

**SOCIAL CHANGE
IN THE
GREAT DEPRESSION ERA**

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Introduction

The Great Depression Era was a time of serious economic crisis in the United States of America. The US economy collapsed, causing huge turmoil; it had a devastating effect not only throughout the whole country, but overseas too. This era was characterized by high rates of unemployment, hunger, and homelessness. People had to face terrible hardships, thus their lives changed radically. As the country was struggling for survival, significant changes took place in society. While searching for the solutions for the problems caused by the depression, society was transformed.

My thesis explores how the Depression affected the lives of the American people, and how society adapted to the new situation that emerged at the beginning of the 1930s.

1. Great Depression: an overview

It is a widespread belief that the Great Depression was caused by the stock market crash of 1929. The truth is that the causes go way deeper than that.

In the Roaring Twenties people turned inward, they did not pay much attention to international issues, or social concerns. They turned toward greater individualism; their main purpose was to get rich, enjoy life, and try new inventions. The 1920s were really prosperous times. Industries produced large amounts of consumer goods, but for prosperity to continue, demand had to grow as rapidly as supply. People were persuaded to buy such products as automobiles, radios, and household appliances. As long as people were purchasing goods, everything was all right. However, there was one big problem with the economy: income was not distributed evenly. The property of the wealthiest citizens grew rapidly because of successful businesses, while the working class did only get a small share of the profit. "In 1929 the top 0.1 percent of American families had a total income equal to that of the bottom 42 percent."¹ The result was that those who wanted to buy products did not have enough money to do so. To solve this problem, credits were introduced; people could pay later for the products they bought. But the time came when people had so much debt that they had to stop purchasing. In the 1920s farmers were already in trouble, they produced much more than needed, so they could not sell their products for a profit.²

The economy was weakened by international problems too. After World War I, the United States of America became the world's chief creditor. American bankers lent a lot of money to European borrowers. At the same time there were high tariffs on imported products,

¹ "Great Depression in the United States," http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761584403/Great_Depression_in_the_United_States.html 2007.03.12. Hereafter cited as "Depression."

² "Depression."

this made it really difficult for other countries to sell their goods to Americans. In consequence, it made paying back loans more difficult.³

The US stock market was in a boom, especially between 1927 and 1929. Stock prices were rising steadily, many people invested their money into stocks, since they thought that prices would continue to rise and make them wealthy. There were a lot of people who did not have money to invest; they bought stocks “on margin”. This meant that they paid only a portion of the price and borrowed the rest, believing they could sell the stocks for a much higher price and thus repay the loan and also make profit. Stock prices were much higher than the actual value of the company shares they represented. In the fall of 1929 many investors thought that prices would not rise anymore, so they started to sell stocks. Many others followed them, this way stock prices fell rapidly, and the stock market crashed on 29 October, 1929. That day stocks lost around \$15 billion in value. Prices continued to fall; those who bought stocks on credit could not repay their debts. Many people committed suicide, because they had huge debts. “The crash affected the economy the way exposure to cold affects the human body, lowering the body’s resistance to infectious agents that are already present. The crash reduced the ability of the economy to fight off the underlying sicknesses of unevenly distributed wealth, agricultural depression, and banking problems.”⁴

The stock market crash was just the first dramatic phase of a prolonged economic collapse. Conditions continued to worsen for the next three years, as the confident, optimistic attitudes of the 1920s gave way to a sense of defeat and despair. Stock prices continued to decline. By late 1932 they were only about 20 percent of what they had been before the crash. With little consumer demand for products, hundreds of factories and mills closed, and the output of American manufacturing plants was cut almost in half from 1929 to 1932.⁵

The depression got deeper and deeper.

³ “Depression.”

⁴ “Depression.”

⁵ “Depression.”

Unemployment rates soared, because of the high number of factories that were closed.⁶ Furthermore, a lot of people lost all of their savings when banks failed:

Many banks had made loans to businesses and people who now could not repay them, and some banks had also lost money by investing in the stock market. When depositors hit by the depression needed to withdraw their savings, the banks often did not have the money to give them. This caused other depositors to panic and demand their cash, ruining the banks. By the winter of 1932 to 1933, the banking system reached the point of nearly complete collapse; more than 5,000 banks failed by March 1933, wiping out the savings of millions of people.⁷

Herbert Hoover was the President of the United States when the economy collapsed. He did not believe in government intervention. He thought that restoring the public confidence would encourage businesses to increase production, thus providing jobs. This way, he believed, the economy would revive again. He raised taxes to balance the federal budget, because he thought that would restore business confidence. But it made the situation worse, demand further declined. He believed in individualism and self-reliance, so refused to give relief payments to the needy. He thought that it was the task of charity organizations to help people.⁸ His measures concerning trading actually helped the depression to deepen:

Hoover and most of his Republican Party firmly supported protective tariffs to block imports and stimulate the American economy by increasing sales of American-made products. In 1930 they enacted the Hawley-Smoot Tariff, which established the highest average tariff in American history. This was a crushing blow to European economies, which were already sinking into depression. Other nations retaliated by raising their own tariffs. This action helped to worsen and spread the depression by choking off international trade. Between 1929 and 1932 the total value of world trade had declined by more than half.⁹

It is apparent that Hoover's administration was not efficient; it did not soothe the depression at all.¹⁰

⁶ "Depression."

⁷ "Depression."

⁸ "Depression."

⁹ "Depression."

¹⁰ "Depression."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was much more competent; he introduced the New Deal, which consisted of relief programs and social reforms. These will be further described in the next two chapters.

The Great Depression finally came to a halt when the US started to prepare for entering World War II. War preparations required a lot of supplies, so production began to grow. Unemployment drew back, since workers were needed. Due to WWII, the US economy began to prosper again.

2. Urban life

2.1 Unemployment

Due to the decrease of demand for industrial products, many factories and mills had to shut down, since no one wanted or could afford to buy their goods. Therefore, people who worked for these bankrupt firms lost their jobs. Factories that were able to hold on in spite of that the number of customers seriously fell, had to decrease production, thus fewer employees were needed. Again, many workers became unemployed. City streets became crowded with people looking for any kind of work.

Margo says that “the labor market in the 1930s was persistently in disequilibrium. Labor supply exceeded labor demand, with mass unemployment the unfortunate consequence.”¹¹ So the whole decade was characterized by high rates of unemployment. 1933 was the worst year considering this issue, roughly 25 percent of Americans (about 12,830,000 people) could not find jobs.¹² According to Jensen, long term unemployment was a new phenomenon in the US. Before the 1930s, only illness or other personal problems kept people out of work for more than a year. It was totally new that a lot of people could not find employment for such a long time. This so called “hard-core unemployment” was the main source of the hardships and distress that characterized this era.¹³

During the Depression years, people were constantly moving between jobs. Although this was a time of massive unemployment when firms dismissed many people, hiring also occurred. Factories hired almost one million people about every three or four months. Between 1933 and 1939, the hiring rate was about 400,000 workers per month. Due to the

¹¹ Robert A. Margo, “Employment and Unemployment in the 1930s,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7, no. 2. (1993), 44. Hereafter cited as Margo, “Employment.”

