Frenette, Bélanger, and Hétu, 482.

[196] *Ibid.*

organisation allowed farmers to take out long-term loans and at better interest rates than could be provided elsewhere, thus allowing them to better invest in their lands and increase yields.[197]

It is not all that surprising then that Crossman and Annett recall their parents growing lots of strawberries for market or of the importance of the railway to their region. Both children during the time, they were probably entirely unaware that such enterprises were encouraged by the government to help reduce rural poverty in the Gaspé both before and during the Depression. Indeed, Annett's comment that "Life didn't change all that much" during the 1930s hints at the continuity of agricultural programs that continued to be important to farmers after 1929. Moreover, growing strawberries at the encouragement of the government represents one other way that farmers sought to increase their income during the period.

Food and Community:

Just as in my Prairie interviews, stories of food, cooking, and eating occupy a significant portion of the thirteen SHOMI interviews explored in this chapter, and offer more than a glimpse into the ordinary eating habits of Anglophone farming families during the 1930s. Memories of food reveal the degree to which farmers were sheltered from the Depression, and they also speak directly to the different experiences between cities and the countryside. Interview subjects speak of always having wholesome, good meals, largely sourced entirely from their own farms. In these interviews, it is apparent that food took on extra special meaning for Québec farmers, just as it did for those on the prairie: interviews refer to a time when food was prepared at home from home-grown ingredients, and where those who shared it were connected by deep communal ties.

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[197] *Ibid.*, 483.

This section of the chapter is deeply grounded in textual analysis; some long quotations are employed and closely analysed.

Gertrude Day's family farmed in the Eastern Townships during the 1930s. Her interview was conducted in 1972 with Marc Lablanc; the main topic covered in her interview is the experience of World War II in the Eastern Townships, however the Depression is also a prominent theme, particularly in the first section of the recording. Again, her birthdate is also not given, but she too speaks of the First World War and how her first child had just been born at that time. She recalls that their farm was about a hundred acres and consisted largely of pasture land for dairy cows, though her father also grew a lot of mixed cereals and vegetables for sale. She remembers her family as always having food on the table, most of which came directly from their own farm. She states:

> The Depression was bad, but farmers lived as well as anyone else, if not better. We couldn't get sugar, for instance, but we had our own maple sugar. We had our farm and we grew all our own vegetables; we worked hard at it. Mother made delicious food, and I used to help her some. I remember we even sent produce out to other parts of the country, once or twice, to areas that were really suffering. We didn't suffer though, no more than anyone else. Yes, we managed alright.[198]

Like other interviews, in stating that her family "didn't suffer," she suggests the Depression to have been a period of hardship and want. Indeed, she notes "other parts of the country...that were really suffering." She does not identify exactly where these particularly destitute places were, though it is perhaps a reference to the kind of relief aid that was sent into the Prairie during the 1930s, and which is remembered by Dorothy Daniels in the previous chapter and referenced

[198] Gertrude Day, Interviewed by Marc Lablanc of the Standstead Historical Society. 1972. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 3:00-3:47.

in Prairie historiography. Day's story provides a direct link between the experiences of rural Anglophone farmers in Québec and those on the western prairie.

While Day identifies the hardships of "other parts of the country," she notes how this was not at all the experience of their family or of the other farmers in the area. Instead, she says, "farmers lived as well as anyone else, if not better." The biggest hardship that Day suggests her family experienced was from a lack of sugar; however, as she explains, even in that case a sugar-alternative could be sourced from the farm. Their rural lifestyle and connection to the land provided shelter and security: "We had our farm and we grew all our own vegetables."

In particular, her memory of food reveals two things about the lasting memory of the period amongst rural peoples. Her story here is another clear example of Frisch's trope of survival. Certain food items were scarce, yet the family found alternatives and got by: "we managed alright." Her memory of food also hints at the special symbolism that food has in memories of the Depression, revealed in the passage, "Mother made delicious food, and I used to help her some." For her, food reaffirms a moment centred around the integrity of the family unit, a subsistence economy, and a close-knit community. It is not that her mother simply made "delicious food," but that meals represented a family effort: Day "used to help her" mother with cooking, and the whole family "worked hard at it" to put food on the table. Again, the theme of resilience is present in her recollections of food: through hard work, perseverance, and family effort, they got through the hardships of the decade. Resilience overshadows the pain and difficulty of the 1930s for Day; it is the lasting memory from the period.

