As 2008 draws to a close, recent newspaper headlines predicting economic doom and gloom make people anxious for what 2009 may bring. Wall Street bailouts, the mortgage crisis and the bankruptcy of major corporations have people wondering if the worst is over or if it is yet to come. To find these answers, economists and historians often look to the past.

Believe it or not, there was a time when things looked even more bleak than they do today. The Great Depression of the 1930s was a dark period in American history, and it is being recalled more lately as the country wonders whether it could happen again.

In a two-week special feature, The Holyoke Enterprise is presenting an account of the history of Phillips County during the Depression. Next week's article will feature stories and memories from those who actually lived through those tough, economic years.

The general belief is the stock market crash of 1929 was the catalyst for the Great Depression era of the 1930s, but in truth it is difficult to pinpoint when exactly things began to go south for those living in America's heartland.

During World War I, the federal government had encouraged farmers to grow as much wheat as possible. "If you can't fight, farm!" was a popular slogan of the time.

After the war, a devastated Europe bought huge quantities of food from the United States, driving up prices and, consequently, encouraging farmers to buy up as much land as they could afford or purchase on credit.

This hectic period, known as the "Great Plow Up," was also spurred on by new technology. Tractors and disk harrows now replaced the horse and plow, allowing farmers to grow three times as much wheat as they could before the 1920s.

In reponse, the once-high crop prices began to plummet. Farmers' costs, meanwhile, remained constant or increased. This loss of income led farmers to plant more, but more crops on the market only further decreased prices.

So by the time of "Black Thursday" on Oct. 24, 1929, farmers in the middle of the country were already in the middle of an agricultural crisis. In fact, that week's edition of The Holyoke Enterprise contained only a little blurb about the crash in its World News section.

However, the worst was yet to come, as the effects of the stock market crash, combined with major droughts, began to strike the Midwest.

In looking at editions of The Holyoke Enterprise from 1930 to 1931, Phillips County was quick and proud to boast the economic hardships of the rest of the country were not being felt so much in its little corner of the world.

During the summer of 1930, the paper reported while general crop conditions in the rest of the state showed decline, Phillips County was leading most other areas of the state by a large margin.

Also, in November of the same year, the paper stated the delinquent tax list for the year "does not indicate bad times for Phillips County and is substantially smaller than other counties in the area."

Two weeks later, local banks released reports that "fail to furnish any measure of support for the hard-time and depression talk made quite common throughout the rest of the country these days."

Still, the people of Holyoke could not be completely unaffected by what others were suffering around them. Stories of closed banks in the Denver area, Wray and Sterling were reported nearly every week. There were even some folks in Phillips County who found the news too hard to take, and a number of suicides were recorded that year to be the result of "financial despondencies."

By 1931, Phillips County's good fortune began to turn. That April, the county experienced its first dust storm. The paper explained its occurrence this way, "Although the ground has plenty of moisture, the top soil is getting very dry and heavy winds cause it to be blown away from roots of wheat and other plants. Moisture, however, will prevent this condition."

Typically, when historians refer to the "Dust Bowl area" they are talking about southern Kansas, western Oklahoma, northern Texas, northeastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado. However, its effects were felt as far north as the Dakotas.

Caused by severe drought and extensive plowing without crop rotation, natural grasses of the Plains that normally kept soil moisture in the ground were killed. With the grasses destroyed, the soil dried, turning into a fine dust and blowing away in large, dark clouds.

In June 1931, Citizens State Bank and First National Bank merged to form the largest banking institution in the northeast Colorado/southwest Nebraska area. Bank board members assured people the merger was not caused by the economy, but rather the lack of need for two large banks.

Bank president C.E. Paul told the Enterprise, "both banks were financially sound. Also, we want to let people know the so-called Depression has been very light in Phillips County and the county is in a very sound financial condition."

However, only two weeks later, the newspaper reported a 30 percent loss on the year's wheat crop due to early freezing, high winds and root rot. Amherst wheat crops were also reportedly suffering from an unknown disease.

That summer also saw the worst grasshopper infestation experienced so far, causing severe crop damages. In fact, it was so bad, farmers started an organization in which they would meet every week to discuss how to get rid of the pests, distribute poisons and time poisoning operations.

Little moisture fell that summer, as the weather reports indicated a hot, dry summer with high winds. All of these conditions combined to create the lowest corn yield ever that fall harvest.

As a result, Phillips County Bank was forced to close in December, due to a slump in deposits on account of the short grain crop, and a steady amount of withdrawals.

As 1931 turned into 1932, drought continued throughout the region. That April, the people of Holyoke were relieved by heavy rains that ended the months of drouth, but it was noted still much of the wheat crop had been killed by unfavorable weather.

