

Day Zero – a Dissertation on Isolation

Part VII

This week in isolation my dad and I reviewed some historical photos, many taken during the Great Depression. Some are family photos; others are of neighbours from the area around our prairie homeland.

Bear also dug through her family albums from that era and retrieved stories from her relatives.

Both of our families were hard hit during the 1930's, but I have yet to see a picture that didn't have an optimistic feel to it. There were several images of barren fields and dust-bowl landscapes, but the people in almost every photo wore smiling faces.

The photos and stories are all very inspiring. There is a great deal to learn by taking a deep dive into the past. I hope that the knowledge gained can be applied to the present situation.



The Shepherd's (above) and the Paton's (right), bringing home the bacon.

Grab a pig and come along for the ride!

Russ Paton

May 2, 2020



A Quarter Turn

Sunday April 26 – Day 46

World Risks “Biblical” Famines.

World’s Biggest Humanitarian Emergency nears Breaking Point.

The Worst Locust Infestations for Decades.

The Crisis Forcing Mothers to Give Away their Babies....

These are captions you would expect to read in 1935 newspapers or as lines in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The fact that they are actual headlines from April 2020 *BBC* articles, is deeply troubling.

The news stories are about conditions in Africa, Yemen, and Venezuela but, if we are so complacent as to think it couldn’t happen here, we are badly mistaken.

Corona Virus isn’t the cause of these headlines. It is just the latest in a long line of natural and man-made disasters that push the world ever closer to fundamental change.



Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Inspector in 1930's, near Kisbey, Saskatchewan

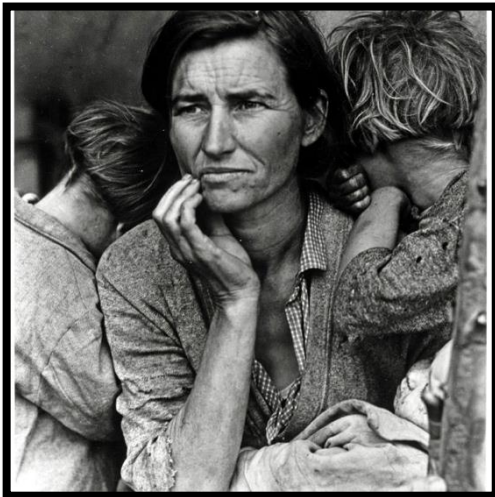
This is not a time to panic, but it is a moment in time to prepare for a paradigm shift.

Put some oil on the nut in your head that keeps your preconceptions rusted in place – and prepare to give it....

..... a quarter turn.

It Already Has

Also, Sunday April 26 – Day 46



The woman and children in this photograph are not from Africa, or Afghanistan. The photo was taken in California, in 1936.

The photographer was Dorothea Lange. The photo entitled *Migrant Mother*, was the most reproduced image in the world for decades. It drew attention to the plight of destitute, displaced people from the American mid-west, and influenced John Steinbeck while he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*.

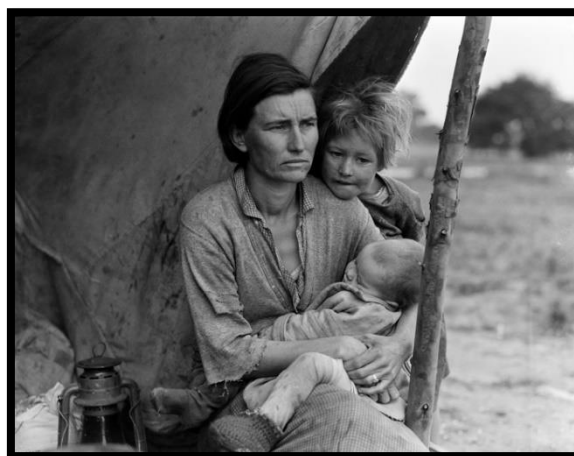
Asked about the circumstances surrounding the photo Lange said, in part;

I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food.

It is a gut-wrenching image. (If you want the whole gut-wrenching story, click on the link below to *Florence Owens Thompson* Wikipedia page.)

My point is, if you think it can't happen here, ...

.... it already has.



[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence Owens Thompson](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Owens_Thompson)

A Mathematical Certainty

Monday April 27 - Day 47

Chief Engineer aboard the Titanic, calculating the extent of damage:

“The ship will sink, ‘tis a mathematical certainty.”

I am not an engineer or an economist, but I can do math. Given the current rate of government spending and at this level of tax revenue, this ship will sink. It is ...

... a mathematical certainty.



Your choice – there aren't enough life rafts for everybody.

I dedicated some time this week to thinking about how to manage change and come out smiling. I had help and inspiration from historical photos, and the wisdom of people who have lived through the experience.