Ruby Hodgings also fondly remembers meals during the Depression. She was born in Clarendon in 1903, but as a young child her family moved to a farm near Shawville, northwest of

Ottawa, where she lived for most of her life. She was married in 1923 and by the time of the Depression had three children of her own. She and her husband were farmers, specialising in both dairy and beef. They also kept large flocks of hens for eggs, getting around twelve dozen a day, which they sold in Shawville. They also grew some cereals and a lot of vegetables, mostly for domestic consumption. She explains that,

> During the Depression we lived off whatever we raised on the farm: eggs, our own meat, potatoes, lots of vegetables. We lived better than we did in later years, I would think. Much better. Far nicer food. Real good food back then! No, we never went without. We were never hungry. We grew all our own vegetables.[199]

Like Day, her story clearly reveals the pleasure that she associates with memories of food. She recalls that the family actually "lived better" during the 1930s "than [they] did in later years." Certainly, as she highlights, meals then consisted of "Far nicer food." She does not explain why meals were nicer then, but the context of her story within a larger narrative of farming suggests that there was a real pride in providing food from one's own land: "we lived off whatever we raised on the farm," she explains. Her memories reflect a time of self-dependency and joy around food that, for whatever reason she does not note, was lost to the family "in later years." After the Second World War, her family moved off the farm and opened a restaurant in town beside the Shawville creamery, but the closure of the creamery in the 1960s proved disastrous for the family business. But during the 1930s, they were largely self-sufficient from their land, speaking to Frisch's theme of survival: through their hard work and resilience, rural people not only got by, but shared pleasure through food, just as those on the Prairie did.

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[199] Ruby Hodgings, Interviewed by the Gatineau Valley Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 22:50-30:38.

Moreover, having their own farm produce also allowed them to be able to barter for things that could not be grown on the farm, further illustrating the ways in which rural peoples got by in the Depression. Hodgings says:

> We used to take a few dozen eggs into Shawville and they used to insist that we take the full amount that the eggs were worth in groceries. And, well, we could never eat the full amount -- that was just too much food for us! So, we used to share a lot of it with our neighbours. I used to get a few tins of salmon, just to have on hand, you know. We'd also buy dates, sugar, coffee, and tea, those sorts of things. I always had something for the children -- some sort of fruit, nice and fresh. No, we never went hungry. We were lucky.[200]

Just like many of the other SHOMI interviews, Hodgings stresses that her family "never went hungry" during the Depression, repeating this twice. In doing so, she again depicts the period as epitomized by hunger, a lack of food, and suffering. Yet, she emphasises how her family's experience of the Depression was exactly the opposite of such hardship: after bartering eggs for groceries in town, she recalls how they "could never eat the full amount" of food that was given to them, so much so that they "used to share a lot of it with [their] neighbours." In saying that they were better off than others, Hodgings again speaks to Frisch and the theme of luck that pervades memories from the Depression (including those from the Prairies and Québec). The family was "lucky." Her recollection also underscores to the symbolism that food has from the time, again evoking strong connections of home, community, and family. In particular, her memory of always having something "nice and fresh" for her children" further suggests the ways that rural people nurtured their children and shared pleasure through food even during the Depression.

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[200] *Ibid.*

Ruby Parker tells similar stories about food and community. Her family farmed near Cowansville in the Eastern Townships. They were principally dairy farmers, although some other crops were also grown, including oats which served as animal fodder. Parker's family were regular parishioners at the local Anglican Church, a recurring place referenced within her narrative. At one point within the interview, her crackly, distant voice describes parish suppers from that time, a semi-frequent occurrence that she remembers fondly. These suppers went beyond the religious aspects to being an important means of community-building centred around table fellowship. She recalls:

> We would usually have a ham for supper -- a baked ham, right off of someone's farm. And, there'd also be baked beans, donuts, rolls. We always had a good supper! It was hosted by the Anglican Church, in the church hall; that's where we had our church suppers, down in the hall. And, it was always up and down the stairs: you'd take your food in and some of the men and boys would meet you at the top of the stairs and run it all in, because if you had a lot of stuff with you, well, you didn't want none of it to drop or spill. The kitchen was in the basement, you see, but you didn't do any actual cooking down there; the kitchen was just for keeping things warm. You had to cook it at home. And, everybody brought something. We all shared and it was always very good. There was ham and baked beans, vegetables too: turnips, carrots, cabbage, potatoes, all from people's gardens. Lots of fresh salads too. Oh, we had good suppers in those days! Good fun! Everybody helped. We all worked hard at it. The older ladies would do all the cooking, but the young people would help serve it and do all the running around. It was fun -- a time to socialize and talk with everyone, and there'd be music and dancing too. No, people never went hungry in them days.[201]

Her story illustrates again how farmers were provided with livelihood and shelter from their land during the Depression. This self-sufficiency is evident in her story: she remembers dinners consisting of "baked ham, right off of someone's farm," alongside vegetables and salads, "all from people's gardens." Her remark that "No, people never went hungry in them days" is

[201] Ruby Parker. Interviewed by the Eastern Townships Research Council. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 41:30-46:01.

particularly important. Like many of the other SHOMI interviews, she acknowledges an understanding of the 1930s as a time of overall hardship and poverty, yet makes it quite clear that this experience did not reflect her own community's reality. Again, her story provides another Canadian example of Frisch's trope of survival, with details of pain and hardship from the period completely absent; moreover, she notes that it was hard work that allowed such community gatherings to occur, echoing the resilience theme common to Depression-era memories.

Of course, Parker is here describing a community gathering, one in which "Everybody brought something." She repeats, "Everybody helped." Her description should not be seen as indicative as the norm for meals at the time. Rather, she is talking about a communal, collective effort. Yet, in this detail, her story hints at something of the common experience of the Depression amongst the other rural families that Parker knew. Everyone contributed to these community dinners and did so with food produced on their farms. This shared experience of the decade is furthered in her very remark that "*people* never went hungry": whereas the other interviews previously examined in this chapter speak of individual families never going without ("we never suffered," "we managed," "we got by"), Parker extends this experience to the broader community around her. Indeed, in this section of her interview her memory reveals much more about the experiences of a tight-knit rural community than it does about that of her own family. Moreover, her narrative speaks to the motives behind the interview creation process itself: the strong communal ties that she describes were rapidly disappearing at the time of the interview, both to changing economic realities, and to out-migration and political shifts. The incentive for creating the interviews in the 1970s and 1980s was to preserve stories from a fading way of life, before they were lost forever.

Her story distinctly reveals the particular symbolism that food invokes in rural memories of the Depression. Similar to my Prairie interviews from the previous chapter, her memory harkens to a time of strong family unity, a subsistence economy, and a close-knit community. For her, just like Hodgings, food symbolises a time when food was prepared at home, from farm ingredients, and where those who shared it were connected by deep communal bonds. The repetition in her story clearly emphasises the communal pleasure shared through food ("We always had a *good supper*," "it was always very *good*," "we had *good suppers* in those days! *Good fun*!"). The jovial tone of her voice in this section of the interview, full of laughter, further suggests the joy with which she remembers food from the decade, and in particular these church suppers. Her story further conveys the sense that rural people did not simply just get by during the Depression, but nurtured their families and communities through food.

Wild foods:

Farm produce was not the only source of food available to the Québec farmer. Just as on the Prairies, foraged foods provided a free and important source of nutrition to rural diets in Québec, particularly at times of the year when other food was scarce. All thirteen Québec interviews contain memories of foraging, fishing, or hunting. Berries and fruits hearty enough to survive the open plains were the wild foods most remembered from the prairie. However there were other options available to rural people in Québec: mushrooms, nuts, berries, dandelions, and fern fiddleheads are all wild foods recalled in the interviews of the SHOMI Database.

