

The ten year disaster

The Great Depression of the 1930s beat Canada up pretty badly. Not only did we have to contend with the collapse of world trade, our western provinces were also treated to the worst drought, grasshopper infestation and dust storm conditions in their history.

The disaster started with the stock market crash on Wall Street in October, 1929. International trade dried up and, because of Canada's dependence on exports, the economy was devastated. This, plus a cruel climate that turned the Prairies into a dust-bowl, put the country in a sad position. By 1933, 30% of the labour force was unemployed. Wages dropped. Prices fell even further. Not everyone suffered. Those with secure incomes benefitted from dirt cheap prices, but many lost everything. Examples of heart-wrenching letters sent to Prime Minister Bennett, pleading for help, can be found at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa.

There was little comfort for farmers, the young or the unemployed. Government and business were helpless in the face of this onslaught. The welfare system was hopelessly inadequate. The federal administrations of Bennett and Mackenzie King did little to create jobs, laying this responsibility at the feet of local and provincial governments. This resulted

IT'S YOUR HISTORY

in the fiscal collapse of the four western provinces and hundreds of municipalities.

Unemployment relief camps were established that paid single men 20 cents a day to do construction work. Conditions were poor and discontent ran high. It culminated in the On-to-Ottawa Trek that saw hundreds of protesters jumping the CPR freight trains. "Riding the Rods," to Ottawa. The march ended with the Regina Riot July 1, 1935. Prime Minister Bennett rejected the protesters' demands and the RCMP forced the trekkers to disperse and return home. Conditions in the camps gradually improved.

Other than an entrenched frugality among those who survived the period, the Great Depression resulted in the emergence of a strengthened social democratic political movement and the expansion of government involvement in social programs and the economy.

Thankfully may not be the right word, however, the outbreak of World War II provided the necessary stimulus to drive the economy out of depression. For information on this and other less depressing periods in Canadian history, contact the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa.



Jumping the CPR freight trains. National Archives of Canada. C 24840 NC

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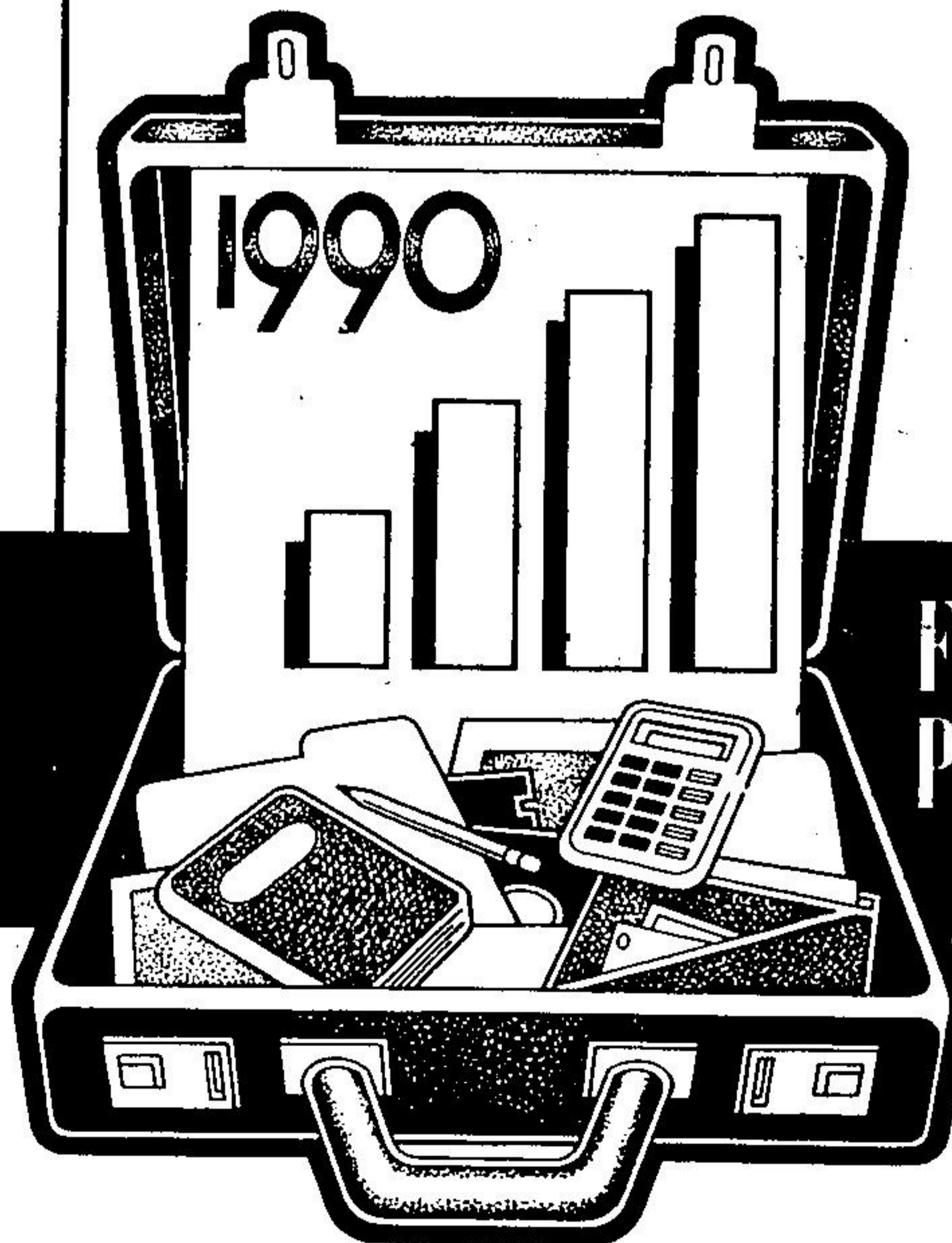
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