¹² “The Great Depression: A Brief Overview,” <http://www.todaysteacher.com/TheGreatDepressionWebQuest/BriefOverview.htm> 2010.03.06.

¹³ Richard J. Jensen, “The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19, no. 4 (1989), 566. Hereafter cited as Jensen, “Unemployment.”

high number of applicants to every job opening, employers could carefully pick who to employ.¹⁴

One might think that those who were willing to work for less money were indeed the ones who were most likely to get hired. According to Jensen, this was not the case at all. He says when a firm wanted to hire new employees, it took a look at their wage histories. Those applicants who earlier earned higher wages somewhere else were assumed to be more efficient, so they had a bigger chance of finding work. Therefore, those who earlier earned lower wages were less likely to get the job, because they meant a greater risk for the firms. The risk of an applicant not being properly efficient was the highest when a person with a low wage history was willing to work for less money. These applicants had an extremely hard time finding employment.¹⁵

The unemployment rates were the highest among unskilled people. The explanation for this is simple: demand for unskilled workers seriously decreased because factories were becoming more and more mechanized. It did not really matter if an unskilled person had good employment records, because employers needed to see that workers had the ability to learn. Unfortunately, unskilled people could not show they had this ability, so with or without good employment records, they were not hired. Another problem was also severe, unskilled workers could get edged out of their jobs by skilled workers.¹⁶

It is obvious that lack of skills was a major drawback for people looking for work. In contrast, “[h]uman capital was a personal asset that sharply reduced the risk of unemployment.”¹⁷ Unemployment rates were lower among white collar jobs, and people with more education had the opportunity to find jobs in that sector. Level of schooling was important no matter what kind of job a person applied to, because more education meant that

¹⁴ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 563-564.

¹⁵ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 567.

¹⁶ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 567.

¹⁷ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 568.

the person was intelligent and had the ability to learn. These were the qualities employers found really valuable.¹⁸

When firms decided to decrease the number of workers, usually three factors helped to decide who to dismiss. “The main criteria used in selecting whom to lay off, according to statements of personnel officers and other executives, were competence (71 percent of firms), length of service (72 percent), and family situation (53 percent). Indeed in practice in New York factories, layoff rates declined sharply with seniority.”¹⁹ So people with longer service times were less likely to lose their jobs. “In railroads, the annual layoff rate between 1929 and 1933 was 43 percent for all employees with less than five years seniority. The rate declined steadily with seniority, so that only 15 percent of railroad workers with fifteen to nineteen years of service were laid off.”²⁰ This meant that young people, who did not have long service times, had less chance to keep their jobs, unlike older workers with more seniority. Firms held on to workers with longer service times, because they had more experience with the equipment, thus training was not necessary. Young people with less experience had to be trained, which increased the expenses of firms. Although older people with the necessary skills were less likely to be laid off, if such a person around the age of forty-five was indeed fired, s/he did not really have a chance of finding a new job, because firms did not like to hire new workers over that age. The explanation was that it was difficult to teach older people new workshop styles, and that it increased pension costs and accident rates.²¹

It is clear that there were factors that increased the possibility of losing a job, and made it almost impossible to find a new one. There were so many unemployed people that the disadvantaged ones could not find employment for an extremely long time, because for every job they applied, hundreds of more skilled people applied too.

¹⁸ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 568.

¹⁹ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 568.

²⁰ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 568-569.

²¹ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 569-570.

2.2 Fighting off unemployment

Government actions had to be taken to fight off the widespread joblessness. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced the New Deal. During the First New Deal (launched in 1933) relief programs were started. The Second New Deal (launched in 1935) introduced social reforms.²² Right at the beginning of Roosevelt's presidency, the Congress established emergency organizations and passed several regulations that were supposed to decrease unemployment rates throughout the US. Minimum wages were introduced and working hours were reduced through the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933.²³

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established in 1933. It was a public works project; its purpose was to provide work for young, unemployed men. The work was related to environmental conservation and development; workers planted trees, built shelters for wild animals, populated lakes and rivers with fish, and cleaned beaches. The corps was controlled by the army. Workers lived in camps or barracks, got three meals a day, and earned low wages.²⁴ It was an opportunity for unemployed, young people to do something constructive, and in return they did not have to worry about going hungry or getting homeless. Due to the CCC, the number of people looking for work decreased. The program was also beneficial for the environment.

The Works Progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA) was established in 1935. Its purpose was to employ people who were on relief. The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia describes the WPA's projects as follows: "WPA's building program included the construction of 116,000 buildings, 78,000 bridges, and 651,000 mi (1,047,000 km) of road and the improvement of 800 airports. Also a part of WPA's diversified activities were the Federal Art

²² Stanley K. Schultz and William P. Tishler, "Liberalism at High Noon: The New Deal," <http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/lectures/lecture19.html>, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as: Schultz, "New Deal."

²³ Jensen, "Unemployment," 571.

²⁴ Schultz, "New Deal."

Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Theatre Project.”²⁵ Paintings, drawings and sculptures were created by artists working for WPA, theatrical and musical performances were presented, and valuable guidebooks were written. WPA operated until June, 1943, and employed about 8.5 million people altogether.²⁶

Jensen criticizes both the CCC and the WPA for not providing proper training opportunities. Through training, the productivity of the hard-core unemployed could have been increased. This is important, because “increasing the productivity of labor is the best way to reduce unemployment permanently without causing damaging side effects like inflation.”²⁷ Although the CCC provided some education, it was not really appealing. After a hard day’s work, recruits could take shallow classes if they wanted to. This educational component was not appreciated at all. As for the WPA, it did not even provide any training for the people it employed. The main reason for neglecting education was that labor unions feared that through training new people, a strong competition would emerge for union members.²⁸ Jensen goes on with the criticism as follows:

Beyond the training opportunities lost, an equally serious criticism is that the main work-relief programs, especially the WPA, had a negative training effect. Nine of ten WPA jobs were unskilled; when heavy construction equipment was used, an operator not on relief would be called in. Job skills rusted; the stimulus of ambition through promotions, pay raises, and seniority was stifled; the rhythms of industrial time were forgotten; the efficiency-wage imperatives against slacking were ignored. In stark contrast to normal work environments, in the WPA the most senior employees were the worst workers: the least skilled, the least employable, and the least likely to offer leadership to their co-workers.²⁹

Indeed, this must have been a serious problem. Although people earned some money, the job did not get them ahead. There was no chance of development, and they were not motivated to work efficiently. This was a main drawback, because out on the real labor market, efficiency

²⁵ "Work Projects Administration," The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0852725.html>, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as "WPA."

²⁶ "WPA"

²⁷ Jensen, "Unemployment," 575.

²⁸ Jensen, "Unemployment," 576-577.

²⁹ Jensen, "Unemployment," 577.

and skills were the most important requirements. Jensen points out, that while relief workers did not get any training, their employed competitors were constantly developing. “One estimate is that the value of on-the-job training for employed men having only an elementary education was about \$2,000 in 1939, or the human capital equivalent to more than a year's pay. The value for the WPA workers was close to zero.”³⁰ Furthermore, WPA employees were mocked and they were considered to be highly inefficient workers.³¹ Andy Hansen, who was a child during the Great Depression, remembers how WPA workers were ridiculed:

I remember, however, that some of the local farmers joked about the 10-member crew of WPA men that did road work for several years. The farmers' story was that any time someone happened to pass by the maintenance crew along the roads, the smallest man was always the one working while the larger nine stood around idly watching. Moreover, the small man doing all of the road work was a recent immigrant from Germany. The WPA program didn't gain much respect from the local farmers.³²

It is obvious, that the WPA did not at all have prestige among citizens. Although it provided work for a lot of unemployed people, it did not help them acquire the skills needed to have a chance against the other competitors on the labor market. This was a serious flaw, considering the fact that unemployment rates were the highest among the unskilled.