Kenneth Hunting remembers foraging for wild foods with his family each spring. His interview was recorded in 1979 by Ian Tait. Hunting was born in Vermont in 1892, but as a

young child his family moved to Huntingville in the Eastern Townships, where his father operated a flour mill. In later years, his older brother took over the running of the mill, while Hunting turned to farming. He specialised mostly in cereal production, no doubt because of the family connection with cereals. He also kept a sizeable dairy cow herd, as well as pigs. He was on the farm during the Depression. Recalling meals from that time, he states that

> During the winter, everything was preserved, either salted or put into jars. What we really lacked in the winter was something green. We might have a few turnips and onions left, but nothing fresh. In the spring, as soon as the dandelion greens were ready, we'd have those -- gently boiled up with pork. We used to love them! And, we used to also pick fiddleheads in the spring also. But, dandelions were really the only greens we had in the spring. We'd have them before the garden was really full. Dandelions, that's when we knew it was spring![202]

Agnes Scott likewise recalls foraging in the early spring months. Her interview was also conducted by Ian Tait in 1979. Scott's parents had emigrated from Scotland to Québec in the late nineteenth century, settling on a farm in the Eastern Townships. Like others in the region, they conducted mixed farming, mostly in grains, but with a few dairy cows. The cows, she recalls, mostly provided butter and milk for the family, though if they had any extra they sold it occasionally. During the 1930s, she says that

> We used to go out and get dandelions in the spring, right before they blossomed. Steam them and eat them with butter and salt; they were really very good and a staple at the beginning of the year. And, they used to get the fiddleheads also around that time, which are from ferns -- the head of a fern as it comes up. We found them on the banks of rivers; they were cooked in the same way, but sometimes they'd put them into a jar with vinegar and seal them for winter. Lambsquarters was also harvested in the spring, that one has a very distinct flavour. Sometimes they also used to make wine from the dandelion blossoms.[203]

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[202] Kenneth Hunting, Interviewed by Ian Tait of the Standstead Historical Society. 1979. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 37:35-41:17.

[203] Agnes Scott, Interviewed by Ian Tait of the Standstead Historical Society. 1979. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 38:30-44:56.

While not explicit, Frisch's trope of survival is evident in both Hunting and Scott's recollections about foraging during the Depression. Both underscore the particular importance of foraging in the spring: while the other interviews of this chapter describe the self-sufficiency that farming families had from their lands, only Hunting speaks to the seasonality of what farms and gardens could produce. Gardens and farms provided shelter, but this was tied to the agricultural growing season. During the winter, the family had to survive off of what had been stored away: long lasting vegetables or preserves, "nothing fresh." They suggest that concern about food shortages in the rural world appeared in spring, when winter preserves grew short and spring plantings were not yet ready for harvest. Spring foraging offered the first opportunity for fresh food, "before the garden was really full." Dandelion greens, fiddleheads, and lambquarters were, as Scott states, "staple[s] at the beginning of the year." The rural landscape helped to put food on the table. Hunting's and Scott's recollections also further reveal the sense of joy shared around food during the Depression: Scott recalls how steamed dandelions were "really very good," while Hunting speaks of how his family "loved" eating them and of the excitement by which such meals marked the beginning of spring.

The joy of foraged food also appears later in Scott's interview. She describes how such activities provided not just food staples, but also enjoyment and the very rhythm of rural life during the 1930s. She remembers:

> We used to collect mushrooms and nuts every fall. We used to go out and collect as many of the butternuts as we could, of which there was always a great number in our area. And, hazel nuts as well. We'd have big bags of each of these. It was good fun. And then also beech nuts, of course. Beech nuts were never very popular, because they were so small. The bags would be stored in the attic, tied up to the roof, so as to prevent the mice or squirrels from coming into it. Then in the evenings in the winter, when mother was spinning or other such tasks, we'd take some of those nuts and we had a block of wood and a hammer, and someone

> would crack the nuts. If the nut didn't come out properly, well, then we'd use a knitting needle or something to dig them out. We always enjoyed that! This is how we might spend some of those winter nights. Very pleasant nights! Father might sing to us too. It was good fun.[204]

Apart from providing another illustration of the ways in which farming families were sheltered from hardship at this time, this story reveals the way in which foraging for wild edibles went far beyond being a need-to-do survival tactic, but became instead something very much tied to the pulse of rural life: cracking nuts for eating was an ongoing chore, happening over the "evenings in the winter." Moreover, her story, just like Hunting's before, conveys the pleasure involved in such foods. A real sense of enjoyment is apparent in the tone of her voice during this portion of the interview, something completely lost through transcription into text. These kinds of activities were part of the social entertainment of the times: "This is how we might spend some of those winter nights. Very pleasant nights! Father might sing to us too." In addition, strong connections between family, home, and food are made in her story, revealing the important symbolism that food carries in memories from the decade.

