

Year End Assessments 2008

I always enjoy reading biographies and autobiographies. There is much to be learned from the experiences and observations of others. In reading, I have concluded that each generation seems to deal with parallel issues. The details are different and the settings are unique, but the experiences are often quite similar. I have noted that in most cases the writer gives much attention to four specific categories: Food, Family, Faith and Finances.

It seems most writers make an entry at year's end to assess the events of the year and sometimes to predict what the future may hold. Knowing this to be my final newspaper column of the year, I choose to give my own brief assessment of agriculture in Cache Valley and attempt to share a few correlations from the interesting book *History of Mendon*, as seen through the eyes and recorded with the pen of Isaac Sorensen.

During 2008, Cache Valley farmers enjoyed an abundance of irrigation water and a general reduction in insect problems. As such, most irrigated crops yielded quite well and commodity prices were better than most can ever remember. Dryland crops got off to a good start with cooler spring temperatures and timely spring rains, but the rains virtually stopped the end of May. Dryland yields were lower than anticipated, but very little hay got rained on this year.

Input costs were also higher than any can remember. Oil sold as high as \$147.96 a barrel during 2008 and everything from fuel to fertilizer to baler twine was extremely expensive for farmers. Most farmers struggled daily trying to decide if they should attempt to maximize yields or settle for a reasonable profit. There were all kinds of philosophies shared at local meeting places.

Implement dealers sold more tractors and farm equipment in 2008 than they have for many years. One can see lots of new pickup trucks on farms, too. Some say that is because of good prices from the sale of crops, others say it is because economics have not allowed replacement of aging equipment for several years.

Dairymen and livestock producers started the year with much optimism, but ended rather discouraged. The government-subsidized ethanol program made corn more valuable as a fuel source than it had ever been as a feed. All feeds increased in price, forcing dairy and livestock producers to modify their feed rations, watch profit margins shrink (or disappear), or grudgingly pay unusually high prices in order to feed their animals. Some have been forced to exit the business, while those who remain are often operating on equity instead of net profits. Dairy, poultry and livestock producers are also mystified that proven methods of animal husbandry are being challenged by animal rights groups who have no knowledge of the production process.

Cache Valley farm families are also impacted by this year's economic crisis. Though the problem has been building for years, Wall Street and Main Street end the year in a serious recession... with some saying we will soon be in a deep depression. Washington's \$700 billion bailout plan hasn't seemed to stimulate the economy and

details of a bailout for automakers is also being considered. Farmers are wondering if they can continue to adequately finance their operations and provide for their families. If money is available to finance farming operations, will the terms be such that they can meet the conditions of the loan? Some among us wonder if we spent money too freely when times were good.

Isaac Sorensen wrote a similar entry in 1890: “wheat raising reach its Zenith, both for Quantity and price it brought....Dry farming at this period was among the most remunerative pursuits to engage in....Hogs were at a premium...also all other farm products.....Credit was largely indulged in not by everyone, but by the greater part of the people who allowed themselves to thus be entrapped...heretofore men had been reluctant to go into debt 5-10-15 dollars, they would many of them go into hundreds in this one branch of Family and farm necessities, as thought to be necessities....The reader would inquire how was it people thus allowed themselves to go into debt beyond their means...”

In 1900, Sorensen wrote; “It was not now as it was 25 or 30 yrs ago, it cost but little to keep a family then, but now Very much is required to sustain an ordinary sized family, where formerly \$200 would carry a family safe through the year, it would now require 6-700 dollars, it kept a man as well as the rest of the family very busy to make ends meet.”

Sorensen’s account of the financial “panic of 1907” told of a run on banks, a sharp drop in the stock market, thousands of working men laid off and the establishment of soup kitchens... “there was indeed a hard time for very many for some-time...”

It is not hard to see the correlation of our day with earlier days. Conditions then did not change without neighborly cooperation and financial suffering. We will likely have to follow the same path. Fortunately, most of us are still well fed, well clothed and sheltered from the cold weather. It seems to me if we have food to eat, a family to love and faith to move forward, our finances may not be all that important after all.