

The following excerpts are from Mildred Armstrong Kilcher's memoir about growing up during the Great Depression on an Iowa farm.

HARD TIMES & HIGH SPIRITS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

During the thirties, in Garrison and on that Iowa farm where land was plentiful but money was almost nonexistent, we never wasted a thing. We were raised in the habit of thrift. It pervaded our lives. This was partly due to the Great Depression and partly due to the fact that Grandma and Grandpa never completely made it into the twentieth century. They provided the example to us kids.

Imagine, if you will, the effect of observing Grandpa treat a toothache. He never considered going for professional help, for that would have meant investing time, energy, and gas to drive the fifteen mile round trip to Vinton to the dentist, who would then charge him four dollars for the visit. Grandpa's solution was to climb by ladder to the topmost shelf of the kitchen cupboard and retrieve a tiny, square, brown glass bottle bearing a bright red skull and crossbones and measuring no more than one and a half

inches high. After carefully removing the glass stopper, he would dab some of the carbolic acid on a snippet of white cloth and, using a toothpick, touch it precisely to the root of his aching tooth. Whether that tincture destroyed the nerve or simply deadened the pain, I don't know, but it seemed to work.

Throughout our community there seemed to be a quiet competition to see who could be the most thrifty. When we broke an egg, we ran our forefinger inside the shells to retrieve every last bit of the white. We then placed the shells in the warming oven of the wood-burning kitchen range. When they dried to a proper brittleness, we tossed them to the chickens to increase their consumption of calcium. It was commonly thought that to toss undried shells to the chickens would encourage them to eat fresh eggs.

The desired complexion in those days was as pale and creamy as possible, which wasn't easy to achieve given all the time we spent working out-of-doors. We used tomatoes, both ripe and unripe, to soften



and whiten our cheeks and hands. So unpopular were freckles that it was considered acceptable to invest ten cents in a large lemon and another ten cents at the drug store to buy some borax to eliminate such blemishes. To eliminate pimples and cleanse our skin when we were teenagers, my sister and I would ritually slather a lightly beaten egg white onto our faces and allow about thirty minutes of drying time, during which we were not allowed to smile, laugh, or talk.

We were taught that if you bought something it should last forever—or as close to forever as we could contrive. I think one of the cleverest tricks was how we extended the lives of socks. When the socks of the biggest child developed holes in the toes, Grandma, using her dressmaker's shears, would cut off the end, sew it closed on the sewing machine and pass the socks down to the next child in size.

This was the thirties, and it was a time when we could count on nature's bounty for many of our treats. In the fall we were able to gather a wide variety of nuts. In the spring and summer we would pick ruby red currants, wild plums both yellow and red, wild cherries, wild red and black raspberries and blackberries, wild grapes, and crab apples from the bushes and trees that grew along the roads and fences.