

"PULLING YOUR OWN WEIGHT"

"When everybody is in the same boat, you don't know any better; you're all alike," was Aili's reply when asked what her opinion was of the Depression. Although her family didn't have it as bad as others, she still felt some of the economic hardships.

My grandmother, Aili Benvenue, was born in the small town of Ishpeming on May 19, 1919. She lived there for her first five years, and then moved to Palmer. At age eight, she and her family moved to National Mine, where she still resides.

She grew up on a small farm nestled in a location called Finn Farm. They raised cows and chickens and also had a garden. "My mother used to can, because naturally we didn't have a refrigerator or freezer. We did have a root cellar though, and we stored our vegetables there. Also, having livestock, we had animals to butcher. My mother would boil the meat and then can it. It tasted delicious," my grandmother informed me.

During the thirties, Aili's father worked one day a week in the mine. Her mother walked to work in Ishpeming every day. She cleaned at the Lownstein's store. I asked my grandma how this affected her home life. "Well," she replied laughing, "I sure had a lot of extra work. I had to take care of the younger children, do the housework, learn to cook, everything. We all had to pull our own weight."

Nowadays, many children have a lot of leisure time to do what they want, but Aili didn't, as she had work to do. The little leisure time she did have was spent playing tag or jumping rope with her friends.

When you think of holidays today, piles of expensive gifts come to mind. But when I inquired about holidays during the Depression, Aili said with a chuckle, "They weren't much. We'd get an apple and an orange for Christmas. Sometimes, though, my mother would make me a rag doll."

"There was one special thing we did though," Aili remembers. "On the holidays, my dad would get some lead and melt it in a little metal container and he'd have a tub of water, too. He would then pour the melted lead into the tub. The shape the lead would take would be your fortune for the year." This is a Finnish tradition which is used to celebrate the New Year.

Today, most graduating classes are composed of close to one hundred and seventy students. But the graduating classes of the National Mine High School during the Depression were made up of two to four students. The students' former classmates, with whom they attended grammar school, were now out in the working world. Aili got to stay in school during the Great Depression because she was too young to go out and find a job.

Aili's parents weren't the only ones in her family who were working during the thirties. Her brother, Art, was involved with the CCC program, a program set up by FDR to make work for the young people. Another program that Roosevelt set up was the WPA. The road that goes by Aili's present day house was built by the workers of the WPA.

Many people in National Mine were employed by the mines in the area. After the Stock Market Crash, nearly all of the area mines closed or partially closed. One mine that did not close entirely was the Barnum Mine. It ran on a one day a week schedule. Aili's father worked there during the Depression.

The high unemployment rate didn't affect the people's ability to have fun and enjoy themselves. Curious to find out how people's weddings and funerals differed from those of today, I asked Aili that very question. "Well, they certainly didn't have weddings like they do today," she replied. "They just went and got married and that was that. Funerals, of course, were much cheaper, but they were more or less the same as what they are today."

A big celebration that they had annually in National Mine was the Mid-Summer's Day Picnic, which was a Finnish tradition. The event was held in a big field across from the present day Hercules Inc. They always had a big turnout for this picnic.

Today, we don't see many trains in use. But about fifty years ago, they were used the way airplanes are now. The LSI was the railroad line that came through National Mine. It came to the Powder Mill, which was an active place during the twenties and thirties.

Although the train was popular in the thirties, most people couldn't afford to ride it. "We mostly used our horse for transportation," Aili told me, "although we did have a car. You couldn't afford to drive it all the time though."

My final question for my grandmother was, "What do you think of kids today?"

"I think kids are kids all the time, but they have too much. Parents are being too lenient with them today. They're not corrected enough. They don't have enough chores. We always had to work and children today don't want to take any responsibility toward a home. When you're born during the Depression and you've lived through it, it seems kind of strange that mothers and fathers don't make their children assume a little responsibility, more than they do."

After completing this interview, I suddenly realized why my grandmother often tells me to eat everything at mealtime and not to waste my money on foolish things. She appreciates everything she has and wants to help me do that also. I want to thank her very much for sharing part of her life story with me.

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