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# Helen Schemmel interview for Wright State University History Course 485

Matt Opperman

Helen Schemmel

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Matt Opperman  
HST-485  
April 29, 2001

### **Introduction**

The person that I chose to interview was my great-grandmother, Helen Schemmel. The interview took place in Minster, Ohio at the home of my great grandmother. She was a young adult during the height of the great depression, and a wife and mother during the Second World War. It is during this time period that the interview focuses on. She tells her stories about what it was like growing up in these times and some of the hardships that people faced.

During the interview she made many references to the fact that people that lived during this time learned the value of a dollar, and were not frugal with their money. She talked about how people planted their own gardens and learned to be self sufficient, because they did not have the money to buy the food at the store. We also spent some talking about the politics of the time and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, including the programs he established and the various tactics he employed to turn the country around. Entertainment was also different during this time period, and Helen Schemmel told some interesting stories about what teenagers would do back then for entertainment. It was not too dissimilar to what teens do now, but at a very different cost.

The Second World War was also a time period I chose to focus on during this interview. We talked about how the war effort helped out the struggling economy, and how thousands of people suddenly had work. There were also hardships at home during the war. Most of the food that people bought was rationed out, and you needed stamps to obtain certain things such as

sugar, flour, and even shoes. She also talked about how neighbors would trade these ration stamps for items that they needed. For instance, if you needed shoes but not sugar, you would trade the sugar stamps with a neighbor who didn't need their shoe stamps.

*Matt Opperman  
HST-485  
April 29, 2001*

*{012}, Matt Opperman: It is April 23 at 3:45 pm and I am sitting here with my Great Grandma, Helen Schemmel, and we are going to talk about the Depression. How old were you at the onset of the Depression?*

She was born in 1913, which made her 15 years old at the onset of the Depression. Her family did go through the hardships that some families did. However they were not wealthy, and had to make some sacrifices.

*{097}, MO: Now, did you know of any families that were going through hard times?*

There were some families around here area that needed help and they received it, but for the most part the real hardships were felt further west.

*{132}, MO: So, it was more towards the west where it was felt more?*

She affirmed this assumption, and told of the dust storms they received out there. It was also during this question that she told of the bank closings.

*{206}, MO: Now, were most of the people you knew in the farming or agricultural business?*

There were some industry in the area, but for the most part the majority of the population were farmers.

*{240}, MO: Was FDR well received by everyone?*

President Roosevelt was well received by everyone she knew. She talked very approvingly about the President, and credited him with turning around the country.

*{286}, MO: Did you have a radio back then?*

They did have a radio, and they would listen to it every night. This was one of the main ways of receiving news.

*{307}, MO: Did you listen to the Fireside Chats?*

She does remember the chats. However she said that she was too young to care much about them

at the time.

*{314}, MO: What would you do for entertainment when you were young?*

As kids they would often make their own entertainment. The movie theater was also a popular place.

*{339}, MO: Was there much crime back then?*

There was some crime, due to the depression people did have things, so they would steal them. She said there is far more crime now though.

*{372}, MO: What would you do when you were a teenager that would differ from what teenagers do now?*

As a teen she would often go to the movies, and then to get a sandwich and beverage. The price of entertainment was also different during this time period. She told of what a typical date would cost back then.

*{446}, MO: Not too many people did that did they?*

This was a spontaneous question, that arose after she told of how her and her husband built a new house during the height of the depression.

*{465}, MO: Do you remember how the war helped the economy?*

If a man had a business that was essential to the public he was often spared by the draft board. He would not have to go to war. She also talked about the rationing of goods.

*{502}, MO: How did they ration the goods you received?*

The rationing of goods was done by books of stamps. Each family had an allotted set of goods they could buy, and when that supply ran out that was all you received.

*{552}, MO: During the war, would more people listen to the radio for update on the war?*

She said they would, but you did not receive the news as quickly as you do now. The newspapers would often run extras as soon as an important event took place.

*{585}, MO: Was there a large movement among the population to rally around the flag?*

Yes there was a certain loyalty that everyone felt towards the war effort.

*{594}, MO: Did you experience any skepticism about being a German-American?*

Even though she grew up around people of all German decent. She never experienced skepticism about being a person of German decent.

*{619}, MO: Now, how do you look back at this time period?*

She felt she learned the value of a dollar during this time, and the need for a good work ethic.

*{660}, MO: What positives do you think your generation took out of this time period?*

They learned the value of money. The basic reasoning that you don't have enough money to buy then wait until you do.

*{697}, MO: Do you think this Country will ever see the things you generation went through again?*

Much concern was expressed over this question. She felt that people today do not have what it takes to make through a depression.