Jensen claims that effective training programs would have equalized the hardship people had to face. This would have been a positive development, because “the problem was not so much the depth of the depression as the unequal distribution of hardships. ... Conditions were far worse in the early 1930s than a decade before because the hardship was concentrated on the least efficient, least skilled, poorest third of the population.”³³

³⁰ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 578.

³¹ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 578.

³² Andy Hansen, “A farm boy remembers the Great Depression,” <http://www.pnwlocalnews.com/sanjuans/jsj/lifestyle/42337097.html> 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Hansen, “Farm boy.”

³³ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 579.

World War II removed millions of people from the labor market, and made retraining necessary. So finally, this made it possible for the hard-core unemployed people to get rehired.³⁴

Significant social reforms were realized through the following three acts of the New Deal: the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, and the Wealth Tax Act. The Wagner Act (officially the National Labor Relations Act) protected labor unions; it ensured that workers had the right to unionize. The Social Security Act established a federal-state system to provide unemployment compensation and old-age insurance. Workers could pay Social Security taxes and in return they were guaranteed to get benefits after retiring at the age of 65. The Social Security Act “was a milestone in American history because it acknowledged the responsibility of society at large to take care of the less fortunate.”³⁵ Due to the Wealth Tax Act, the wealthy had to pay higher taxes. Also, new and larger taxes had to be paid on inheritances, valuable gifts, excess business profits, and profits gained through selling property.³⁶

2.3 Life of the city dwellers

*“They used to tell me I was building a dream, and so I followed the mob,
When there was earth to plow, or guns to bear, I was always there right on the job.
They used to tell me I was building a dream, with peace and glory ahead,
Why should I be standing in line, just waiting for bread?”*

*Once I built a railroad, I made it run, made it race against time.
Once I built a railroad; now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?
Once I built a tower, up to the sun, brick, and rivet, and lime;
Once I built a tower, now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?”*
(Yip Harburg: *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime*)

³⁴ Jensen, “Unemployment,” 582.

³⁵ Stanley K. Schultz and William P. Tishler, "Dr. New Deal' Becomes 'Dr. Win-the-War'," <http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/lectures/lecture20.html>, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Schultz, “Dr. New Deal.”

³⁶ Schultz, “Dr. New Deal.”

During the Great Depression, life was really hard in the cities. Unemployment changed the life of millions of people. Many people lived in crowded tenements with no heating. Living conditions were unsanitary. Many of those who lost their jobs could not pay the rent or mortgages, so they got evicted. When the Depression got really deep, almost seventeen thousand families were evicted every month. Although cities provided local aid, this was not enough to maintain satisfying living conditions. Since more and more people got unemployed, relief payments had to be reduced. Charities played an important part in helping the needy. Philanthropic groups collected money, but as the depression got worse, these resources drained quickly.³⁷

The song titled *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime* was very popular those times. It is built around the theme of people not having any money. It mentions bread lines, which were very common those days. Charities and churches provided food for the hungry ones. People who could not afford to buy food waited for about two or three hours in long lines to get free meal, mostly soup. Many tried to grow vegetables on rooftops or in abandoned lots, since they had no money to buy groceries. There were almost twenty thousand of these gardens in Gary, Indiana, alone.³⁸

Unemployed citizens had to face terrible hardships. Their situation was totally hopeless. They were living in constant fear of the future; they knew that things were not going to get better. This must have been a really huge emotional and psychic burden. In 1934, Martha Gellhorn visited several cities in Massachusetts. She gives a stunning description about the unemployed people:

Now about the unemployed themselves: this picture is so grim that whatever words I use will seem hysterical and exaggerated. I have been doing more case visiting here; about five families a day. And I find them all in the same shape - fear, fear driving

³⁷ "City Life During the Great Depression," <http://middle.usm.k12.wi.us/faculty/taft/Unit7/citylife.htm> 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as "City Life."

³⁸ "City Life"

them into a state of semi-collapse; cracking the nerves; and an overpowering terror of the future. ... They know what they're going through. I haven't been in one home that hasn't offered me the spectacle of a human being driven beyond his or her powers of endurance and sanity. They can't live on the Public Welfare grocery orders. They can't pay rent and are evicted. They are shunted from place, and are watching their children grow thinner and thinner; fearing the cold for children who have neither coats nor shoes; wondering about coal.³⁹

This description clearly shows how miserable the situation was. It is sad how helpless people were. They had no way out of this situation, and they knew that. They could not do anything to make things right, this gave way to hopelessness. Gellhorn goes on with her description:

I could go on and on. It is hard to believe that these conditions exist in a civilized country. I have been going into homes at mealtimes and seeing what they eat. It isn't possible; it isn't enough to begin with and then every article of food is calculated to destroy health. But how can they help that; if you're hungry you eat "to fill up—but the kids ain't getting what's right for them; they're pale and thin. I can't do anything about it and sometimes I just wish we were all dead."⁴⁰

Malnutrition was a serious consequence of poverty. It weakened the body, which gave way to diseases. Gellhorn says that tuberculosis was on the increase, children had impetigo, and there were several other health problems such as rickets, anemia, bad teeth, and flabby muscles. She also adds that feeble-mindedness was on the increase too.⁴¹ Living in overcrowded houses was yet another cause of bad state of health. Gellhorn describes this as follows: "Again, due to unemployment and also to prevalent low wages (all these mill hands and shoe workers are working part-time; and their wages are not more—and often less—than relief), families are evicted from their homes. So they double up, in already horribly overcrowded houses. The result (my sources are labor leaders, social workers, doctors, nurses) is increased nervous disorders."⁴² So to cut back expenses, people moved together and shared rent, food costs,

³⁹ Martha Gellhorn, *The View from the Ground* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 20. Hereafter cited as Gellhorn, *View*.

⁴⁰ Gellhorn, *View*, 21.

⁴¹ Gellhorn, *View*, 21.