Much of the land usually designated for wheat was devoted to corn that year due to weather conditions and low prices. Unemployment began to rise as farmers tried to save money by harvesting themselves rather than hiring help.

That spring of 1932, the Red Cross began distributing sacks of flour to needy families in Holyoke. By July, 400 sacks had been given away and 500 more were sent in to fill the demands.

More dust storms and drouth were experienced during the spring and summer. Many corn growers had to replant the crop several times because of the winds. Grasshoppers again were a problem that year as well.

On July 14, 1932 The Holyoke Enterprise reported record-high temperatures had been recorded for two weeks straight. Small grain was considered to be a total loss that year and there was only a small amount of winter wheat still surviving. All crop productions had fallen well below the five-year average, and in Haxtun, Farmers State Bank was forced to close.

It wasn't just the farmers who suffered. Twice in 1932, Holyoke Town Council slashed town employee salaries—the second time, cutting them in half. The cuts were necessary, said the

board, because of the drastic loss in revenue caused by more vacant homes, the discontinuance of payments and the decline in utility use.

In a September article, the Enterprise stated Phillips County Commissioners had sent a request for unemployment relief from the state auditing board. In their request, they noted some men in the area who were unable to find harvest work “are near the starving point.”

Efforts to relieve the despair that had taken hold of the county were made in the fall. Taxes at all levels were lowered, charity drives were organized and the Phillips County Relief Committee was formed with W.E. Heginbotham as its chairman.

Still, people were hurting. On Oct. 27, Sheridan O’Neal was found dead, having killed himself over “the country’s financial conditions,” despite being financially sound himself. Then in November, a group of citizens organized to try to stop publication of that year’s delinquent tax list. State authorities were forced to step in and demand the list be printed.

Any hopes the New Year would bring relief were quickly dashed as droughts and dust storms were recorded throughout January, 1933. At this point, it was remarked there had been no subsoil moisture for a year.

In the last week of January, over 500 farmers gathered together for the first meeting of the Farmers Holiday Organization. The purpose of the organization was to obtain a moratorium on debts and to seek the elimination of deficiency judgments, evictions and foreclosures.

Dust storms became a regular occurrence in 1933. In April, a Haxtun woman was killed during one of these storms. She was trying to get her livestock in the barn when a gust of wind suddenly swung the barn door shut, knocking her to the ground and breaking her hip.

On Monday, May 22, 1933, a significant dust storm led to “one of the queerest days in this country’s history,” according to the Enterprise. A cloud of black rolled in on Holyoke late that morning, and by noon, “you couldn’t see across the street.” It was reported at 3 p.m. that afternoon, it was pitch black like night. The storm finally blew through that evening, turning the sky red as it did so.

Property losses included crops, barns, machinery and fences either damaged or destroyed by the harsh winds. And more bad news came that summer, when it was recorded only 10,000 wheat bushels had been sold by the end of July. Prices for all crops were also shooting down sharply.

In an effort to stimulate economic growth around the country, newly-elected President Franklin Roosevelt began to put his “New Deal” plans into action that year. In August, 1933 it was announced that legislation had passed which would pay cash to farmers who agreed to reduce their wheat production. A total $126,000 was given to Phillips County wheat growers.

Another project receiving help from New Deal legislation was the creation of Highway 6. Formerly U.S. Highway 38, the route became known as Highway 6 when it was decided a connected road running from coast-to-coast was needed. The routes of US 32, which ran from Chicago west, and US 38 were combined and replaced by U.S. 6.

Begun in 1932, road construction had been stalled before reaching the Nebraska border due to the economy. Things began to pick up in the summer of 1933, however, with renewed funding.

Despite these efforts, the years of 1934 and 1935 would be the worst ever for Phillips County. As the drought continued, the dust storms became worse and farmers could only look on helplessly as their crops suffered.

Nearly every week during the summer of 1934, The Holyoke Enterprise reported new records for highest temperatures, lowest moisture and lowest crop yields. That year, Phillips County was

placed on the list of counties in Colorado needing drought relief. Because of that, county livestock producers were given feed for their animals, who were suffering the most from the depletion of feed crops.

As there was little grass left to graze on and with the feed supply scarce, thousands of livestock were starving to death. To help, the government began to buy and destroy thousands of cattle.

Between July 5 and Dec. 7 of 1944, a quarter million head of cattle were purchased by the state of Colorado. The vast majority of them were “condemned.”

