



Overview Essay

The Great Depression: A Struggle to Survive

In the presidential election of 1928, when Herbert Hoover ran against Al Smith, the Republican party proclaimed in advertisements across America that it had "filled the working-man's dinner pail—and his gas tank besides—made the telephone, radio and sanitary plumbing standard household equipment . . . put the proverbial 'chicken in every pot' and a car in every backyard to boot." Within a year, however, the stock market had crashed and families across the nation were struggling to keep a roof over their heads and clothes on their backs. After a tour of more than twenty states, Oscar Ameringer, editor of an Oklahoma City newspaper, wrote this: "The roads of the West and Southwest teem with hungry hitchhikers. The campfires of the homeless are seen along every railroad track. I saw men, women, and children walking over the hard roads. Most of them were tenant farmers who had lost their all in the late slump in wheat and cotton. Between Clarksville and Russellville, Arkansas, I picked up a family. The woman was hugging a dead chicken under a ragged coat. When I asked her where she had procured the fowl, first she told me she had found it dead in the road, and then added in grim humor, 'They promised me a chicken in the pot, and now I got mine.'"

The Human Toll

For millions of people, the Great Depression was a time of extreme hardship. At its peak in 1933, over a quarter of the American work force had no jobs. In Chicago, the unemployment rate was 40 percent. People living in rural areas fared no better. Over one million families lost their farms. In places that depended on mining or manufacturing, whole towns were unemployed when mines or factories closed. Miners, farmers, factory workers, and white-collar professionals—people in all occupations were affected by the Great Depression.

African-Americans carried a disproportionate share of the burden, often being the first to be laid off and last to be hired. By 1932, half of all African-American workers were unemployed; they had little chance of finding jobs. A clerk in a store in Marianna, Florida, expressed the ugly sentiment behind the statistics when he said that the African-American "hasn't got no right to have a job when there are white men who can do the work and are out of work."

The results of the widespread unemployment of the Depression were devastating. No unemployment payments were issued to people who lost their jobs. Federal and state aid, when available, was too little to survive on. In New York City the weekly welfare allowance for a family was \$2.39, this when a half gallon of milk cost 21 cents. The situation was just as bad in other parts of the country. No state or federal funds existed for rent, medical care, or clothing. "We are merely trying to prevent hunger and exposure," reported one welfare worker. But even this goal was unrealistic, for millions of people were hungry and homeless.

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime

Across the nation, despair was widespread. Those people who were lucky enough to have a job lived in a constant state of anxiety about their future. Many accepted large salary cuts or had their hours reduced. For the millions of jobless, the situation was even worse.

With so many people unemployed, there was less and less hope of finding a job. A Baltimore

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man remembered walking twenty miles looking for work. "I just stopped every place," he said, "but mostly they wouldn't even talk to me." For Americans brought up on the idea that work was the measure of one's worth, joblessness quickly undermined people's self-esteem. "I'm just no good, I guess," said one unemployed woman.

To survive, people were forced to ask for help—from relatives, friends, strangers, and relief organizations. Acts of generosity abounded during the Depression, but with resources scarce, so did resentment. "What's the matter with those people that they can't go out and get a job and support their families?" was a common complaint against those seeking help.

Many needy Americans found the thought of asking for charity painfully humiliating. "I have had too much self respect for my self and Family to beg anything," wrote a North Carolina man. "I would be only too glad to dig ditches to keep my family from going hungry." People who were able to get Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs were glad of the chance to work for their money rather than accepting charity.

Fighting to Stay Alive

Thousands of people lost their homes during the Depression because they were unable to pay their mortgages. Some moved in with relatives. Others, who only a few months earlier had lived in warm, spacious houses, were forced to move into rundown sections of town—called Hoovervilles—where people built homes from whatever materials they could find. A woman who lived in Oklahoma during the Great Depression remembered a visit to a Hooverville: "Here were all these people living in old, rusted-out car bodies . . . There were people living in shacks made of orange crates. One family with a whole lot of kids were living in a piano box. This wasn't just a little section, this was maybe ten miles wide and ten miles long."

Thousands of families had no homes at all. Farmers in the Dust Bowl were particularly

hard hit. Many lost their farms and were forced to travel from place to place in search of work picking fruits and vegetables. These migrant workers were paid low wages and

could barely support their families, who were often sick and malnourished.

Hundreds of thousands of "hobos" wandered around the country looking for work or begging clothing and food

wherever they could. Many of these transients were young people who left home so as not to burden their families. To survive, they sometimes ate from dumps or garbage cans. One woman recalled the sobering sight of "thousands of men rolled up in their overcoats" sleeping on the pavement under a bridge in Chicago. Many became ill or died from hunger and exposure.

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The Conclusion

The Great Depression led many Americans to believe, as Franklin D. Roosevelt said in a campaign speech in 1932, that "the first obligation of government is the protection of the welfare and well-being . . . of its citizens." As a result, in the years since the Depression, the federal government has broadened its powers to increase its control over the economy and to ensure that the basic needs of American citizens are met. Work remains to be done before this last goal will be achieved.

The Depression had a profound effect on traditional American values about work and money, undermining the belief that hard work and honest living would surely result in a good life. People began to feel more and more at the mercy of outside forces. In the years after the Depression, therefore, many Americans turned to the immediate acquisition of money and material goods as the only way to guard against an insecure future. Many of those who had suffered through the Depression stocked freezers with food and storage shelves with row after row of canned goods, guarding against the possible return of another Great Depression.