⁴² Gellhorn, *View*, 22.

sometimes even bedding: “the hotbed was a living arrangement in which night workers slept during the day and day workers used the same beds at night.”⁴³

There were many families who could not even afford to pay shared rent. Homeless people used cardboard boxes to build shacks near edges of cities. These shanty-towns were called Hoovervilles, because people blamed President Hoover for this disastrous situation. Many other things were named after Hoover: “In public parks, homeless men slept on benches, covering their bodies with ‘Hoover blankets,’ or newspapers. ‘Hoover hogs’ were jackrabbits or gophers caught and cooked to replace the traditional Sunday ham. ‘Hoover villas’ were public latrines used for overnight stays. ‘Hoover flags’ were empty pockets turned inside out.”⁴⁴ This was a way for people to express their resentment towards Hoover, who he did not provide any help for the needy. Hoovervilles were usually built near rivers or fireplugs, but lacked electricity and running water. Hoovervilles were not supported by the government, but were allowed to exist. However, many of them were burnt down by sheriffs.⁴⁵

Long term unemployment pushed many into resignation. Gellhorn describes how desperate people were: “In this town, and I believe it is a typical eastern industrial city, the unemployed are as despairing a crew as I have ever seen. Young men say, ‘We’ll never find work.’ Men over forty say, ‘Even if there was any work we wouldn’t get it; we’re too old.’ They have been on relief too long; this is like the third year of the war when everything peters out into gray resignation.”⁴⁶ There were men who left their families because they could not find work and were ashamed of themselves for not being able to provide for their families. Many could not bear the sufferings and gave up the fight. Suicide rates increased noticeably. Pauline Kael, who was a student during the Great Depression, remembers this as follows:

⁴³ “City Life.”

⁴⁴ “City Life.”

⁴⁵ “City Life.”

⁴⁶ Gellhorn, *View*, 25.

When I attended Berkeley in 1936, so many of the kids had actually lost their fathers. They had wandered off in disgrace because they couldn't support their families. Other fathers had killed themselves so the family could have the insurance. Families had totally broken down. Each father took it as his personal failure. These middle class men apparently had no social sense of what was going on, so they killed themselves. It was still the Depression. There were kids who didn't have a place to sleep, huddling under bridges on the campus, I had a scholarship, but there were times when I didn't have food.⁴⁷

It is horrible even to imagine how depressed, hopeless, and helpless people had to feel to throw away their lives. They did not see a way out, they could not even hope for a better future; it must have been a terrible feeling. With a little hope they might have clung on to their lives. People have never experienced such helplessness; they were accustomed to the notion of the American Dream, which emphasized that everyone had equal opportunities and through hard work anyone could get ahead. Unfortunately, in the Depression years this notion could not be put into practice, simply because there were no opportunities to take. Many felt ashamed for not being able to fend for themselves, so they chose death.

City life during the Depression was harsh for most of the inhabitants. People were either unemployed, or were in constant fear of losing their jobs. A lot of people left cities for rural areas to try to make a living on farms. If they could not earn money to buy food, they thought they could at least try to produce what they needed. However, rural life was harsh too, the next chapter shows why.

⁴⁷ “How did the Great Depression affect the lives and dreams of those that lived through it?,” http://www.socialstudieshelp.com/Lesson_84_Notes.htm 2010.03.06.

3. Rural life

3.1 Overproduction and its consequences

World War I had a very severe effect on European agriculture. European countries needed to import agricultural products. This was very advantageous for American farmers, since they had the opportunity to sell their crop abroad. US farmers increased production and did not stop even when the export market began to narrow. Farmers bought such expensive equipment as plows, threshers, tractors to further raise the amount of crop produced, since they expected huge profit from exportation. Most of them purchased these machines on credit, this way they piled up serious amounts of debt. Prices were still high, so this kind of investment seemed to worth it. However, by the 1920's European agriculture was safe and sound again, thus finding export market for American goods was getting more and more difficult. Farmers produced much more than needed, this resulted in lower prices. Many got into an extremely difficult financial situation, because they had mortgages on their farms, but since their income receded, they could not pay.⁴⁸

It is apparent that overproduction caused serious troubles. With so many people suffering from hunger around the world, it might be hard to imagine that too much food can cause such turmoil. But indeed, not being able to sell products has such serious consequences. Profit is an extremely important economic ingredient. In its absence, you cannot raise the dough, so to say. Without profit, development is not possible. Without development, decline cannot really be avoided, because everything devolves if not attended to. It is true that most of the farmers had food galore, but their hard work did not result in profit. Prices were so low, that it was not worth harvesting the crops, and it was cheaper to use grain instead of coal for heating. The following description shows the severity of the situation: "In South Dakota, the county grain elevators listed corn as minus three cents a bushel — if a farmer wanted to sell

⁴⁸ "Agricultural Adjustment Act," <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1639.html> 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as "AAA."

them a bushel of corn, he had to bring in three cents. Fields of cotton lay unpicked, because it couldn't be sold even for the price of picking. Orchards of olive trees hung full of rotting fruit. Oranges were being sold at less than the cost of production. Grain was being burned instead of coal because it was cheaper.”⁴⁹ This was undoubtedly a very serious problem, but unlike a lot of people, farmers at least had the food they needed. Andy Hansen, who was a child during the Great Depression, recalls that “farmers, especially those on the larger dairy farms, survived more easily during this period because they had always lived so independently.”⁵⁰ He also remembers that “during the Depression, the value of land took on a new meaning: Anyone in possession of even a few acres could plant gardens, maybe have chickens or pigs and sheep and perhaps a cow. Also those with timber owned a valuable asset both for firewood and lumber.”⁵¹

During the Great Depression a lot of people left urban areas and started farming to produce the food they needed to survive. Unemployed city dwellers migrated to rural areas in hope of finding employment, because in urban areas it was almost impossible.⁵² “The migrants usually sought assistance or jobs from friends or relatives, or attempted to scratch out a meager existence by cultivating their own small plots of land.”⁵³

Although agriculture was in serious trouble and farming was not prosperous, a lot of people had no other choice if they wanted to survive.

⁴⁹ “AAA.”

⁵⁰ Hansen, “Farm boy.”

⁵¹ Hansen, “Farm boy.”

⁵² Robert L. Boyd, “Urban unemployment, the rural labor market, and southern blacks in farm labor during the Great Depression: a research note,” *The Social Science Journal* 39 (2002), 295–299. Hereafter cited as Boyd, “Urban unemployment.”

⁵³ Robert L. Boyd, “A “Migration of Despair”: Unemployment, the Search for Work, and Migration to Farms During the Great Depression,” *Social Science Quarterly* 83 no. 2. (2002), 554-567

3.2 Agricultural Adjustment Act

The government had to take action to inhibit the further aggravation of the grim situation caused by overproduction. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president of the United States and introduced the New Deal. An important part of this program was the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The AAA's purpose was to "restore the purchasing power of American farmers to pre-World War I levels."⁵⁴ For this to happen, production had to be cut back, so the government paid farmers to produce less crops. The following seven commodities were heavily overproduced: cotton, corn, wheat, rice, peanuts, milk, and tobacco, so AAA intended to control the supply of these. Supply and demand had to get back into balance; otherwise it was not possible to raise crop prices.⁵⁵

There was a huge problem with the AAA. The money given to farmers was taken from companies that bought and used farm commodities to produce food and clothing. In 1936 the Act was declared unconstitutional, because the Supreme Court "ruled that it was illegal to levy a tax on one group, the processors, in order to pay it to another, the farmers."⁵⁶ Although the Act was withdrawn, later Congress passed legislation that favored conservation, balanced prices and food reservation for lean years.⁵⁷

The government's answer to overproduction was the financial encouragement of production cutback. This was a necessary step to take on the road leading to the balance of supply and demand.

Although the Agricultural Adjustment Act did not solve the agricultural crisis, it was a very important piece of legislation, it "remained the basis for all farm programs in the following 70 years."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ "AAA."

⁵⁵ "AAA."