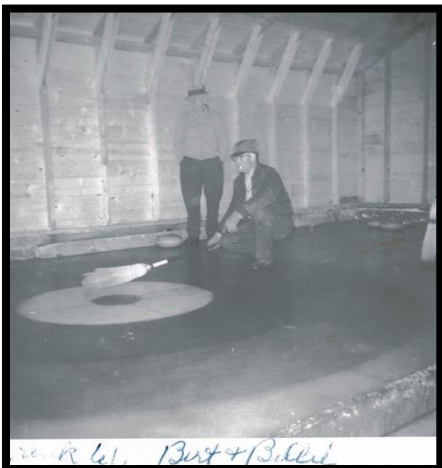
Hardship to Happiness

Tuesday April 28 – Day 48



protection. (Notice the horses in the bleachers, by Grandpa's elbow)

The Shepherd family overcame hardship through music. What fun it would have been to sit in the Senate Community Hall and listen while *The Shepherd Family Orchestra* played *You Are My Sunshine* or *Blue Moon*!



I remember asking my Grandfather about life during the Great Depression. I was expecting stories about poverty and hardship, but what I got was memories of community, family, and fun times.

When I pressed him on it, Grandpa said that it was a humbling experience to go to town and not have a single penny in his pocket. The family would trade farm produce (poultry, cream and eggs) for supplies they needed, but there was seldom any cash exchanged during the '30's.

He didn't linger on the topic.

Grandpa moved on to baseball and hockey. The picture on the left combines both. Grandpa was the goalie on the hockey team that day, but he wore a baseball catcher's vest for



Curling was (and still is) an institution on the Prairies. This photo of Grandpa Billie was taken in the early 1960's, but the sport had not changed much since the Depression. Two sheets of natural ice, in a community rink, on the bald prairie is all it takes to transform.....

..... hardship to happiness.

Blue Moon – The Mavericks. <https://youtu.be/8bKUBNFhW3g>

The Length of our Tether

Wednesday April 29 – Day 49

International travel is so commonplace nowadays it has become something of a banality. When somebody mentions a trip to Mexico or Hawaii – *no big deal*.

The situation was similar in the 1920's. Air travel wasn't a thing then, but ocean liners were packed with tourists traveling between North America and Europe.

My grandparents lived a great distance from the ocean, so they weren't part of the *wet set*, but they took a memorable overland trip in 1927. A year after they were married, Billy and Florence Paton packed a Model T Ford and drove from Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan to California and back. It was a formidable adventure in a car that topped out at about 35 mph.

Billy and Florence chugged their Model T over the prairies, through the Rocky Mountains, along the Pacific coast all the way to the Redwood forests of northern California. Prairie roads were mostly gravel then, trails through the Rockies would have been rugged, and there were very few bridges on the Oregon coast. Florence and Billy camped along the way and absorbed the wonders of the continent. They were young, prosperous, carefree, and in no hurry to get home.



Soon after Billy and Florence returned from their honeymoon trip, the Great Depression and their first son arrived, on about the same day.

Finances dried up, the land dried up and dreams of anything other than survival withered with them. By the time Dad was born in 1934, holiday travel was a distant memory.

Grandpa and Grandma never ventured more than about 50 miles from home for the next two decades, and not much further than that their entire lives.

The shock of instant poverty was so powerful it became generational. Grandpa and Grandma lived their entire lives frugally. They were always vigilant about finances, ever wary that the difficult times they had endured could return.

Their three sons, Earl, Adrian and Jim inherited their parent's frugal habits and carry them to this day.

Even as general prosperity returned, spending financial resources on luxuries like vacation travel was never considered. Until I was 23 years old, my travel experience was almost entirely confined to southern Saskatchewan. My only *foreign* destination was a weekend trip to Brandon, Manitoba.

My first major travel experience was a business trip from Regina to Edmonton in 1978, paid for by the company I worked for. Until that trip, I had never been on an airplane.

This isn't an "up hill, both ways" story. In the second half of my life I have flown around the world, from Australia to Denmark, and hundreds of places in between. But I still remember what it is like to be confined to a very small pasture.

I have no idea what is in store for Albertans in the next decade, but it might be wise to keep one hand on the travel paradigm lever; just in case we have to shorten

.... **the length of our tether.**



The parents of these unidentified youngsters converted the axle of a car to a one-horsepower cart. The kids all seem happy enough, but they weren't going very far.

A Field Day

Thursday April 30 – Day 50

When my Visa bill showed up this month, I was shocked. With all our expensive hobbies eliminated (travel, restaurants, vehicle expenses, etc.) the bill was extraordinarily low. And yet, I don't feel like I missed much.



