

# Great Depression caused hard times in Solano

By Jerry Bowen

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Today I saw an interesting front page from a United Kingdom newspaper, The Independent, showing a photo that may or may not be a modern soup line waiting for handouts. The headline blatantly shouts, "United States of America 2008; The Great Depression."

Just for kicks, let's take a look at the local scene at the end of the 1920s through the depression years of the 1930s. I won't even attempt to answer the question, "Is history repeating itself?" We certainly have enough "xpurts" in the media and government giving us all kinds of different and competing opinions on the national scene.

The 1920s and 1930s was a wild cycle of boom and bust; a decade of fabulous prosperity followed by the worst economic collapse in California and the nation's history.

The prosperity of the twenties wasn't very well distributed; too much wealth went for profits and not enough for wages. Many workers couldn't afford to buy the products they produced because businesses produced more goods than could be consumed. Ultimately, the large supply of unsold products weakened the economy resulting in the crash of the stock market in 1929, followed by the worst depression in the history of the nation.

Businesses and banks throughout the state closed their doors in the 1930s; thousands of individual investors and depositors lost everything. California farm income in 1932 sank to just half of what it had been in 1929. The number of building permits in 1933 was less than one ninth what it had been eight years earlier. Many property-owners lost their farms and their homes. Unemployment in the Golden State reached a staggering 28 percent in 1932; two years later, one-fifth of all Californians depended on public relief.

The "Dust Bowl" resulted in thousands of refugees streaming into California seeking a better life. Discontented workers in the thirties went on the offensive. The San Francisco General Strike of 1934 paralyzed the Bay Area and attracted national attention.

The hard times of the thirties contributed to a disturbing resurgence of favoring native inhabitants as opposed to immigrants. Filipinos were among the first to feel the brunt of

anti-foreign hostility followed by a backlash against Mexicans. White workers charged that recent immigrants posed an economic threat to native-born workers. The federal government responded with a program of mass repatriation. Federal, state, and local authorities encouraged a voluntary exodus, but forced deportations also occurred resulting in as many as 100,000 deportees leaving California for Mexico.

The fruit and produce industry suffered because of a lack of field workers. Many of the families in Vacaville soon found less food available for daily consumption. They were forced, even more, to live off the land. They planted vegetable gardens, and from this obtained a good deal of their food. Folks in the country poached game for meat.

In 1933, President Roosevelt attempted to relieve the effects of the Depression by calling for emergency legislation - the National Industrial Recovery Act - that in turn set up the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The administration was to set prices, rates of pay, hours of work, and other "codes of fair practices" for each industry. Although it was voluntary, only businesses that complied with the industry codes could display the NRA's blue or red eagle symbol in their windows or on their packaging. Those who did not display it were made to seem unpatriotic and selfish. The NRA itself was attacked as being both communistic and authoritarian. In May 1935, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional on the grounds that it improperly delegated legislative powers to the executive branch of the government and that the constitution granted to the federal government only the power to regulate interstate commerce, not intrastate commerce.

I'll continue our look at the past century's depression in my next column.

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