⁵⁶ "AAA."

⁵⁷ "AAA."

⁵⁸ "AAA."

The outbreak of World War II was the final solution to the problems of overproduction. Demand of agricultural products grew intensely, since military troops required lot of supplies.⁵⁹ Somehow it is sad that war is needed to end such crises. What was a curse for a lot of people, was also almost a blessing for others. The war had a boosting effect on American agriculture; on the other hand it was devastating for people living in areas where military operations actually took place.

3.3 Dust Bowl

“In the morning the dust hung like fog, and the sun was as red as ripe new blood. All day the dust sifted down, and the next day it sifted down. An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees.”

(John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*)

Low prices caused by abundance of farm products were not the only difficulty farmers had to face. Nature played a terrible trick on people living in the Great Plains region: wind blew off the top layer of soil and everything got covered by dust. As Steinbeck depicts it in his famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the air was full of dust that sifted down constantly and covered everything like a blanket.

The Dust Bowl, which started in the 1930s and lasted through that decade, was such a severe environmental crisis that it was matchless in the 20th century North America. The Great Plains region was hit by serious drought and strong winds. Winds damaged soil productivity by blowing away the topsoil; estimates show that about 480 tons of topsoil was lost per acre. Dust storms were also harmful for health since sifting dust damaged air quality.

⁵⁹ “What is Drought?” <http://drought.unl.edu/whatis/dustbowl.htm>, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as “What is Drought?”

Pneumonia, asthma, eye infections, and influenza became more common in Dust Bowl areas.⁶⁰

Donald Worster, famous historian of the Dust Bowl, described this as a disaster: “In no other instance was there greater or more sustained damage to the American land, and there have been few times when so much tragedy was visited on its inhabitants. Not even the Depression was more devastating, economically ... in the decade of the 1930s the dust storms of the plains were an unqualified disaster.”⁶¹

3.3.1 Causes and solution

Severe drought was one of the causes of the Dust Bowl, but it was not the only one. Farmers also contributed to the erodibility of the land through extensive cultivation. In hope of extra profit, they tilled more land to produce more goods. The “soil was exposed, dry, and pulverized from repeated tillage. There was limited moisture to make the soil cloddy and rough, and there were few obstacles to block the flow of wind.”⁶² Hornbeck found that most historical accounts emphasize the effect of land exploitation, and that people “feared that the region would become the once-imagined American Desert if private land-use practices were allowed to continue.”⁶³ At that time two methods were used to control erosion: strip cropping with strip fallow, and windbreaks. Mostly trees played the role of windbreaks, since these could block the flow of wind. These methods would have decreased the damage if they had been carried out on most of the farms. A huge problem was that individual farmers’ efforts to control erosion were sometimes not effective at all, because if a neighbor did not use these methods, dust carried away by wind from his land could damage the crop of surrounding

⁶⁰ Zeynep K. Hansen and Gary D. Libecap, “Small Farms, Externalities, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s,” *Journal of Political Economy* 112, no. 3. (2004), 665-694. Hereafter cited as Hansen, “Small Farms.”

⁶¹ Quoted in Hansen, “Small Farms,” 666.

⁶² Hansen, “Small Farms.”

⁶³ Richard Hornbeck, “The Enduring Impact of the American Dust Bowl: Short and Long-run Adjustments to Environmental Catastrophe,” NBER Working Paper No. 15605, December 2009. Hereafter cited as Hornbeck, “Enduring.”

farms too. The answer to why so many people were reluctant to invest in erosion control methods probably relates to the high land tenancy rates. Tenants mainly focused on their crop, the land was less important, since they did not own that.⁶⁴

Although the drought began in 1930, the government did not give an adequate response until 1937. At the beginning of the decade, the drought was not expected to last long, and it was thought that individual efforts to prevent erosion would be effective. In 1937, soil conservation districts were inaugurated. These had the power to force farmers to cooperate, and also had the financial resources needed to follow through with erosion control. In the spring of 1938, drought began to ease. By 1941, the amount of rain was almost normal, which solved the problems caused by the Dust Bowl.⁶⁵

Government intervention should have come much sooner. Farmers should have been financially encouraged to fight erosion right from the beginning, but unfortunately no one could foresee the intensity and persistency of the drought. Again, the final solution was not provided by the government. Not the government, but nature put a stop to the ordeals of people living in the Great Plains area. Although, it is true that people cannot countervail against nature, because it is much more powerful than humankind, government should have recognized the seriousness of the situation, and should have taken appropriate measures much quicker.

3.3.2 Surviving the Dust Bowl

Unpredictable weather and such natural disasters as tornadoes, hail storms, floods, and drought have always been characteristics of the Great Plains region. It is also known for summer heat and winter cold. Farming in this region has never been easy; farmers always had

⁶⁴ Hornbeck, "Enduring."

⁶⁵ "What is drought?"

to fight the weather. Still, this was nothing compared to the hardships people living in that area had to face in the 1930s.⁶⁶

In the 1930s, life expectancy was 58 years for men and 62 for women in rural America, since living conditions were really harsh there. Most of the farms did not have electricity and running water. The absence of indoor bathrooms made keeping clean more difficult, this way diseases could spread more easily. People worked with gas or steam-powered machines, which were really dangerous. Even the kerosene lamps they used were unsafe, since these were highly flammable. It is not surprising at all, that farming accidents were not rare. In case of accidents, there was no help around, because hospitals and doctors were usually many miles away. Most women gave birth to their children at home. People had no refrigerators, this way food-borne illnesses were common.⁶⁷

It is clear that living on a farm was extremely hard even before the Dust Bowl. In the 1930s, nature made people face unpredicted troubles. Even weather became another factor that caused disease. Awfully poor air quality, a result of the sifting dust, was responsible for the so called "dust pneumonia." A lot of people suffered from this. Grit got into the lungs, and caused the same symptoms as pneumonia. Woody Guthrie, singer, wrote a song titled "Dust Pneumonia Blues" about this common problem.⁶⁸

The most serious problem the Dust Bowl caused was the large-scale crop failure. Drought and dust destroyed almost everything farmers planted. In addition, prices were so low that selling the crop that survived the horrible conditions did not bring any profit.⁶⁹ People who lived through this remember that neighbors were helpful towards each other, and

⁶⁶ Claudia Reinhardt and Bill Ganzel, "Surviving the Weather," http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_02.html 2010.03.06.

⁶⁷ Claudia Reinhardt and Bill Ganzel, "Accidents & Illnesses," http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_03.html 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Ganzel, "Accidents."

⁶⁸ Ganzel, "Accidents."

⁶⁹ Claudia Reinhardt and Bill Ganzel, "Migration Out of the Great Plains," http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_29.html, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Ganzel, "Migration."

that "no one had any money. We were all in the same boat."⁷⁰ Tenants could not pay rent for the land, this way land owners did not get any money for lending their farms and farmhouses. Farmers who had mortgages on their land and could not pay, lost their farms. The bank took over these farms, and people were forced to leave. A lot of people could not make a living on farms anymore; they moved west hoping to find jobs. About 65,000 people moved out of Nebraska alone in the 1930s.⁷¹ "From 1930 to 1940, population declined relatively by 8.1% in high-erosion counties and 6.5% in medium-erosion counties. Much of the relative decrease reflects aggregate out-migration."⁷²

Harsh conditions forced people to leave their homes and seek livelihood far away. This must have been a terrible blow emotionally too. Although they hoped for better life conditions when they left their houses behind, they could not have been sure that things would work out just fine wherever they were going. Nevertheless, they did not really have a choice. If they wanted to survive, they had to leave.