*{716}, MO: Is there anything else you want to add to this interview?*

The period from 1900-2000 there was more progress during this time than any other time period in history. She also talked about the invention of the automobile and how different it was back then compared to today.

*{799}, MO: Alright then, we are going to wrap this interview up. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me Grandma.*

Helen Schemmel  
Interviewed by Matt Opperman  
April 23, 2001  
At the Schemmel residence in Minster, Ohio

*{012}, Matt Opperman: It is April 23 at 3:45 pm and I am sitting here with my Great Grandma, Helen Schemmel, and we are going to talk about the Depression. How old were you at the onset of the Depression?*

Helen Schemmel: In 1929 the Depression started and I would have been 15 years old, I was born in 1913. The Depression affected an awful lot of people as far as we were concerned. My mother and dad, they were both hard workers, knew how to stretch a nickel. In those days, we used to have the nickels with the Indian head on one side and the buffalo on the other side and my parents would say that you would have to squeeze the nickel until you heard the buffalo holler. My dad and mom were both born in 1887 and were married in 1910. My dad had a job at Klipstein Lumber Company in Sydney, Ohio. He made nine dollars a week. After a couple of years he was able to built a house. Of course he worked with lumber and was a fairly good carpenter and he had a regular carpenter with him. The house that he built cost him \$900. You ought to see it today. It is not a bad house. Of course in those days you didn't have indoor plumbing but after a while, as time went on, he added that stuff to it. After my dad had finished this house, he had received the opportunity to sell it and make money on it. He then built another one. Now, in 1920, we had lived at the edge of Sydney, near the fairgrounds. We lived on Highland Ave and our back yard was all county and my dad had bought 3 acres there and had 5 lots that all faced on Highland Ave. He built one house and sold it. We also ended up selling our house on Lynn Street so he built another house. Over a period of a couple of years I can't remember how many houses we lived in. He built one house and we never even got a chance to live in it because he sold it the next week. He made good money on it. In those days, if you made \$1,000 to \$2,000 profit you were doing good. Both of my parents were good managers. As far as the Depression goes you mentioned something about people making sacrifices. We never thought it was a sacrifice. We never felt deprived. Like at Christmas, you got one gift. One year, I was about nine, I got a little sewing box. Of course in those days oranges were luxuries and now everything is year round. In those days, if you didn't get oranges at Christmas you were poor. I got one nice gift when I was ten, a camera. It was a brownie camera and I was so proud of it. It still takes good pictures today. No, we never felt deprived or anything. I guess we didn't expect too much. Since you didn't know about the other things you didn't have a chance to feel deprived.

*{097}, MO: Now, did you know of any families that were going through hard times?*

HS: Well, actually you got what you needed at the top of the list and anything else you wanted you had to wait until you saved some of those buffalo nickels. You knew you had to save ahead in order to get what you wanted. But in 1929, when the stock market crashed, they formed committees. That way people didn't have to live without things. You could get your food by people who donated it. I remember one time there was 2,000 pounds of carp from Lake St.

Mary's that was sent to Sydney for the food program. People would get free food. Of course we never got any of it. Everyone had their own garden too. Chicken now a days is an everyday occurrence, but in those days if you had chicken on Sunday, it was a luxury. You made due. We didn't feel the Depression too much, but like I said, you made due with what you had and you didn't expect too much.

*{132}, MO: So, it was more towards the west where it was felt more?*

HS: Yeah, out west they had those dust storms. If you have ever seen the Beverly Hillbillies on T.V., that is like the way it was. People would load up all of their belongings and head out. A lot of people lost their farms. Then, in 1929, the stock market crashed and the banks began to take homes over and a lot of people lost their homes. In a way I guess we were kind of lucky because we didn't have any money in the bank to lose, but a lot of people did. In fact, my grandmother had sold their farm in Delphos and moved to town. Evidentially they must have put everything in one bank, and the bank closed and they lost everything. So, grandma had caught a hard time getting along. You had to take any kind of job that you could get. For a lot of people it was hard. Your great Grandpa and I were married during the depression. We were married in the thirties and the depression was still going on, but your grandpa and his brother were in the dairy business. So, we had milk and all of the ice cream you could eat. The only thing we noticed from it was people didn't pay their milk bills and I still think, to this day, there are outstanding milk bills. During this time you would find more empty houses since many people had lost their homes or couldn't pay the rent. Families would move in together. Parents would move in with their children or vice versa. It was an all together different life back then. I don't know how people expect for things to be given to them now a days. I remember one lady that deposited \$2,000 into the bank the day before it went under. No one said a word to her that the next day the bank was going under. She ended up losing all of her money. At that time, \$2,000 was a lot of money. A lot of people were also taking cuts in their salaries, up to 1/3 of a cut, rather than losing their jobs.