Grace Rankin speaks of the joy of foraging for wild foods too. She was born in 1920 on the Magdalen Islands, off the easternmost coast of Québec. Just like rural families in the Gaspé, her father was engaged in both farming and fishing. Later on in her life she was a school teacher, which forms the primary topic of her interview, although the Depression features prominently in the first section of the recording. Similar to my Prairie interviews, Rankin's foraging memories centre on berries. She describes:

> We had raspberries, lots of them. There used to be lots of them wild there. We used to go out and pick berries; we used to love doing that. And we had cranberries and blueberries also, all wild. Big cranberries. Mother would make

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[204] *Ibid.*

> lots of jam and pies. I remember this one time, there was a fire and lots of blueberries came up there in the next years; we'd take the horse and pick buckets. I used to drive the horse because I was the eldest. And, there were tonnes of berries in there. Blueberries seemed to follow a fire, something in about the ashes.[205]

Her story again reveals the family connections and joy associated with food: "we used to love doing that." Yet, beyond highlighting the symbolism attached to food within Depression-era memories, Rankin's recollection about jam, in particular, further illustrates the differing experiences between urban and rural communities. Baillargeon notes how two-thirds of her interviews with Montréal women spoke about preserving food, but that this activity was clearly not linked to the Depression.[206] On the contrary, a lack of income made it difficult to buy the large quantities of sugar and other ingredients necessary for preserving. It was cheaper for them to go directly to the grocer and purchase what they could afford, rather than attempt to make it at home. Moreover, she notes how desserts were skipped altogether in 1930s meals, or consisted of recipes that did not require expensive ingredients.[207] Yet, rural families did not share the same concerns: fruit could be grown on the farm or foraged from the landscape, and if they lacked sugar (as Gertrude Day's interview from the townships suggests), they could always rely on local alternatives, including maple-sugar or honey. While not explicitly related to employment, stories again parallel Rudin's comment about how farmers on marginal lands sought ways to increase their incomes through off-farm labour: in the same manner, rural families resiliently supplemented their diets and provided for their families through foraging. They got by during the Depression because of their rural location.

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[205] Grace Rankin, Interviewed by the Council for Anglophone Magdalen Islanders. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 19:49-23:58.

[206] Baillargeon, 136.

[207] *Ibid.*

Not Just One Rural Experience:

Interviews among Anglophone farmers from the SHOMI Database reveal how rural families in Québec were provided shelter from the Depression on their farms. Because of their land, farming families had access to their own produce. They were, to an extent, self-sustainable, only needing to purchase items including sugar, flour, coffee and other goods that could not be produced domestically. They also kept gardens, as well as their animal and field crops. Moreover, memories from the period suggest that the agricultural economy of Québec had not entirely collapsed during the 1930s, as it had on the Prairies, and that farmers were still shipping dairy and other farm goods into urban centres, particularly by rail. In addition, just as on the Prairies, rural families could rely on foraged edibles when planted foodstuffs were not yet ready for harvest. Again, a narrative of a *great* Great Depression should not be overstated: the SHOMI Database contains a number of stories that run counter to this narrative, and it should not be presented as the only arc from the region. There are many other interviews that speak of hardship and rural poverty. Yet, one thing links these other stories together -- while rural, the speakers are not themselves farmers.

Arthur Brown's memories about growing up in the Gatineau Valley during the 1930s have already been discussed. He recalls how his family on the farm did not particularly suffer during the Depression, but he does remember a neighbour who did. He states:

> I recall a neighbour of ours, James Cross, now he wasn't a farmer. He used to cut wood to sell, for each winter. All by hand in them days. One thousand cords of it each winter. He sold it to people in town. Now, those were the kinds of people that felt the Depression more: the labourer felt it more than the farmers did.[208]

[208] Arthur Brown, Interviewed by the Gatineau Valley Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 16:39-22:58.

His story explicitly suggests that farmers did not feel the ill effects of the Depression to the same extent that did those involved in industry, even if be it such a simple rural industry as selling wood. It is unclear from his story as to why the woodcutter "felt it more than" Brown or other farming families. But, Brown hints that it is because his work was dependent upon urban buying power, whereas his family's agricultural products were not necessarily in the same situation. They fared well, while the rural labourer was not so well-off. Similarly, multiple other interviews in the SHOMI Database recount the conditions of rural poverty experienced by granite miners in the southeast region of Québec, close to the New York and Vermont borders.