Most of the people who left their farms migrated to California. These migrants were known as Okies, because about 20 percent of them came from Oklahoma. People thought of California as a dreamland, where there were jobs for everyone. This was because "the boosters of California had advertised that the state offered a perfect climate and an abundance of work in the agricultural industry."⁷³ Although the weather was mild, and lands were productive, the Great Depression had serious effects on California too. There was some work, but unfortunately, there was not enough for everyone. Many people could not even get into the "dreamland," since they were forced to turn back at the borders. Even those who were admitted and could find work were not satisfied, because wages were so low that families

⁷⁰ Claudia Reinhardt and Bill Ganzel, "1930s Farm Life," http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_01.html, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Ganzel, "Farm Life."

⁷¹ Ganzel, "Migration."

⁷² Hornbeck, "Enduring."

⁷³ "Okies," http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/water_06.html 2010.03.06.

could hardly earn a living, even when children were working too. The steady flow of migrants heavily contributed to the low wages, there were always people who were willing to work for as little as they got. Migrants did not live in houses, they had no place to go, so they usually set up camps near irrigation ditches. Hygiene was hard to sustain under such conditions, so health problems came up.⁷⁴

A lot of people who left their homes for California had to realize that life was almost just as hard there as it was at home. For those who did not get a job, life did not get easier, since they still could not earn a living. Although the weather was mild and the air was clear of dust, health problems arose because of the crowded camps. At home at least they had farmhouses, now they had to live in camps under miserable circumstances.

“Arrival in California did not put an end to the migrants' travels. Their lives were characterized by transience. In an attempt to maintain a steady income, workers had to follow the harvest around the state. When potatoes were ready to be picked, the migrants needed to be where the potatoes were. The same principle applied to harvesting cotton, lemons, oranges, peas, and other crops.”⁷⁵ Even those migrants who had jobs could not take work for granted. They could not settle in one place, since most jobs were temporary. Their life was characterized by constant travel and search for work. This was not what people wanted, but sadly this was the best they could get, there were no alternatives.

“Effects of the Plains drought sent economic and social ripples throughout the country.”⁷⁶ There was competition for jobs not only between migrants, but also between migrants and the resident population. This rivalry “created conflict between the groups. In addition, because of poverty and high unemployment, migrants added to local relief efforts,

⁷⁴ Robin A. Fanslow, "The Migrant Experience," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tsme.html>, 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as Fanslow, "Migrant."

⁷⁵ Fanslow, "Migrant."

⁷⁶ "What is Drought?"

sometimes overburdening relief and health agencies.⁷⁷” Migration obviously could not solve the problems created by the Dust Bowl, since there were not enough jobs. Living on relief could not be sustained for long. Migration also resulted in hatred towards the migrants, because they were seen as rivals.

“The Great Depression changed the lives of people who lived and farmed on the Great Plains and in turn, changed America. The government programs that helped them to live through the 1930s changed the future of agriculture forever.”⁷⁸ The survival of most of the families “undoubtedly rested solely with their perseverance and integrity. Whether they stayed or moved into the drought regions or migrated to other areas in hopes of a better life, families encountered new hardships and obstacles that would require ingenuity, resilience, and humility.”⁷⁹ People had to be strong to survive. Families had to keep together, because together it was easier to endure the difficulties. Humor helped too: “tales about birds flying backward to keep from getting sand in their eyes, housewives scouring pots and pans by holding them up to keyholes for a sandblasting, and children who had never seen rain were among the favorite stories of Dust Bowl inhabitants.”⁸⁰

“In the end, it was a combination of willpower, stamina, humor, pride, and, above all, optimism that enabled many to survive the Dust Bowl.”⁸¹ It is amazing what kind of hardships people can endure. Although it is painful even to imagine how miserable living conditions people had to put up with, it is somehow elevating and heartening to know that people can live through such terrible times too.

⁷⁷ “What is Drought?”

⁷⁸ Ganzel, “Farm Life.”

⁷⁹ “What is Drought?”

⁸⁰ “What is Drought?”

⁸¹ “What is Drought?”

4. Minorities

Minorities were especially hardly hit by the Great Depression. Hardships gave rise to racism, because as unemployment increased, people felt that minorities took job opportunities away from the Americans, this resulted in hatred towards minority groups.

4.1 Mexicans

Mexican immigrants were welcomed during the war years, because laborers were needed. However, when the depression hit, they became subjects to racist attacks, and had to face immigration restrictions and deportation. Around 350,000 Mexican workers and their families were deported during the 1930's, this way the Mexican population decreased by almost 40 percent. Many of the children who were repatriated were born in the USA, so they were in fact American citizens. The deportation had a devastating effect on the deportees. Many lost their homes, businesses, personal properties, automobiles; some were not even allowed to get their last paychecks. They were simply transported to the nearest border town, and were forced to leave the USA. Emilia Castañeda, who was 9 years old when she left the USA with her family, remembers the day of their departure: "We left with just one trunk full of belongings. No furniture. A few metal cooking utensils. A small ceramic pitcher, because it reminded me of my mother...and very little clothing. We took blankets, only the very essentials."⁸² Mexico was not at all prepared to receive the repatriated. Unemployment rates were already high there too; so many deportees became jobless in their home country.⁸³

Politicians considered deportations as patriotic measures.⁸⁴ It is true, that these mass deportations were beneficial for the US, because this way the number of unemployed decreased somewhat. However, it was unfair towards the legal immigrants. The depression

⁸² Steve Boisson, "Immigrants: The Last Time America Sent Her Own Packing," <http://www.historynet.com/immigrants-the-last-time-america-sent-her-own-packing.htm> 2010.03.06.

⁸³ Richard D. Vogel, "Stolen Birthright: The U.S. Conquest and Exploitation of the Mexican People," <http://www.houstonculture.org/hispanic/conquest5.html>. 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as: Vogel, "Stolen."

⁸⁴ Vogel, "Stolen."

was not their fault. Mexicans “contributed not only to the war effort, but also to the overall economic development and prosperity of the United States during 1920s. They did not, however, have a future in the nation that they helped to create.”⁸⁵ Earlier, they helped to make the US more prosperous, but when miserable times came, they were not welcome anymore.

4.2 African-Americans

The Great Depression came down hard on everyone, especially African-Americans. Margo says that “[f]rom 1890 to 1930 the incomes of black men increased slightly relative to the incomes of white men, but the trend in relative incomes reversed direction in the 1930s. Migration to the North, a major avenue of economic advancement for Southern blacks, slowed appreciably. There is little doubt that if the Depression had not happened, the relative economic status of blacks would have been higher on the eve of World War II.”⁸⁶ So, in the years of the Great Depression the economic progress of blacks fell back. Sundstrom says that the history of economic progress of black Americans had some episodes of improvement, and some of stagnation or backsliding. According to him, the worst backslide happened during the Depression.⁸⁷ Hatred against black people severely increased. In some Northern cities, many wanted blacks to be fired and replaced by whites. Violence against African-Americans also grew stronger, particularly in the South; in 1932 there were 8 lynchings, whereas in 1933 there were 28.⁸⁸

Unemployment rates were much higher in the cities for black people than for whites, right from the beginning of the Depression. “Within the North, unemployment rates were 80

⁸⁵ Vogel, “Stolen.”

