

“When you mention the phrase “hard times,” the image I get, the conventional sense, is a picture of dust bowl Okies and “Grapes of Wrath,” and of hard scrabble and empty stomachs and no good choices.”

— Brent Scheneman

TIMES

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In the last full quarter, the U.S. economy turned in the worst performance numbers in 28 years. Two such faltering quarters in a row, in which the gross domestic product declines, and the economy will meet the official standard for a recession.

In Lee County, where property values declined last year for the first time since records were kept beginning 50 years ago — and probably for the first time since the Great Depression — values dropped 12 percent.

Meanwhile, the county issued only 32 permits for single-family homes in unincorporated Lee in September. That tied the record monthly low set in December 2007, and was well down from about 1,300 permits issued in August 2005.

Also in September this year, tourism as defined by people who rent motel rooms declined almost 13 percent from the previous September.

That sounds hard, but is it?

A hospice nurse in Collier County, Bill Goodsell, defined hard times a week ago as dying in unnecessary pain and terror. And he described death as “the equalizer,” in which the end is no different a time for the rich or the poor.

Perhaps the definition of hard times is relative — to the person, to the generation, to the nature of experience.

There are no long soup lines today, although soup kitchens remain a present if not mostly invisible feature of the landscape. Few people grow food regularly in order eat, because they have to.

Nobody, apparently, is starving, as some did during the Great Depression.

No state governor today would respond to his constituents the way Alf Landon did in Kansas, in 1933. Studs Terkel quoted Landon in his famous book, “Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression,” in which Americans described in the muscular vernacular of our own English how they remembered the 1930s.

“Men with tears in their eyes begged for an appointment that would help save their homes and farms. I couldn’t see them all in my office. But I never let one of them leave without my coming out and shakin’ hands with ‘em. I listened to all their stories, each one of ‘em. But it was obvious I couldn’t take care of all their terrible needs.”

People today are suffering, too, and in the case of some who fail to find health care for their terrible needs, dying is a very real possibility.

So with all due respect to the late, great Studs Terkel, Florida Weekly offers the voices of a few people living here and speaking to hard times now.

Mr. Terkel died last week at 96, but the people who speak below, however briefly, would have been familiar to him.

Their words are reprinted directly from conversations.

Brent Scheneman, 58, freelance journalist, Germany and Lee County:

When you mention the phrase “hard times,” the image I get, the conventional sense, is a picture of dust bowl Okies and “Grapes of Wrath,” and of hard



Scheneman

scrabble and empty stomachs and no good choices.

But I’m a baby boomer. I never personally experienced any of that.

As a traveler, a journalist, I’ve been to places where people faced truly hard times. I think of the Guatemala City dump. I did a documentary film there, and that was hard times. We watched young kids grow up and either get out of it or not.

That’s there. And in an almost ironic sense, such people today are in the most advantageous position.

When we suffer the results of a climate change, what appears to be a collapse of the world’s economy, overpopulation, an unsustainable environment — whatever combination of that compound collapse that appears imminent — those people in the third world are much better prepared to handle it. They know nothing different.

But for those in the so-called first world, the likelihood that we will experience hard times at that Okie, dust-bowl level might not be so far fetched.

The other side of the coin of hard times is that those are the opportunity moments for a civilization. That’s where the leap into an upgraded way of living can occur — a way that’s sustainable for a species. A sustainable society can and will emerge, whether it’s some remnant herd or an entire continent. It’s only natural that could happen.

So I look at it not with dread, but, hey — if it happens in such a way, and enough of the right-minded people are preparing for contingencies, maybe it’s the last great opportunity for humanity to save itself.

So to me, politics as usual in the information age — that’s the hard times. Where the leadership on the planet doesn’t have a clue about how to get us out of it.”

James “Jimbo” Wilson, 13, student, Varsity Lakes Middle School:

“To me, what shows we are in hard times, is in my school class. We have fairly lucky people — good kids, good people. But there are so many now, there are about 12 kids at school I know, and they’re telling us that they’re moving, or their parents are walking away from their house because they’re being laid off. People can’t afford to keep others on staff. It’s sad to see these kids losing a chance at a great education.

If they can’t afford to keep up the mortgage, there’s a good chance they’re not even going to be able to go to college. So if these aren’t hard times and this isn’t a recession, I don’t know what is.

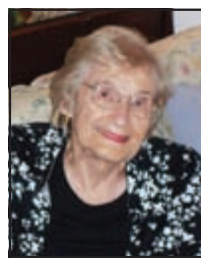
Personally, naturally, I don’t have that much experience to go on at my age. But the worst thing that’s happening to my family? As of late we’ve been selling everything — the boats my father and grandfather bought years ago, and kept in good shape. Things we love and use. We’ve had to sell them just to pay the mortgage or electric bills.