Charles Bullock's grandfather founded the quarry in Graniteville in the late nineteenth century, and Charles himself worked in the granite industry for most of his life. The interview with Bullock was recorded in 1982. The community that Bullock lived in was home to the largest deposit of grey granite in Canada, and this industry dominated the local economy. His family were not at all farmers. He recalls that during the 1920s there was a large increase in the granite industry, with cities like Montréal and Sherbrooke undertaking large curbing and paving projects. The prosperity lasted until 1931, "when the Depression reached Graniteville and closed everything down for seven years. The quarries were completely closed down, with the exception of the odd little order that came along."[209] He recalls the 1930s as the only large layoff that happened in the quarries he worked in, during which almost the entire community was unemployed and dependant on relief for their livelihoods.

Guilford Redicker also grew up in Graniteville and worked in the granite industry until his retirement. He remembers that some of the quarries were able to keep operating during the

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[209] Charles Bullock, Interviewed by the Missiquoi Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 14:40-18:54.

Depression, but with an extremely reduced staff. He states that during the decade many unemployed people opened up their own quarries, or turned to other occupations, just to make a living:

> A lot of little quarries popped up here and there, all through the cow pastures and in the woods there. There were a lot of little quarries mushrooming up. Everybody was going into cutting granite, just to be able to resell it to somebody, just to be able to make a living. And, a lot of the quarrymen, they had to turn to cutting wood, they had to turn their hand to farming, they had to do something else because there just wasn't enough quarry business to keep them all. It started to pick up again in the early 1940s, and was going strong again by the 1950s.[210]

Both of these stories illustrate the poverty and unemployment connected with rural industry during the Depression. Most of the community was unemployed, and as Redicker explained had to turn to other occupations just to sustain themselves. The fact that he highlights farming as one of the new occupations turned to by unemployed quarrymen further highlights the stability of agriculture in period. Farmers did not feel the decade to the same extent as labourers.

Yet, somewhat surprisingly, even here Bullock recalls the Depression in positive terms. He reflects:

> Well, as far as I am concerned, we formed an orchestra and went around playing. We played music at dances--we played during the dances. I was interviewed once before, a Ms. Gerber came up here and she wanted to get the real information on the 'awful Depression.' And, I said to her, "Well, I guess you've come to the wrong boy, because we never had so much fun as we did during the Great Depression." We made the best with what we had. We never had it so good. We lasted as an orchestra for almost ten years, before we went back to work full-time.[211]

His story clearly shows that the trope of survival exists in recollections from farmers and non-farmers alike. Bullock's story says a lot about *how* the 1930s have been remembered. His story

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[210] Guilford Redicker, Interviewed by the Missiquoi Historical Society. Accessed via the Québec Anglophone Heritage Network's SHOMI Database. 14:40-18:54.

[211] Charles Bullock. 14:40-18:54.

suggests that there are multiple and unique recollections of the Depression, not just positive narratives associated with farming, nor negative ones tied to industry. It should also be noted here that the stories of the SHOMI Database do not represent the whole experience of Depression-era farmers in Québec. Moreover, as noted previously, while some historiography notes the increase in farm numbers, a large number of farmers on marginalised lands abandoned their lands altogether. In addition, Pierre Berton records the horrific story of one farmer near St. Perpétue, southwest of Montréal, who after losing his farm bludgeoned his family to death with a hammer before shooting himself.[212] No doubt, countless similar tragedies occurred in Québec, just as they did in the Prairies. Not all Québec farmers experienced the Depression positively, but within the thirteen SHOMI interviews of this chapter this is precisely how the decade is remembered. This positive legacy goes beyond the shelter provided to rural peoples because of their rural way of life; positive memories of community, place, family, self-sufficiency, and food all speak to the incentives behind recording the interviews during the 1970s and 1980s. The interviews offer precious details about the strength of rural life in a time of widespread hardship, but their value is deeper and more enduring. They speak to a way of life that was rapidly disappearing at the time the interviews were collected, looking back across the major economic, demographic and political shifts that created the modern society of Québec.