⁸⁶ Margo, “Employment,” 56.

⁸⁷ William A. Sundstrom, “Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression,” *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2. (1992), 415. Hereafter cited as: Sundstrom, “Last Hired.”

⁸⁸ “Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s,”

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn//features/timeline/depwwii/race/race.html> 2010.03.06. Hereafter cited as “Race Relations.”

percent higher for blacks than whites. Within the South there was approximate parity between the races.”⁸⁹ Almost half of the African-Americans became jobless by 1932.⁹⁰

According to Sundstrom, there are three explanations to why unemployment rates were so much higher for African-Americans. The first one is connected to the fact that unskilled or less educated people had less chance to find work than the more skilled or more educated ones. It is unquestionable that blacks were less skilled and less educated than whites, “although in northern cities the educational deficit was somewhat mitigated by the self-selective migration of better-educated blacks.”⁹¹ Furthermore, those black people who were skilled, usually had occupations that were heavily hit by the Depression, for example a large percentage of them worked in the bricklaying sector. In the northern cities, most of them worked for factories that were connected to steel or car manufacturing, and these also suffered heavily from the consequences of the Depression.⁹²

The second explanation is connected to discrimination. It claims that equally skilled workers were not treated equally on the labor market.

Many contemporary observers insisted that black workers, even if equally qualified, were the "last hired and first fired." A series of reports on black unemployment issued by the National Urban League cited various reports of employers replacing black workers with unemployed whites: "So general is this practice that one is warranted in suspecting that it has been adopted as a method of relieving unemployment of whites without regard to the consequences upon Negroes."⁹³

The third explanation is that the New Deal programs had a negative effect on the employment opportunities of those who were less skilled, including most of the African-Americans. Because of the minimum wage codes, employers tended to replace black workers with white ones, who earlier would not have been willing to accept the low wages. Since

⁸⁹ Sundstrom, "Last Hired," 417.

⁹⁰ "Race Relations."

⁹¹ Sundstrom, "Last Hired," 420.

⁹² Sundstrom, "Last Hired," 420.

⁹³ Sundstrom, "Last Hired," 420-421.

employers had to pay equal minimum wages for blacks and whites, those who preferred whites laid off blacks.⁹⁴

It is clear that African-Americans had much less chance to find employment than whites. In many cases they were discriminated against, other times they were not skillful enough. Either way, many of them were unemployed during the Depression.

“During the Great Depression, joblessness, the most serious form of labor market disadvantage, compelled urban blacks to become 'survivalist entrepreneurs,' that is, persons who start small businesses in response to the need to find an independent means of livelihood.”⁹⁵ In the 1930s, unemployment rates for black people were extremely high, and a large number of black-owned businesses failed. However, the number of small black-owned businesses began to rise when unemployed blacks who had some savings started small shops to make a living. Black leaders encouraged their people to support these businesses by favoring them instead of businesses owned by whites. Black churches and newspapers emphasized that spending money in black-owned stores was very beneficial, because it helped the expansion of the business, which resulted in the hiring of black workers. However, black people favored downtown stores and white merchants, because they offered better goods and better terms of credit.⁹⁶ “Black shopkeepers thus garnered only a small share of the local trade in their own communities. In Chicago, for example, Black firms received less than 10 percent of the money spent by Black consumers.”⁹⁷ Many blacks opened small stores, groceries, and eating-and-drinking places; these were common, because even if the business failed, owners could use the stored supplies. Many black entrepreneurs started barbershops and beauty-shops, because whites did not offer these kinds of services to black people, so these

⁹⁴ Sundstrom, “Last Hired,” 422.

⁹⁵ Robert L. Boyd, “Survivalist Entrepreneurship among Urban Blacks during the Great Depression: A Test of the Disadvantage Theory of Business Enterprise,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81. no. 4. (2000), 972. Hereafter cited as Boyd, “Survivalist.”

⁹⁶ Boyd, “Survivalist,” 974.

⁹⁷ Boyd, “Survivalist,” 974.

businesses did not have white competitors. Also, these fields were not hard to enter, and could be performed at home. Those who started barbershops were better off than those who opened stores, because barbers and beauticians did not have to compete against outsiders.⁹⁸

The life of African-Americans has never been easy in the USA. They have always been subject to discrimination. Perhaps they can never be truly equal to white Americans, in times of enormous distress they will never be thought of as Americans, but as blacks.

⁹⁸ Boyd, "Survivalist," 975.

5. Women

“The Great Depression had a profound and devastating impact on people's lives, yet throughout the decade public debate about the crisis was often treated as if it were a problem that men alone confronted.”⁹⁹ Although in 1930 more than 25 percent of the workers were women, labor unions, male employees, and the government did not consider them as permanent members of the labor force. Even most of the women who worked full-time thought mainly of themselves as homemakers.¹⁰⁰ Most of the women worked in the service sector; they were clerical workers, nurses, teachers, or domestics. The Depression did not hit this sector as badly as the manufacturing industries where mostly men worked. In many families women became the breadwinners, and they were frequently accused of taking jobs away from men.¹⁰¹ “When the men on the assembly line at Studebaker, for example, worked one partial shift every few weeks or did not work at all, their daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and girl friends continued to work as clerical, janitorial, and food service employees in the corporate headquarters.”¹⁰² Although many women were working, it was still assumed that they lived in families and were dependent on men.¹⁰³ This might be why so many people thought that unemployment among men was a much greater problem than unemployment among women.

In some ways the depression affected women and men differently. Traditionally, men were the breadwinners in the family, and when they lost their jobs, they felt ashamed for not being able to provide for their loved ones. At the same time women, who took care of the household, felt their roles becoming more important, because it was their task to try to make

⁹⁹ Elaine S. Abelson, "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934," *Feminist Studies* 29. no. 1. (2003), 122. Hereafter cited as: Abelson, "Women."

¹⁰⁰ Abelson, "Women," 117.

¹⁰¹ "Women, Impact of the Great Depression on,"

http://www.novelguide.com/a/discover/egd_02/egd_02_00550.html 2010.04.10.

¹⁰² Lois Rita Helmbold, "Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-Class Women during the Great Depression," *Feminist Studies* 13. no. 3. (1987), 639.

