Hard Times: A Group Memoir

by Jean Florman

Seventy years ago, a class of Iowa engineers celebrated, graduated, applauded their parents and professors, and looked forward to successful futures in an honorable profession. Cutting-edge radio technology and innovative industrial design had made engineers America's darlings, and for almost a decade, the country had witnessed unprecedented economic prosperity.

But members of the class of 1930 also felt the shadow of Black Thursday—October 24, 1929.

There is no account of the full burden of the Great Depression on these young graduates. Yet a remarkable series of documents written by Iowa’s 1930 mechanical engineering alumni has preserved their thoughts about their education, early careers, and personal lives during the difficult years immediately following graduation. Chatty, descriptive, funny, and poignant in turn, these unique memoirs are informative windows into the past.

Mechanical Engineering graduates posed for a class photo in 1930. Included in the photo is Professor Croft (back row, second from left) who suggested the young men keep in touch through annual letters, which were collected as “The Mechanical’s Bull-Session” (above) and distributed to the whole class.
The story of "The Mechanical's Bull-Session," as the collected letters were titled, began with C.O. Croft, professor and head of mechanical engineering. Shortly before graduation, Croft proposed that the 10 members of the class of 1930 write annual letters summarizing what had happened in their lives during the previous year. One classmate, Wallace (Wally) E. Nelson, was chosen by his peers to print his classmates’ typed “annual reports” onto blueprint paper, then bind and distribute the booklets to all who contributed. The project met with enthusiasm, and with various members of the class serving as editor, the booklets continued to be produced until at least 1938.

At first, the young engineers—like everyone else—didn’t realize how devastating the stock market crash would be. After all, the “late depression,” as alumus C.H. Clark called it, became the Great Depression only in hindsight. Although all of the young engineers managed to find work or enter graduate school, their first letters, written in December 1930, refer to hard times.

“Business is pretty bad in New York. Most industries are running part time and a tremendous number of people are out of work. There are bread lines, army trucks feeding the unemployed and police stations giving away food.

"Still, they are building bigger buildings and theatres. It is good that the people are optimistic. They all say to themselves ‘Better days are coming.’” [Bill McLarney]

Some class members were forced to turn to occupations other than engineering. Lawrence E. Allen landed a sales job for the National Map Company, a position which, he said, “very nearly caused me to give the engineering profession a break.” Although Allen did work for some months during 1930 as an engineering draftsman, letters from subsequent Bull-Sessions indicate that he returned to selling maps and eventually became quite successful at it. Allen held another distinction among his Iowa peers.

“Some two or three months ago I chanced one day to discover my wife sewing blithely away on some little garments. Needless to say it was quite a shock to learn that I was to undergo the ordeal of paternity in a few weeks. It was all arranged that the little girl was to be called Lorraine. He arrived November 30th and is already named Lawrence Edwin, Jr. Eight pounds of bone and muscle he looks like a potential engineer if ever there was one. I therefore wish to avail myself of this opportunity to formally announce myself as the first father of the class. I do not expect anyone to contest me openly.” [Lawrence E. Allen]

The 1930 edition also includes a letter from Bull-Session editor, Wally Nelson, who mused about the contemporary economic situation and concluded it would be short-lived.

“We surely were dumped on the world at a time when it was tough sledding, saying the least. By living through this business depression I am sure that we have learned many a valuable lesson; and that we are trained fundamentally for the great period of reorganization which is soon to come.

Things are looking up, let’s go!” [Wallace E. Nelson]

Sadly, Nelson would not live to see the slow but eventual easing of the economic vice. He died after compiling the third edition of the Bull-Session.

By the time the second annual collection of letters was printed in late 1931, it was clear that the economic downturn was more than fleeting.

“Before anyone has time to wonder how I happen to be writing from away out here [in Los Angeles], I may as well break down and admit that it is purely a matter of financial difficulty. I got so poor that I couldn’t even buy coal to keep the family warm in the Middle West.” [Lawrence E. Allen]

The following year, Milford A. Bergsten’s letter described a series of short-term non-engineering jobs he patched together as companies reduced workers’ pay or hours to remain afloat.

“Bergie” first spent two months selling hardware at the Montgomery Ward store in Burlington, Iowa. Then, “falling back on politics my next job was with the county engineering department, which lasted for three months. I worked as an extra on profile work on the laying out of new roads. [Next] was the John Deere Plow Co. of Moline in their company store here in Iowa City. The balance of the year was spent at home helping my father in his implement store. Financially the year shows no gains.” [Milford A. Bergsten]

“During the last summer the depression caught up with me. The Bell Laboratories went on a five day, then on a four day week. Finally they decided that they had done enough
research for a while so they dumped out most of their engineers. And I was among the group that joined the army of the unemployed.” [Bill McLarney]

Like many other young college-educated men of the time, McLarney decided that if he couldn’t work, he might as well return to school. He earned his master’s degree in economics from Columbia University in 1933. “After that,” McLarney wrote, “I will again become a full-fledged member of the unemployed.”

