

The Open Suitcase Series - Program Description

The Depression of the 1930s in Prince Edward Island

This program reveals what life was like on Prince Edward Island during the years of the Great Depression. The decade of the 1930s had huge economic and social impacts worldwide. Though the Depression affected the Island to a lesser extent than other provinces in Canada, those living here still faced numerous challenges. Islanders learned to be resourceful, leaning on industries such as fox farming and tourism to get through the difficult times. Stories from those who experienced the “Dirty Thirties” will engage listeners while bringing to life this trying time in history.

The written material covers the following topics:

What is an economic depression?

Learn the definition of an economic depression. Who does it affect?

What caused the Great Depression?

Learn about the stock market, inflation, and the roaring twenties.

When did the province of PEI feel the effects of the Depression?

Discover the Island economy of the 1930s and the influence of the trickle-down effect.

How did PEI, with its farm-based economy, experience the Depression?

Compare produce prices in the years leading up to and during the Depression. How were farmers affected by this economic downturn?

Was PEI’s fishing industry also affected?

Examine the change in prices for a fisherman’s catch throughout the Depression years.

How did Islanders share their food supply?

The generosity of people, even through hard times, can be seen through the stories shared by Islanders.

How did the Depression affect people not living on farms?

An urban lifestyle is very different from a rural one. This was also the case in the 1930s and the Great Depression affected those living in the Island’s urban areas differently.

Were there any industries that prospered during the Depression years?

Learn how Islanders took advantage of the growing industries of tourism and fox farming to improve the Island economy.

How did the PEI government help Islanders survive the hardships of the 1930s?

Explore the politics of the day and discover different techniques implemented by the government to bring relief to those in Canada's smallest province.

Were jobs difficult to find?

Read stories of the struggles of job-hunting experienced by both men and women during the Depression.

How was PEI's population affected?

Learn of prior out-migration from the province and how the economic turnaround brought people home.

Were there organizations that helped people during the Depression years?

Credit Unions are still found across the Island today. Learn about the development of this banking system and other co-operative movements.

What were some of the unusual measures taken by Islanders?

Rum running, though an illegal activity, was a source of income for a number of Islanders during the years of the Depression.

When did the economy begin to improve?

Learn how WWII changed the economy, creating employment and increasing both imports and exports.

What are some examples of the hardships experienced by Islanders?

Four stories are included which recount experiences of individual experiences during the 1930s. Topics include Christmas, college, inventions, and funerals.

Questions for Critical Thought and Ideas for Further Exploration

What is an economic depression?

- Discuss the definition of an economic depression. Are there any signs of this today?
- Who would be most hurt by an economic depression, the rich or the poor?

What caused the Great Depression?

- What are stocks and what is a stock market?
- Why would the day of the crash be known as 'Black Tuesday'?

When did the province of PEI feel the effect of the Depression?

- Why would there be differences in the ways by which the Depression affected different provinces?

- Did Islanders expect the Depression to affect them as it did other Canadians? Why or why not?

How did PEI with its farm-based economy experience the Depression?

- If prices for produce and other farm products were so low, why did some families still have trouble buying enough food?
- Would it have been easier to be a farmer, a fisherman, or a businessman during the Depression years?

Was PEI's Fishing industry also affected?

- What would have been more beneficial for the fishing industry, selling their catch at very low prices in an attempt to sell more, or selling fewer at a higher price?
- What is a primary industry?

How did Islanders share their food supply?

- Why was it important for Islanders, amidst their own struggles, to put effort into helping others during this difficult time?
- Were their efforts worthwhile even though they did not receive anything in return?

How did the Depression affect people not living on farms?

- What sort of businesses would struggle the most during tough economic times?
- What are some of the pros and cons to rural and urban life during the 1930s?

Were there any industries that prospered during the Depression?

- Why was the Island a good tourist destination in the 1930s?
- If people had very little money during the years of the Depression, why were they investing huge sums of money in fox farming?

How did the PEI government help Islanders survive the hardships of the 1930s?