*{206}, MO: Now, were most of the people you knew in the farming or agricultural business?*

HS: In Sydney, there was Monarch, where they made pots and when the war started that really shot that business up. But, the farmers were hit the hardest. I remember that you could buy a whole hog for five dollars and have it butchered. Hoover was in office then and when he ran for reelection he promised a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage, but everything was just the opposite. When Roosevelt was elected, of course he was in office for 12 years, he really turned the country around. He started different programs and started the NRA and put ceilings on rents and wages.

*{240}, MO: Was FDR well received by everyone?*

HS: Oh yeah, he turned the country around, gradually he turned the country around. The bridges that were built they all had W.P.A. written on them. They were built during the depression. Then, in Sydney, they had CC Camps. These camps were occupied by young fellows that you had to enlist. They weren't paid much and they would go and help farmers. The way I knew about that is because grandpa would deliver milk to these camps. He said they ate pretty good. These

camps were set up and they were put to work on the roads and any work that needed done. Later on, they were moved out west. They were paid thirty dollars a month and twenty five was sent back home to their families. They lived on that extra five dollars. Well, there were no jobs for anybody and that is what they did.

*{286}, MO: Did you have a radio back then?*

HS: We had a very big console radio. We would listen to Amos and Andy every night. When I got married we just had a small radio then.

*{307}, MO: Did you listen to the Fireside Chats?*

HS: Tell you the truth, back then I was not too interested to listen to those fireside chats. You know, at that time you were not too interested, but I do remember them.

*{314}, MO: What would you do for entertainment when you were young?*

HS: Well, when we were kids, we made our own entertainment. We had three acres in the back of the house and we had our own ball team and we would play in the street because there was no traffic. Every night the gang would meet in the street. You couldn't do that now. Even when it became winter time, of course Sydney had big hills, a couple of blocks from where we lived, there were real steep hills, and we would go down one side and up the other. We always looked forward to snow. The police would rope off from the top of one hill to the top of another. No cars were allowed to go through there. And we had the movie theater.

*{339}, MO: Was there much crime back then?*

HS: I remember this one time, I was only in my teens. There was this family that lived a couple of streets from us and the husband came home one night and tried to kill the whole family. I don't know what the reason was. I think they were in the process of getting a divorce. The youngest one, the baby, was in the cradle yet and he really beat them up, none of them died, but he really beat them up. One had to have a plate put in he head. The oldest girl was his favorite and he told her we will go out behind the woodshed and die together and there was this vacant lot next to their house. Well, she went outside and somehow or another she got away from him. Well, he got a lifetime in the penitentiary. They didn't drag things out like they do now. But, anyway, he came back to the house after the police came and cut his own throat and the police had to carry out the victims and step over his body. He lived through it, but I will never forget that. During the depression, there was a lot of break-ins. If the burglar's would get six or seven dollars, they were happy. People didn't have money so they would break in and take things.

*{372}, MO: What would you do when you were a teenager that would differ from what teenager's do now?*

HS: Well, not everyone had cars back then. My dad bought his first car in 1923. We were not allowed to drive the car. Some kids could borrow the car though and would drive to Piqua to the

movies or go to Avon Lake and Evergreen Lake. They would have swimming and dancing at these places. We never had Kings Island or anything like that, but we did have Russel's Point. That was a nice amusement park with the rides and dances. But, otherwise we would have parties at different places. Now I don't know what it would cost now a days, for a date, but when I dated, we would go to the movies. It would cost you twenty five cents per person so, for a couple, it would be fifty cents. Afterwards, we would go to the Spot Restaurant in Sydney and get the best hot ham sandwiches for ten cents a piece. A cup of coffee or drink were five cents a piece. So, there you had the whole date for under one dollar. Gas was also twenty five cents per gallon. I remember this one time this one gal ran out of gas and pulled into the filling station and she had twenty five cents and got one gallon of gas. Can you imagine someone getting a gallon of gas for twenty five cents now? Now, when we were married Grandpa had a new car with one payment left. We rented a five bedroom house for eighteen dollars a month. We made about twenty dollars a week so rent was one weeks work. We were careful with our money and counted our nickels and dimes. We were married for seven years and then during the height of the depression we built a new house.

*{446}, MO: Not too many people did that did they?*

HS: No, not too many. I think it was the only house going up in Sydney. But my dad gave us the lot and we didn't even ask for it. There was a house up the street and they were asking \$4,500 for it. We built a new house for \$500 more. But, like I said, my dad gave us the lot and only charged us 2% interest. If we weren't offered that lot we would have never built a house. So, that's how we built a house during the depression.

