

**DEPRESSION-ERA DINNERS CONSISTED OF LAMB CHOPS,  
STEAK AND OYSTERS  
01/25/00**

A conversation with my granddaughter Cyndi caused me to pause and think, as one my age tends to do, about by gone days. She prompted the exchange with the announcement that her finances were in a temporary slump – a situation I had not been appraised of in quite some time. In fact, not since she entered the work force at the beginning of last summer, a most commendable accomplishment for one so young.

I was happy to alleviate her predicament and it left me with a warm feeling that old Gramps could be of some help. In the course of our chat I learned that she earned more in an hour than I did in a week on my first job. I turned that fact around in my mind for a couple of days before I realized its significance was lost on her. Just as quickly it dawned on me that the same was true when my great-grandfather exchanged the same remarks with me.

It's especially startling to know when he built his home just before the turn of the century its total cost was only \$300. By contrast, our first home, bought in 1959, cost \$6,500. It was fully furnished as well. I was making \$3,460 a year at the time.

Older people quite naturally reminisce much more than they did when they were younger. The older they get the more ammunition they have accumulated and the more time they have to dispense it. One guy who enjoys it as much as I do and has a much better memory than I do is Dave Herlehy.

Dave's working days were spent in the Little Falls area of the Mohawk Valley before he retired in Old Forge. He is just enough older than I am to have experienced economic conditions just prior to the big WWII. He recalled that his first job paid 35 cents an hour, minimum wage being 40 cents an hour before the war and 75 cents an hour as late as 1946. He worked for over 20 years for Snyder Industries, the largest bicycle manufacturer in the US. They made bicycles for many retail giants, but only sold one under their own label. It cost \$10.

My best friend, Morgan Roderick, recalled paying \$8 for his first bike, a used one, in the same time period. His father complained because he thought Roderick paid too much for it.

Delmonico's first restaurant menu, printed in America in 1834, appears ridiculous today, but like all things, it is relative when compared to other costs. Tea or coffee was a penny; half a pie, 2 cents; and steak, 4 cents. Regular dinners were 12 cents.

Wilhma Fryer, my mother in law, supplied me with a copy of the menu as well as one

from 1944 from Lucca's Restaurant, a San Francisco eatery. She saved the menu as a memento after a dinner there on some special occasion or other. Full course dinners were \$1.25. A notation on the bottom of the menu reported that the prices were fixed at the time by the Office of Price Administration, (OPA), a government institution that regulated maximum prices one could be charged on most commodities.

The one thing that intrigues me about the comparison of costs over periods of time is how some items that were very cheap relative to current prices have changed dramatically. When I was a kid, oysters, lamb chops and flank steak were very cheap. I know because they were included as a regular part of our menu when everything was hard to come by.

The lamb chops remind me of an old friend who had an extended stay in Iceland. He boarded in a private residence and was in heaven with the regular meals of lamb chops. Sheep are very common there and take the place of lawn mowers. The only rub was the lady of the house refused to cook the chops medium rare the way he preferred them. They had to be cooked well done.

As his visit wound down he wanted to show his appreciation for the hospitality he had been shown by his many guests. He settled on throwing a chicken barbecue. His choice was based on his love for the same, which had not been included to any great extent since his arrival, and he thought it would be cheap. He found chicken prices there, where very few are raised, to be very expensive.

So Cyndi, the moral of this story based on your Gramp's experience, is all things are relative. Things have never been better than they are at this time and your money is providing you with more and better quality items than it did me at your age. I hope and expect the same will be true for your grandchildren.