

Carroll Yesteryears
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Carroll County Stood Strong Against Great Depression
By Austin Hewitt

The Great Depression of the 1930s remains as the biggest economic crisis our country has ever faced. It impacted every person. Unemployment was 25%. There were food lines. Millions travelled the rails looking for jobs. The Dust Bowl in the Great Plains, caused by severe drought, led many farmers to leave their land and move West. But have you ever wondered how Carroll County was impacted by the Great Depression? The answer is. . .better than most places.

According to Carol Lee's book *Legacy of the Land*, 80% of Carroll County's economy in 1929 was directly linked to agriculture. Farmers had weathered a recession during the 1920s caused by ramping up production for World War I and the war ending sooner than expected. There was optimism for the future, but hopes were dashed by the Crash of 1929. On the heels of the Crash came the worst drought in Maryland history. Crops died in the field; pastures were useless. The Carroll County Dairy Herd Association told its members, "What should have been a period of advancement has become a struggle for existence."

Consumer buying power collapsed with the economy resulting in surpluses of farm commodities, and prices tumbled. The farmers' initial response was to increase production which only made things worse. Prices dropped further. Carroll Countians began to realize that this was no ordinary recession. By 1933 almost one third of the county's farmers were behind on their taxes and mortgages. During one month in 1932, there was an average of seven bankruptcy sales per day. The future seemed bleak.

To combat the crisis, local businesses, local government, and the federal government did what they could to help. Banks realized that foreclosing on a farm only resulted in a property they couldn't sell. Instead, they stopped foreclosing and allowed the farmer to stay on his land in hopes he could catch up. Local feed and seed companies gave farmers loans so they could continue planting. County judges stopped putting liens on farms for unpaid taxes. From 1929 until 1933, not one farm was sold for tax delinquency, but still here was a problem with low prices.

In 1933 the federal government finally took major steps to help. As part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the newly-established Farm Credit Administration, Federal Land Bank, and Production Credit Association began providing loans and direct financial support. The most important program was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration which paid farmers to reduce acreage and production of specific commodities. Eight hundred local farmers signed up the first year it was available. Those who had already cut production or changed to other crops not in the program received checks for not planting the old crop and made money from the new one. By 1934-35, the farm crisis had begun to ease although things were still not back to normal. Like the nation's economy in general, it took until WWII to fully recover.

What were the effects of the Great Depression on the rest of Carroll County? Businesses were hit hard. There were business and bank closures. Canneries may have suffered the most. There were

24 in 1929 but only 10 in 1934. At least four clothing stores closed on Main Street in Westminster between 1930 and 1932 according to going-out-of-business ads in *The Carroll County Times*. The number of banks in the county dropped from 20 to 17. Two of the banks that failed were the First National Bank of New Windsor and the First National Bank of Hampstead. One closed in Detour.

However, it appears things weren't as bad as in many large cities. There were never food lines in Carroll County. In 1938 *The Times* noted that Westminster, with less than 5,000 people, had five banks. Frederick and Hanover, both three times larger than Westminster, also had five banks. Waynesboro, larger than Westminster and Gettysburg—the same size as Westminster—only had two. *The Times* also noted that there were as many stores in Westminster as in towns two to three times larger. There was concern that the Westminster business community might be getting too big, but this was evidence that Carroll County had survived the Great Depression and was moving forward.

Additional evidence that things were not as bad in Carroll County was that many businesses and government services expanded or opened in the 1930s. Davis Buick moved to Main Street, Westminster, in 1930. Federal money supported construction of a new Westminster Post Office beginning in 1932. The Hub of Good Values moved to Main Street in 1935. The Mt. Airy Canning Company built a new plant in 1935. Late in 1936 over 600 students moved into the new Westminster High School which replaced one built in 1898. Hampstead Ford opened in 1936. The Blue Ridge Rubber Company in Taneytown opened in 1936. The Carroll Theater in Westminster opened on Thanksgiving Day in 1937, and the Central Grocery Store in Hampstead built an addition for a 200-seat movie theater in the late 1930s. The Westminster Stockyard opened in 1938. The Farm and Home Service (later Southern States) in Sykesville opened in the 1930s. Carroll County went all-out to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 1937 with a huge parade. Even the Goodyear blimp flew over to mark the occasion.

Carroll County not only survived the Great Depression but weathered the storm better than most places. It found a way to thrive thanks to the resilience of its farming community, wise local business practices, local government action, and help from federal government programs.

Austin Hewitt is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image: A crowd forms outside New York's American Union Bank during a bank run early in the Great Depression. Of the 20 banks in Carroll County, only 3 failed. Photo courtesy of the National Archives.