*{465}, MO: Do you remember how the war helped the economy?*

HS: Now the men that had families, or had a business that was necessary to the public, like our dairy, that kept them out of the war. Our oldest son Ron, he had to go, but that's when the war was being fought in Japan and he was stationed in Germany for two years. Now, the war was hard on people too. Like I say, everything was rationed. Like sugar and shoes. You had to have your coupons. If your kids needed new shoes you would put card board in the soles until you could get new shoes. I think a lot of kids went barefoot.

*{502}, MO: How did they ration the goods you received?*

HS: Well, you got your book of stamps, you had to register for them. For each member of your family you got more stamps. So, if you had a large family you got more stamps. Neighbors would trade stamps. Say for instance sugar. If you didn't need the sugar you would trade it to another family say for shoes. Your gasoline was rationed, you watched where you went. I mean you didn't go somewhere and let the car run. A lot of people would make their own goods like bread and such. There were companies like Monarch that made war materials and Wagner Ware, in Sydney, made cooking ware. They would make these cast iron skilletts out of aluminum until things were over and then they went back into their normal product line. People would save tin cans and cut the top and bottom off and smash them and they would have drives for tin cans to help the war effort. You would also save your tin foil and roll it into big balls and they would also

collect that. You also learn to do without certain things and to conserve because when your stamps were gone - that was it.

*{552}, MO: During the war, would more people listen to the radio for update on the war?*

HS: Well, they wouldn't broadcast things like they do now. Now something happens and ten minutes later you have it on TV. You got the news over the radio, but nothing like it is now a days. In fact, they tell too much now a days. But the radio and the newspaper were the only source of news. I remember when I was a kid the Sydney Daily News. The Ohio State Penitentiary had a fire and the newspaper, no matter what time of the night it was, would come out with a special edition and the paperboy would be out at midnight or two o'clock at night yelling "Extra! Extra!" while running down the street. Everyone would get up and go buy a paper. That's how you got a lot of your news.

*{585}, MO: Was there a large movement among the population to rally around the flag?*

HS: To a certain extent. You know your loyalty was there. They had rally's and people would go and march. I can't say I was ever involved in any of that, but they did have stuff like that.

*{594}, MO: Did you experience any skepticism about being a German-American?*

HS: Well, an awful lot of German people lived around here. They whole neighborhood and my parents would speak German. They only time they would speak German though, is when they talked about things is when they didn't want us kids to hear. But as far as people giving us a hard time because of our German descent, no, we never had a problem with that.

*{619}, MO: Now, how do you look back at this time period?*

HS: Like I said, we felt the depression, but we didn't expect that much. We didn't feel that we were under privileged doing without this or that. It was a fact of life you know. Now everyone wants to start at the top instead of starting at the bottom and working their way up. And that's what we did we would work our way up and gradually things would get a little bit better. If your expectations are not so high I guess it all works out. As far as looking back, I will be 88 in July, but I had a good life. I can't say I was ever denied anything. We just learned, if you want this, you cannot have that.

*{660}, MO: What positives do you thing your generation took out of this time period?*

HS: Well, I thing our generation learned the value of money. We didn't have credit cards and all that stuff. If you wanted something you saved your money first and then you bought it. If you wanted something, you planned ahead for it and saved your money and then go out and buy it. It's a lot cheaper to buy things that way than to pay interest on things. If you did buy on credit, you saved your money to pay it off right away. I think the people of our generation valued what we had more. Then that diminished over time, but some people still have those old fashioned ideas.

*{697}, MO: Do you think this Country will ever see the things you generation went through again?*

HS: I would hate to see it because some of the younger generations, I don't know what they would do if they had to go through a depression. Actually, they wouldn't know how to get along. It could come again, you never know.

*{716}, MO: Is there anything else you want to add to this interview?*

HS: You know they would tell people that when automobiles first came out, they were hazardous to your health. The first car, as you know, were touring mobiles. It would take you four hours to get from Sydney to Toledo. I don't know if you know what Isen Glass is, but it was like plastic glass that would fold down over your car when it would rain. I remember we were coming home from Toledo and it started to rain and we had to get out of the car and put the Isen Glass down. If you were going 25 to 30 mph, you were going fast. Another time we went to Dayton and the car didn't have windshield wipers on it and coming home, just before we got out of Dayton, we got into a horrific downpour. My dad had to stop and get windshield wipers on the car, only you had to run them by hand. So, he drove with one hand and operated the wipers with the other. Between the years 1900 and 2000 there was more progression than any other time period. I have seen the invention of the car, commercial air travel, and the launching of the space program. There was a lot of progress but it came on so gradually you hardly noticed it. Now, if you would go back to the 1900's right now, you would really know the difference. People didn't have cars, you walked everywhere so we didn't need gyms or health clubs. It was an all together different time.

*{799}, MO: Alright then, we are going to wrap this interview up. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me Grandma.*