That’s how I see it, but I have a grand-

father who is set in the idea that America is bulletproof and the Great Depression is the only bad thing that happened to us. No matter how much my dad (a firefighter and paramedic) and I try to explain that things are hard right now, my grandfather is still convinced this is the greatest economy, and, I guess I’ll use the word juggernaut, that we are a juggernaut in international economic status.”

Virginia Stephens, 90, mother, Lee County:

We were better off in the Depression than we have been at other times, it seems. I don’t know, I guess because we were not used to a whole lot of extras.



Stephens

My dad was a coffee salesman (in Parkersburg, W.Va.) and people still drank coffee. So we were better off than many others.

We always had a garden, so we had enough food. I was their expert eater. My dad and I would go down to the tomatoes with a salt shaker and take ‘em right off the vine. You didn’t spray them with terrible things, then. I can still taste them.

People took care of each other. Relatives came, they still came. Mother canned anything. That’s why my husband, Bill, married me — my mother’s cellar. And he thought I was going to do that, too. I told him: I would freeze, I’d cook, I’d do anything else, but I would not can.

I’d come in from someplace and mother would be standing over the stove, and you’d have to help. Sometimes you’d be standing over the stove until 10 or 11 at night.

So I can’t say I remember any times that I thought were hard times, then. But I thought the war (World War II) was hard times, because Bill was overseas. And I was scared. I remember D-Day: Always before it was full checker, everybody yelling at each other all the time, at the Parkersburg Rig and Reel, where I worked. But on D-Day, it was complete silence in there.

Now, I don’t consider this hard times. I feel like I’ve been the luckiest person in the world.

Chester Scheneman, 86, retired factory worker, father, Lee County (and father of Brent Scheneman):

About the hardest thing was watching my mom and dad figure out what to do.

He was vice president of the Lincoln Rubber Company (in Ohio). They went into receivership. The person who bought it didn’t know what to do and it caught fire and burned down.



Scheneman

But my mom and dad made out all right. They borrowed money to start a little beer joint where we used to live. We lived above it. Right there up the sidewalk from where we had the house.

One thing I remember during the Depression is going out fishing and catching a lot of bluegill, and mom fried them up and sold them for dinners. We

were just trying to get by.

I know everybody had it rough, but I don’t think anybody starved, I never saw that in my town. People sort of worked together. Most of the fathers worked and had jobs.

When I was 10, my job was to clean up that beer joint in the morning. It’s nothing really that I shouldn’t have been doing. When Dad said to do it, I did it. You try to work, too, with your parents. Whenever Dad needed help with something, I helped.

Hard times now? No, that’s not how I see it. Everything we made happen, people made happen themselves. They got greedy and bought more homes, homes that were too big. And most places I go to buy food, you can’t find a parking place, so nobody’s starving.

The people who hurt are often the ones who put themselves in that place to start with. You gotta be careful all through your life. A lot of people live from week to week, people have things, they overspend.

And you can work. My dad cared for us, and he would work extra — he’d go out and help his brother-in-law lay cement block. My wife, she as brought up in West Virginia, and they didn’t know there was a Depression. They lived on a farm, butchered hogs, the neighbors came in to help, they could get wild honey. She said, there were no hard times in West Virginia.

Maureen Wall, 61, hairstylist, Lee County:

My worst fear is losing health care — that would be hard times. Not just because of the cancer I had (lymphoma), but because of what I saw. I saw a 42-year-old woman with no money, and she got the surgery probono, but she couldn’t get the chemo. I didn’t see it, but I heard she died.

My insurance gave me limited home health care, and I was in the hospital a month. I almost didn’t survive. And then they sent me home with tubes sticking out of me, and the insurance finally didn’t cover home visits. One tube fell out, along with a lot of stuff that dripped out, and I was by myself.

We have to see a lot of specialists: eye doctors, cancer specialists, gastroenterologists, sometimes neurologists, and we survive by CAT scans and MRIs and other diagnostic tests. We pay 10 percent of each MRI, so that’s \$360 now, just for one.

My husband and I have hard jobs, we both stand on our feet on hard floors, and we’re at an age where we could start thinking about retiring, but we can’t because of health. We work for money, but also for health care. He works for Lee Memorial as a chef, so we have health care through there. It’s more expensive now than when we started, too. And Social Security — we worked a lot of years to have a little nest egg in that — but Social Security got pushed back to 66. And we have a house we can’t sell in this economy. So we can’t leave. We’re trapped there.

But I don’t consider all that hard, or hard times, because in the case of my cancer, we had insurance and I got it done. I have a strong will to live, and that helps. And I also believe in God’s control. People sure aren’t in control, that’s for sure. ■