1934 also marked the beginning of the “Jack Rabbit Project.” Low moisture and warm temperatures during the early years of the 1930s destroyed much of the natural conditions which typically kill young rabbits. As a result, hundreds of thousands of starving jack rabbits descended on the Dust Bowl region, devouring what precious little crops were still alive.

Desperate farmers were forced to begin an extermination campaign. Approximately 325,000 jack rabbits were predicted to be in the Holyoke area in August of 1934, when the local rabbit project began. 250 farmers signed up to take part in weekly hunting drives.

Most of the drives took place on Sundays. Sometimes shotguns were used, but since this could be very dangerous, more often than not, clubs were used. During the drives, lines of people were formed to march through the country and funnel the rabbits into pens. Once they were all inside, young men would jump in and begin killing them.

The drives mostly occurred before the springs of 1934 and 1935, when field work would begin. However, smaller drives were held all year round.

Both the wheat and corn crops of 1934 were the least productive on record. Several years of low crop production began to take its toll on county residents. Some gave up and moved on. With the beginning of each school year, fewer and fewer students were enrolled.

Those who stayed behind experienced the worst dust storms yet during the spring of 1935. In the Feb. 28, 1935 edition of the Enterprise, a front-page article described the worst of these storms that rolled in the previous Thursday.

It was reported the entire day was black as night outside and inside, the lights were necessary all day. The article stated, “Even old time residents here had never seen a storm like the one Thursday, they declared.” It added, “breathing was difficult either indoor or outdoor.”

The dust storms continued throughout the spring, leaving behind destruction and devastation. A March 28, 1935 Holyoke Enterprise article described its effects, saying, “A great deal of damage has been done by the spring storms. In some places, drifts are 2-3 feet deep. Stacks of feed are saturated with dirt and dust for more than a foot. In some cases, it has penetrated almost to the middle of the stacks.”

In an attempt to keep out the dust, wet cloths were used to cover any cracks in the walls or windows, but still the dust found its way in.

“Many housewives have given up in despair and are now 2-3 storms behind in housecleaning,” said the Enterprise. “The blowing silt is fine as flour and penetrates the best constructed houses.”

Worst of all, the constant breathing in of so much dust had negative health effects. People began to cough and spit up clods of dirt which collected in the lungs and stomach. An epidemic known as “dust pneumonia” raged across the Plains.

For one Holyoke woman, the illness was fatal. Bertha May Salvador died at the age of 57 from dust pneumonia in March, 1935.

Animals also suffered. After many were discovered dead in the fields with inches of dust

coating the stomachs, local vet Dr. Stout warned farmers to keep their livestock off dusty pastures. Eating short, dust-covered grass in fields barren of vegetation is causing stomach and intestine inflammation, he said, and added he realizes growers are hard-pressed for feed.

More county projects were approved by the government in 1935 to help the unemployment situation. That was the year the Phillips County Courthouse was constructed. Another $105,000 was given to the county for use in road construction, the renovation of fair buildings and the improvement of streets and curbs and gutters.

Summer again brought more high temperatures, very little moisture and little crop production. By August the millet crop was completely burned up and only 10,000 bushels of wheat were stored at the Holyoke elevator. The highest yield for wheat in Holyoke was recorded at 12 bushels an acre.

It was at this time, however, that the government and the nation's growers finally started taking a good, hard look at how farming methods had created these disastrous conditions.

On July 18, 1935, 225 farmers attended the government-sponsored Akron Field Day to learn about new, experimental dry farming methods. On the day's agenda were workshops on contour farming, rotation grazing, terracing, revegetation of denuded areas and planting windbreaks.

Throughout 1936, Phillips County worked to implement agricultural changes "to encourage sound methods of farming by conserving soil." The changes seemed to help some, though the biggest relief of all came in June 1936, when Holyoke finally received several inches of rain, putting the soil "in its best shape for years."

Though Phillips County was not out of trouble yet, 1936 was a more optimistic year for its residents. Dust storms were still being reported, but they were not so severe as previously. More moisture led to more vegetation, less dust and better crop yields.

Unfortunately, conditions in southern counties of Colorado were as bad as ever. For them, the summer of 1936 was one of the hottest ever. That year, however, the dust storms of the Southern Plains became so bad, they began to affect those on the East Coast.

This was the wake-up call Washington needed to finally put its full support behind soil conservation. An aggressive campaign to encourage new planting and plowing methods had begun. By mid-1938, the crusade had reduced the amount of blowing soil by 65 percent.

The drought would persist one more year, eventually ending in 1939, after eight years of failing crops. With the return of the rain, the fields soon became gold again with wheat and corn. But the hard years of the "dirty thirties" would remain in the conscience of America's heartland for many years to come.