Bullock's reflection about a previous interview with a "Ms. Gerber" also reveals a lot about post-Depression era understandings of the period. She entered into the interview process "want[ing] to get the real information on the 'awful Depression'" and was no doubt disappointed by the stories that Bullock had to offer. Public perceptions of the decade have been profoundly

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[212] Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression: 1929-1939* (New York: Anchor Publishing, 1990): 185.

influenced by cultural representations of the American Dust Bowl as found in the novels of John Steinbeck, the photography of Dorothea Lange, and the music of Woody Guthrie. Conceptions of the rural experience of the Depression centre on hardship and difficulty, and yet this is far from the recollections of Bullock and others whose stories are preserved in the SHOMI Database.

Conclusion:
"By and by the harvest, and the labour ended"

> *It really hit home, the Depression that is. It was hard. I remember really wanting a pair of new knee-high socks and I didn't even ask for them because I just knew that there wasn't any money for them...Everybody was having trouble in those years. It was hard, but we were lucky*.[213]
>
> - Ruth Aitken, Mekawin, Manitoba

To conclude this thesis, I return to this memory by Ruth Aitken, the same place I began it. Her stories continue to resonate with me, touching my heart more than any of the other interviews encountered during my research. She was the first person that I interviewed about growing up in a rural setting during the Great Depression. The interview took place in her apartment in one of Victoria's retirement complexes back in January of 2012. She had richly explained how important her Anglican faith was to her, and in the weeks after the interview, I imagined taking her to worship with me at the Cathedral. Six months after I met her, I was invited to speak at St. Peter's Anglican Church, a little wooden parish where her funeral was held. It was an immensely powerful, humbling, and honouring experience. I had known her for less than two hours, but together we had explored three decades of her life. At the close of the service, the old organ sounded out and we sang her favourite hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves," a hymn deeply steeped in agricultural imagery and beautifully encapsulating her rural life. Likewise, I can think of no other interview I heard that so resonantly spoke to the experience of the Depression-years.

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[213] Ruth Aitken, Interviewed by Tyson Rosberg. 14 Jan 2012, Victoria, British Columbia. 27:00-28:02.

Debt, the catastrophic collapse of grain prices, drought, dust storms, food shortages, and plagues of grasshoppers decimated the Canadian Prairies during the Great Depression. Aitken's family farmed in Manitoba, but it was southern Saskatchewan and south-eastern Alberta that were hit hardest. The region, whose economy depended almost exclusively on the grain economy, saw income plummet by 90% within the first two years of the Depression. Many were forced onto relief, a humiliating experience for hard working Prairie peoples who had built-up their farms from nothing. A significant number abandoned their farms altogether, choosing to search for better opportunities elsewhere: in total, forty thousand farmers from Saskatchewan and 25,000 from southern Alberta left the Prairie over the course of the 1930s. Several members of my family were among those to abandon their farms, their homes, their lives and head west into the unknown. None of them ever returned to the Prairie -- to the land of "sun and dust," as my maternal grandfather called it. Silence is not the only thing that lingers in my family story: festering feelings of loss, displacement, hurt, fear, and pain are also an unspoken presence. I was surprised at first to find that these themes were largely absent from the initial interviews I conducted in Victoria, but in light of Frisch's work, this silence began to make sense.

Frisch notes the tendency for interviewees who lived through the 1930s to present the decade in romanticized terms. Failure, loss, hurt, and frustration are largely absent in peoples' recollections of the decade, as they compose their stories in such a way to shelter themselves from deeper, painful historical truths. What remains is the theme of survival, which elevates personal and biographical experience into historical terms. It is tempting to romanticise the idyll of the countryside, but this was far from the reality of Depression-era farmers. My paternal grandfather did not "ride-the-rails" to Vancouver because it was romantic, but because conditions

were so tough on the farm that they had to leave. He and my other grandparents grew up in struggling rural communities that were in decline. Their story is therefore very much representative of wider statistical patterns of out-migration and rural depopulation.

