

DEPRESSING DAYS

It was depression time, whatever that was, and it was the best of times, and in some ways it was the worst of times. We were a family of nine, half orphaned, struggling through the harsh life of the wilds of the Gatineau Valley, back of Venosta, Quebec. I was about six in the midst of the depression. I didn't start school until I was seven. I don't know if that was the rule in rural Quebec at that time, or if I was just a late starter. Perhaps the long trek in the deep snow had something to do with it. I get a feeling at times, though, that my reputation had preceded me, and the school authorities and my father came to an agreement to keep me away from school until as late in life as possible.

It was primarily for this reason that, for me, it was the best of times. I was, then, the eldest of four children still at home during school hours. I was high man about the yard. Instant king. With a small k, of course.) My siblings did my bidding. It wasn't easy to return to my place in the scheme of things, when the others returned home.

The next in line, a sister, had the bad habit of telling the returning students, how mean I had been during the day.

She hadn't yet learned to remember that I could "get her" the next day. Doubly. Of course, I hadn't yet learned to remember that the dominant sector could "get me" the next day. Doubly. This split in the hierarchy created a condition whereby life could become rather hazardous, at times, for me.

About the only way we on the farm felt the depression was in the ragged clothes we had to wear.



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Our farm produced most of what we ate. A cord of wood cut from our large forest, or a dozen eggs taken to the local wood dealer, who also owned the general store, brought in a dollar and about six cents, respectively. With this bonanza we could, maybe, buy some salt and pepper one time, and perhaps some sugar and molasses the next.

In another important way, we kids were luckier than most. There were several cottages on our lake. The city people who came to their weekend retreats brought with them, old clothes, footwear, and an abundance of reading material, from comic books to magazines, to week-old newspapers, to Anne of Green Gables, to Tom Sawyer. The fascinating colors in the comics left me with a high that I feel to this day, and that I cannot explain.

Best of all, the tourists brought money. And almost non-existent commodity in our area at the time. Money in the form of pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters which they meted out to whoever was close enough or fleet enough to get to a gate first to open it for them. There were four gates on the road,

that were closed at times, depending on where the animals were confined. Some of these people would hand the keeper of the gate the grand sum of three pennies, as if it were a handsome reward. Others handed out quarters without a flicker.

At that age I already possessed, somewhat, the entrepreneurial spirit. When the fields were reaped of their crops in the late summer, and the farm animals were free to roam at will, I would close some of the gates on Friday when the big money was expected to start arriving. I did well until I got caught.

I was willing to try anything once. I remember the first gate opening quarter that I received. When I was able to replace my bugged eyes in their sockets, I quickly offered to go along and open the rest of the gates. My client readily agreed to the proposition. I hopped onto the running board of the host car, and looked forward to collecting a quarter for each of the three remaining gates. As they passed through the last gate, all of the passengers in the car waved me a very pleasant goodbye and a thank you, leaving me none the richer in monetary considerations. But with a wealth of wisdom.

As I trudged my way home, on the mile-long journey through dense bush, I began to contemplate the fallacy and failure of my foray into the world of finance. I was disheartened, and in no mood for further turmoil. Then I was the dark form moving through the bush, directly toward the road ahead. It was bear country, and no place for a five or six-year-old boy alone. But more about that in a later column.