They don't seem too upset about it. Particularly, the man sleeping on the running board, with the dog in his lap; he appears to be very content.

Picnics are a recurring theme in photos of the 1930's. People would often gather in a field with friends and neighbours. They would bring what food they had, sit on the ground and share it. There was no expense involved, just folks having a communal lunch, in a location other than their kitchen. Simple fun.

I wonder if the people in these pictures felt the same way. Once free spending, their circumstances had been altered by the Great Depression.



The smiles on the faces of these picnicking farmers from Maple Creek, SK speaks volumes. They don't appear to have extended their credit much for their meal, but they are all having....

..... a field day.

The biggest smile of all is on Charlie Shepherd's face (centre, kneeling). Bear inherited that wonderful trait from her Dad.

Trudeau Buggy

Friday May 1 – Day 51

I noticed this truck as we drove through Rocky Mountain House a while ago. I couldn't quite fathom what I was seeing, so I turned around and took a second look – and a picture.

The dealer was proudly announcing that for the low, low price of \$100,000 (tax included) you could take your honey for a date in this beauty!

Rocky Mountain House's economy is based heavily on the oil and gas industry. Wages in the area have been among the highest in Canada for the past decade. There is a market for luxury pickup trucks in Rocky.



There was also a market for luxury vehicles in the 1920's. I have no idea what the open-top roadster in the picture below cost when it was new, but Average Joe could afford one.



Then, the world changed. The stock market crashed in 1929 and drought simultaneously hit the prairies. The global economic downturn, and devastation of primary industry caused a massive reversal of the fortunes of people on the plains. When money ran out for gas, tires and repairs, vehicles were converted to *Bennett Buggies* (named in honour of the Prime Minister of the day, R.B. Bennett).

The fellow behind the wheel of this buggy is about to take his new bride for a date, in a car with no tires, pulled by two decorated horses.

Which do you think is more likely:

- a) five years from now, Average Joe in Rocky Mountain House will drive a new luxury pickup or,
- b) Joe will be taking his date for a ride in a

.....Trudeau Buggy

Formative Years

Saturday May 2, Day 52

No matter what happens in our lifetime, the person we become in the first decade of our lives is who we really are. Everything that occurs afterward can modify our character, but we never really stray from our basic nature. It is carved in stone when we are ten years old.

Dad and his brothers grew up during the Great Depression in one of the hardest hit regions in North America. Their personalities were forged in the furnace of hardship. All three of them have a healthy respect for the volatility of economic circumstances. They have been preparing for the next Great Depression since the last one.



Not only would they survive an economic downturn, they welcome it. It is who they are.

This is the house I grew up in. It was a tiny shack, with a granary nailed on one side to expand the living area for my brother and me.



The frame was straighter back then and there was glass in the windows, but these were the walls that surrounded me for the first five years of my life.

In 1959 we moved to the farm on the right. It was a better house, but we still had to go to the pump at the windmill for drinking water.

I feel sorry for people who have never experienced hardship. When the looming economic reversal happens, they will go from having much, to having little.



When you start with nothing, and if you end up with nothing, you haven't lost a thing.

I could type until my fingers bleed and I will never convince anybody to change their basic nature – it can't be done. If you were born into prosperity, you have an ingrained sense of how the world is and should be.



*Grandpa Billy and unknown child.
Pictures of Grandpa often have an
animal in the background.*

When the Great Reversal I am predicting happens, former prosperity will be

..... our burden to bear.



The Shepherd Family gathered near Maple Creek, SK



Brad (Left) and Russell (driving)

I still love windmills, driving fast and bad haircuts, all traits acquired during my.....

.....formative years.



I don't have a way to accurately predict the future

..... and, I have been wrong as many times as right, but I have a premonition that the course of history is about to take a detour. The road I see ahead looks something like the one below.



It is not going to be an easy journey for those of us who have lived so well for so many years.

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But there is no doubt that we will survive, and we will all do it with

..... a smile on our face.



Grandma and Grandpa before, and after the Great Depression. Always Happy.

This will be my last post for a while. I have some living to do, a garden to plant and adventures yet to be fulfilled.

I cannot tell you how much joy I have experienced connecting with all of you through this period of isolation. Bear and I look forward to extending that connection in person when the pandemic has passed.

If I happen upon something noteworthy in the meantime, I will pass it along.

Until then,

..... **Keep Your Pecker¹ Up!**

Gallery:



Clockwise from the left: Adrian (Dad) and Jim Paton skiing, Shepherd Family dining in 1929, William Paton plowing in Scotland - circa 1890, Brad and Russell Paton farming in 1959.

¹ Pecker = Nose in British English

