Drought, starvation, grasshoppers, rabbits and, above all else, dust. These are the recurring subjects mentioned over and over by those recalling the hard years of the 1930s, or “dirty thirties.”

Life during the years of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl was not only tough, it was also an unusual and unique experience. At least, it was according to residents of Regent Park and Carriage House who gathered Tuesday afternoon, Dec. 30 to share and discuss what they remembered.

Though many of them were young children during those years, it is evident the events of the 1930s left quite an imprint on their memories.

“We all thought the world was coming to an end,” said long-time Holyoke resident Lucille Miles as she described a particularly awful dust storm she witnessed as a child. Before that storm, she said, her father and one of his hands had been outside working by the barn when they saw the black clouds approaching. “As they were getting the livestock into the barn,” Miles said, “my father later told me he had asked the hand, ‘John, don’t you wish you’d gone to church more?’”

Though he grew up in Kentucky, Floyd Wilcox said he also saw his share of dust storms. “They were strange,” he said. “I remember one day it got so dark the chickens roosted in the middle of the afternoon. We’d stuff rags around the door, trying to keep the dust out, but it was still hard to breathe. People thought the world was coming to an end.”

Wilcox added his father was a railroad worker before the Depression, but he, like so many others, lost his job when the railroad companies started to suffer. His family survived off of government

commodities that were distributed every month. He remembered they contained items such as canned goods, flour and beans.

Offering another unique perspective, Dolores Kisner tried to explain how bad things were for her hometown community of Martin, S.D., located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation near the Nebraska border.

Speaking of the total devastation she witnessed, she talked about crops drying up into dust and the helplessness she felt as she watched livestock starve to death because there was no feed for them.

Kisner remembered bitterly cold nights. Her father and two brothers would spend days picking up cowchips as it was the only source of fuel they had. Heating bricks to place under the sheets of the bed helped a little too, she added, but not much.

She tried to talk about her father who worked on a highway project as a way to earn money. But the amount of food he could afford was never enough to keep up with the physical demands of the job.

“He and the other men all got so thin and weak...,” she trailed off. “Let’s just say I saw a lot of terrible things.”

Houses in those days were not as well insulated as they are now, and provided little defense against the unrelenting dust. All the residents recalled putting wet rags or cloths over and around all the doors and windows, and in every crack they could find, in an attempt to keep the dust out. Yet, it managed to come in anyway.

Blankets were placed over the beds during the day and then taken outside to shake the dust off of them before bedtime. Lamps would have to be cleaned constantly or no light would shine

through the caked-on dirt. Dishes, tables and clothes also had to be washed repeatedly.

Animals needed to be rounded up into barns if possible for protection. Gerald Miller remembered days when he helped his father round up the cows during dust storms, adding there was one warning his father gave him that he'll never forget.

"My father told me we had to put goggles on the horses every time we took them out in it, or else they would go blind because the blowing dirt would scratch and build up in their eyes."

He recollected too the big rabbit drives, which he participated in. "The rabbits would come in from all sides," he said. "There was one behind every fence post. We'd round them up and then shoot at them or beat them with clubs." He laughed, "Sometimes we'd use both at the same time."

Of course, there were times when dust storms would strike during a school day. The residents recollected having to do their lessons at times by lamplight because it was so dark outside. More often than not, however, if a dust storm was spotted in enough time, parents came to take their children home and school would be canceled.

While they admitted to experiencing some hard times, Miles and Julma Bonesteel, who grew up on a farm near Julesburg, insisted they were fortunate to have lived on a farm during that time.

"I didn't know the hardships that other families had," said Bonesteel. "Living on a farm, we always had animals, so we always had food."

She added as farmers, her family was able to get coupons from the government for things such as tires and sugar that people living in town could not get.

Miles agreed. "I was always envious of town kids," she said. "Then one day I was talking to a girl who lived in town and she told me how envious she was of me because we had better food."

She added, "We were poor, but we never went hungry, and my father never turned down anyone who needed something to eat." She recalled there were many young men who traveled through the area during those years, trying to find a place to work. Miles said if her father saw one of these men walking by the house he would invite him inside for a sandwich. Many of them, she said, were thin and weak.

With recent economic times being what they are, perhaps everyone should be paying attention to those who are left to describe the difficulties of the 1930s. Certainly, the group of residents at the Carriage House believe it is entirely possible the country could be headed for another Depression.

"I think it will happen again," said Bonesteel. "It's already hit hard times for many people."

"But I don't think we'll ever have the dust storms again," added Miles.

If a Depression is headed this way, they all agreed, it is going to be very hard on the younger generations. Younger people haven't been taught to save their money, they said, and are unprepared for the sacrifices that would be required.

For those looking for more local information and personal stories on the 1930s, check out Dick Waln's Life in the Sand Hills of Northeastern Colorado During the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. The book is a collection of memories shared by people who grew up in northeast Colorado during the 1930s. Many of them are past students of the former Pleasant Prairie School. A copy is available at Phillips County Museum.