- How would increasing the Island government's debt help stimulate the economy?
- Other than providing direct relief, in what ways could the government have helped Islanders?

Were jobs hard to find?

- Why was the paving of highways a good idea? Who did these new roads benefit?
- How do you think the Island compared to other provinces in employment availability?

How was PEI's population affected?

- Why was out-migration popular prior to the Depression?
- Why did the economic turnaround change the out-migration trend?

Were there organizations that helped people during the Depression years?

- Why would the term “co-operative” movement be used?
- Why did this movement expand and grow so much during these tough times?

What were some of the unusual measures taken by Islanders?

- What were the intentions behind the actions of these individuals?
- Did they find their risky actions to be worthwhile?

When did the economy begin to improve?

- How do you think Islanders felt as the Depression began to fade away?
- From where did the root of improvement come? What implications or consequences came with the economic change?

What are some examples of the hardships experienced by Islanders?

- What do you think people learned by living through the Great Depression?
- Why was the Great Depression historically significant?

Suggestions for Activities

1. On the Bank of Canada inflation calculator, determine the CPI index for \$100 in 1930 as compared to that amount today. Talk about the meaning of the Consumer Price Index.
2. Discuss what \$1.00 could buy in 1930 as compared to what \$1.00 can buy today.
3. Prepare a household budget for one month and then try to cut it by half, an exercise many homemakers were forced to do during the 1930s. What could you do without? Discuss the difference between needs and wants. What are some of the items on household budgets today that wouldn't have been there in the 1930s? (An example would be cable TV)
4. Check out the Holman's Catalogue from 1932. You are establishing your first home. You have one hundred and fifty dollars to furnish your two-bedroom apartment. This includes everything from dishes to bedroom furniture. Shop wisely. Think of some creative ways you can recycle and save some money.
5. Play a game of Monopoly. Monopoly was the brainchild of Charles Darrow who found himself unemployed in the United States during the Great Depression. In 1934, he

saw his board game as his financial way out of economic despair. Darrow took his game idea to Parker Brothers to produce and market; however, the company gave him fifty-nine reasons the game wouldn't sell. But Darrow had faith in Monopoly and went ahead on his own to produce five thousand copies and place them in stores for the Christmas of 1934. By 1936 it was the most popular game in the United States. Why do you think Monopoly is still popular today?

6. Have a class discussion on whether youth of today are being given the tools they need to financially succeed in the world. The concern has been raised that many low-income families have trouble eating well as fewer people know how to bake and cook from scratch. There is a greater dependence on prepared and processed food. Do you agree or disagree?

7. Make a meal for the class consisting of homemade baked beans (not canned), homemade bread, and tea. This is a project where parents might give a hand. Figure out the cost of the dinner. How would this compare with ordering in pizza for everyone?

World Wide Web suggestions

A list of related websites, helpful for further exploration, is included. For example: The Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator, Prince Edward Island Premiers Gallery, Population and Demographic Trends on Prince Edward Island, The Stock Market Crash of 1929, The World War II Home Front in Summerside Prince Edward Island, etc.

Items in the suitcase

Besides the written material contained in the binder, a number of other materials have been gathered for the suitcase that will increase the students' understanding of how the Great Depression affected Islanders.

If You're Stronghearted; Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century

Written by Edward MacDonald, former curator of the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation, this book gives an in-depth look at numerous factors that caused, influenced, or helped ease the struggle of the Depression years.

Holman's Catalog, Number 51, Winter 1932-1933

This catalog reproduction allows students to develop a greater understanding of the time period; for example, how homes were lit and heated, what food was eaten, what farm equipment was used, and what hand-powered technology was available. The Holman's Catalog also provides students with prices for a better understanding of the economy of the day and also the concept of inflation.

Monopoly

This board game was first produced in 1935 and included in the suitcase is the First Edition Classic version. Board games would have been a relatively inexpensive form of entertainment, much needed during the stressful times of the suffering economy. Has the game changed much over the years?