But McLarney was able to eke out a living as an itinerant engineer, a saga he detailed in his contribution to the 1933 Bull-Session.

“If this depression keeps up much longer I will be well qualified to assume the responsibilities of a vocational guide for I have had all sorts of experience during the last year. I was a waiter in a Swedish Beer Garden. I sold desks in a department store that had several different kinds of prices.

“And I have repaired radios. This latter kind of work is a good field in which to pick up a few dollars once in a while. I recommend it to those who are out of work at the present.” [Milford A. Bergsten]

By 1931, “Bergie” was working for Frigidaire. Recognizing that the inevitable decline in the number of his unwed peers might be his financial boon, he ended his letter with a pitch.

“Now any of you who are married and are interested in getting an electric refrigerator, just drop me a line and I’ll give you the low down and then tell you the best one to buy.”

The mechanical engineers also reminisced about their undergraduate years. Mark Plumly’s letter for the 1937 volume recalled “the outstanding yearly event” of MECCA week. In his 1930 letter, Kenny Hamil longed for his Iowa City home.

“Wilmington has all the disadvantages of a big city and none of the advantages. There isn’t even a theater as nice as the Englert.” [Kenny Hamil]

From the beginning, several engineering professors also contributed to the Bull-Sessions.

“I am looking forward with pleasure to receiving this volume of letters which Nelson is collecting,” wrote Ralph M. Barnes, associate professor of industrial engineering. “I hope he has better luck getting the letters in on time than I had last year getting your laboratory reports—but why bring that up.”

And in the 1938 volume, Professor Croft, head of the Department of Mechanical Engineering and initiator of the Bull-Sessions, offered the following piece of good news:

“This letter has been somewhat tardy in reaching your class secretary in view of the fact that there has been a renewal of the old question of moving our College of Engineering to Ames. It is with a certain pleasure that we can now report that this issue is again dead for this session of the legislature.”

By 1938, the content and tone of the letters had changed dramatically. The Great Depression had eased, Americans were turning their eyes to problems in Europe, and the mechanical engineering class of 1930 finally could write about permanent jobs with industry giants. Thirty-six-year-old Larry Allen had left the map business, returned to the engineering fold, and worked two straight years with the
Allen—like the other members of Iowa’s mechanical engineering class of 1930—had weathered the storm.

“Another year has completed its span in this vale of tears, and I am not only still working for the same company, but even living in the same house, which is almost a record for me. It is a wonderful age in which we are living.

“Lennox is now producing entirely automatic heating plants of greater beauty than the grand piano of grandmother’s day, and I presume each of you has equal reason to be proud of his company. I note that du Pont, especially, is doing its bit to make the world a better place in which to live by discovering a substance from which ladies’ hose can be made three times as shear as silk ones.

“Having told all the news, I must now go and write my boss about what an inadequate salary I am receiving. Sincerely, Larry Allen”

Saga of Rocklin—Entrepreneur

A few years ago during an alumni gathering in Sioux City, Iowa, University of Iowa President Mary Sue Coleman was chatting with Jim Rocklin (BBA 1964, JD 1967) who mentioned a collection of booklets he had inherited from his father, Isadore Jay Rocklin (BS 1930 in mechanical engineering). The booklets, Rocklin said, contained letters from the mechanical engineering class of 1930, written during the nine years immediately following their graduation. The narratives proved to be a unique and fascinating treasure trove detailing the lives of ordinary men living in extraordinary times.

Like many of the letter writers, Isadore Rocklin described the jobs he had during the Great Depression. His employers included a Sioux City foundry, a Chicago company researching the viability of wind power, an air conditioning production company, and his father’s Sioux City greenhouse business. During those years, Rocklin—good engineer that he was—also tinkered. He designed wind-powered electric equipment and a portable room cooler that relied on ice, manufactured under the trade name Kool-Kleen. In his 1937 letter, Rocklin wryly added that since 1935, “I investigated thoroughly the possibilities for losses in conducting one’s own business by attempting to manufacture a coal stoker.”

By working as a one-man designer, producer, marketer, and shipper, he built Rocklin Manufacturing into a thriving business. After World War II, Rocklin invented a process that continues to be the company’s focus. By melting infinitesimal particles of a metal surface and electronically infusing wear-resistant tungsten carbide onto the surface, “Rocklinizing” increases the productivity and reduces the wear and cost of high-speed cutting tools.

Rocklin continued to work at his plant until shortly before his death in 1993. In a 1990 column for Nation’s Business, Rocklin wrote, “During my life, I’ve learned that flexibility and the willingness to stick to a task that you believe in are the most important characteristics of an entrepreneur. If you love what you do, believe in it, and strive for excellence, who can stand in your way?”