My nineteen interviewees speak to the difficulties of the Depression years, particularly in regards to financial strains and shortages. However, they simultaneously note how fortunate they were. Luck, hard-work, and resilience are common refrains in both regions studied. Other similarities are also present between the two regions: in both sets of interviews, for example, memories of food convey the extent to which farmers were sheltered from the worst hardships of the time period. Moreover, food has a particular resonance within memories from the 1930s, harkening to a time of self-sufficiency, family ties, and local community. Frisch's research on the Depression has been central to this project, with his model of resilience narratives being at the root of how I examined my nineteen interviews; my interviews provide Canadian examples to the trends that Frisch identified in American memories from the same period. Grounded in story, my research also delves into the lived experiences of farming families during the Depression, providing personal description to the strong historiographical framework of existing research.

The survival narrative is so entrenched into the lasting memory of the Depression that it is even present in Québec, the other region of exploration in my cross-regional study, where agriculture did not face the same environmental struggles as on the prairie. Indeed, the amount of land under agricultural production in the province increased in the Depression as people fled unemployment and difficult living conditions in urban areas. The countryside, in comparison, offered a means of subsistence. Of course, this is not to say that farmers in Québec were

immune to hardship. Farm abandonment was also an issue in parts of Québec where marginal lands had been put into production, although to a lesser extent than on the Prairies. Rural peoples in Québec also had their incomes substantially curtailed; however, home-ownership and the ability to produce their own food and fuel allowed many to at least stay off of the relief rolls. The Québec interviews also provide precious details about the strength of rural life in a time of want, but their value is far more enduring as they also speak to a way of life that was vanishing by the time the interviews were collected. This present-day reality no doubt shaped how the interviewees looked back on their lives. As always with oral history, the interviews reveal as much about the contemporary world of the interviewees as they do the history being remembered. Fundamentally, oral history is the study of the relationship between past and present – placing memory at its centre.

Farming families on both the Prairies and Québec were able to assist on what they grew, on their livestock, as well as foraging for food in nearby woods and fishing. Dandelions, fiddleheads, berries, wild apples, fruits, and nuts were all relied on. Moreover, in the case of the Prairies, food relief was shipped in from other parts of the country: one of my interviews from Québec makes a direct connection between the two regions, noting how her family had helped to ship food into the parts of the country experiencing greater difficulty.

The similarities in how people remember these tough times across these regional differences raises Frisch's two-part question about what happens to experience on the way to becoming memory, and what happens to experience on the way to becoming history? The similarities the accounts of these nineteen individuals, who lived in various rural locations in two distinct regions, hint at a larger, communal memory of the decade from across rural Canada. A

valuable extension of this research would be to bring in interview material from other regions and to do follow up interviews to see how prevailing notions of the 1930s have influenced how people compose their individual stories. After all, the line between individual experience and collective memory or history is not unidirectional, it is a two-way street. Oral historians have shown, in various contexts, how the circulation of stories and dominant narratives structure and inform people's personal accounts. The narrative arc of resistance is one such instance of this. By tapping into more of the archived interviews available in other parts of rural Canada, we would be better positioned to map regional variability and make wider claims about the depression-era experience of rural Canadians.[214] As Stacey Zembrzycki states in *According to Baba*, "[l]iving through a period and remembering it are very different."[215]

For me, it will never be possible to fully understand my own family's experience of Prairie homesteading and the depression as I was not there. All that I have are the stories that were passed down to me along with a handful of precious photographs. I can *see* the homestead, my grandfather at the plough, the threshing of a meagre harvest, but I will never live it. I cannot smell the grain or the dirt under my feet, nor know the anxieties of feeding a family in the hardest of times. I will never really know my paternal grandfather who died before I was born. And yet, through this research, I feel more closely connected to him, to my own father, and family -- both alive and dead. Their memories have become an integral part of my own story. I

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[214] During the 1980s, a Québec-based oral history contest, "Memory of a Bygone Era," collected over a thousand oral history interviews.

See: J. P Warren and Steven High, "Memory of a Bygone Era: Oral History in Quebec, 1979-1986," *Canadian Historical Review* 95.3 (2014): 433-456.

[215] Stacey Zembrzycki, *According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral History of Sudbury's Ukrainian Community* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 153.

am a storyteller, weaving and preserving narrative. This story belongs to those rural peoples who saw the Great Depression; I rejoice in their fellowship. This story is also mine.

Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
Fearing neither clouds nor winter's chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

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