¹⁰³ Abelson, "Women," 118.

ends meet. Robert and Helen Lynd, sociologists, noticed the following in a study of Muncie, Indiana: “The men, cut adrift from their usual routine, lost much of their sense of time and dawdled helplessly and dully about the streets; while in the homes the women’s world remained largely intact and the round of cooking, housecleaning, and mending became if anything more absorbing.”¹⁰⁴

Family changed dramatically during the Depression years. A lot of couples delayed marriage, and others did not divorce, because they did not have money to pay the legal fees. It was much cheaper to keep up only one household; this was another reason why people delayed divorce. Birth rates dropped, couples could not afford to feed any more children. Some families moved together, because they thought that together it was easier to face the problems. On the other hand there were families that fell apart.¹⁰⁵ A lot of men left their families because they were ashamed of being unemployed. “A 1940 survey revealed that 1.5 million married women had been abandoned by their husbands.”¹⁰⁶

According to the traditional gender roles, women lived in families that were provided for by a male breadwinner. However, this was not always the case. Many women were divorced, deserted, or widowed; they had to make their own living. If they had children, the perspectives were much grimmer. Single women “were truly on the margins, practically invisible.”¹⁰⁷ Unemployed women did not handle their situation the same way jobless men did. Men were often seen selling apples on the streets or standing in breadlines. Women hardly ever showed up in public spaces like breadlines, they usually tried to cope with their situation alone, they rarely asked for any help. A reporter observed the following: “Many a woman who had come to the verge of starvation was prevented by pride from asking for

¹⁰⁴ Susan Ware, "Women and the Great Depression," http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historynow/03_2009/historian4.php 2010.04.10. Hereafter cited as Ware, "Women."

¹⁰⁵ "America in the 1930s," <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/snprelief1.htm>, 2010.04.10. Hereafter cited as "America in the 1930s."

¹⁰⁶ "America in the 1930s"

¹⁰⁷ Ware, "Women."

public relief. Those women who had been accustomed to plenty were among the saddest and most difficult to help.”¹⁰⁸ Meridel LeSueur, writer, remembers that she lived penniless in cities for several months without help, and she was too timid to show up in breadlines. She also says: “I’ve known many women to live like this until they simply faint on the street from privations, without saying a word to anyone. A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse.”¹⁰⁹ She also adds that there were women who “starved slowly in furnished rooms. They sold their furniture, their clothes, and then their bodies.”¹¹⁰

So women were mostly silent sufferers, they did not want to show how desperate they were. They usually did not ask for help, this way they made their situation even harder.

Many single women who had lost their jobs ended up in shelters, which were becoming more and more crowded with homeless people. Until 1934, only families with dependent children could get emergency home relief, so many unemployed single women could not avoid homelessness. A jobless woman briefly described the situation as follows: “Having an address is a luxury just now.”¹¹¹ The following description shows how rapidly the number of homeless women increased at the beginning of the 1930s:

By comparing the number of "female beds" occupied in the women's division of the Municipal Lodging House in New York City between 1920 and 1932, the dramatic increase in the numbers of women given shelter is evident. Recording 3,039 female beds in 1920, 5,814 in 1929, 23,380 in 1931, and 56,808 in 1932, the "Muni" was inundated by demands for space. And these figures are for an institution that was "designed chiefly to care for the habitually destitute and uneducated woman" and was avoided at all costs by "destitute women entering the rank of the homeless" for the first time. The Emergency Employment Commission reported that between August 1929 and August 1930 the number of individual women given shelter in the five boroughs of New York City had risen dramatically-over 270 percent.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Abelson, “Women,” 112.

¹⁰⁹ Ware, “Women.”

¹¹⁰ Abelson, “Women,” 112.

¹¹¹ Abelson, “Women,” 110.

¹¹² Abelson, “Women,” 111.

It is clear that homelessness among women was becoming more and more widespread. These women needed jobs desperately. Many wrote letters to government people to make it clear that they seriously needed employment, without it they could not last much longer.

One desperate woman from Cleveland, Ohio, had been unemployed for over two years and had "no home and no friends"; she pleaded for some direction. Another described the deplorable condition of the single women of Chicago, who "are roaming the streets wondering where they are going to get the price of a meal, and how they re going to pay their room rent.... Do we all have to starve to death ... in order to get a job?" the writer wondered. A Georgia woman asked, "What can be done for the woman to whom employment means life and necessities ... women who have no men to work for them or [are the] sole support of others." A middle-aged widow who had been unemployed for twenty-seven weeks concluded simply, women "must live as well."¹¹³

These quotations lively depict the emotional state of unemployed women. They were desperate; getting a job was a matter of life and death for them. They were constantly worrying about how they were going to get money to eat and pay rent. Their main concerns were food and shelter, the most basic needs of every living being. It is heartbreaking that many people had to worry about such things every single day.

It is very interesting that the problem of female homelessness was not that widely recognized. These women were invisible, partly because they were shielded from public gaze. The Municipal Lodging House in New York had a separate floor for women and children; they slept and ate there.¹¹⁴

Deeming it "undesirable to feed women and children in public," Lodging House administrators admitted them at a separate entrance "on the far side of the building" and sent them "directly upstairs." The Salvation Army was equally concerned with gender respectability and shielded the newly-poor woman from the public gaze. At its emergency food stations and shelters, men stood on lines that stretched down the street, while women and children either waited indoors and out of sight for food and beds or were fed at separate locations."¹¹⁵

Women did not have to wait in lines on the streets for food; this was indeed a nice gesture towards them. This was meant to protect women, however this was the reason why the public thought that women were not in need, and that the economic collapse caused problem only for

¹¹³ Abelson, "Women," 118.

¹¹⁴ Abelson, "Women," 116.

¹¹⁵ Abelson, "Women," 116.

men. “Not publicly hungry, not conspicuous on the streets, and not a mainstay of the mainstream press, the destitute female was not looked for and only sporadically seen.”¹¹⁶

Those women who sought employment or relief were scorned for taking away jobs from men. “When Norman Cousins realized that the number of gainfully employed women in 1939 roughly equaled the national unemployment total, he offered this flippant remedy: ‘Simply fire the women, who shouldn’t be working anyway, and hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression.’”¹¹⁷ This was really unfair, because many women had no other choice than work to support themselves and their families. Furthermore, it was not at all simple for men to take on jobs that were usually done by women. “Few of the people who opposed married women’s employment seem to realize that a coal miner or steel worker cannot very well fill the jobs of nursemaids, cleaning women, or the factory and clerical jobs now filled by women.”¹¹⁸ Although there was widespread unemployment in the whole country, the number of working women actually increased during the Great Depression. This was possible since those sectors where most of the women worked were less affected by the economic collapse. “According to census figures, the percentage of employed women fourteen and older actually rose during the depression from 24.3 percent in 1930 to 25.4 percent in 1940, a gain of two million jobs. Even more dramatically, the number of married women working doubled during the decade.”¹¹⁹

The government programs that were designed to fight off unemployment did not treat women as equal citizens:

One-quarter of National Recovery Administration codes set lower minimum wages for women than men performing the same jobs, and New Deal agencies like the Civil Works Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps gave jobs almost exclusively to men. Not considered suitable for heavy construction jobs, women on relief were shunted into sewing rooms; black and Mexican-American women faced racial discrimination as well. The Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Acts did

¹¹⁶ Abelson, “Women,” 116.

¹¹⁷ Ware, “Women.”

¹¹⁸ Ware, “Women.”

¹¹⁹ Ware, “Women.”

not initially cover major areas of women's employment such as agricultural work or domestic service. Furthermore, social security benefits were structured around a traditional model of a male breadwinner and dependent female housewife, which disadvantaged women who didn't fit that profile and implied that women deserved economic rights only in relation to men. The Wagner Act of 1935 fueled a dramatic growth in organized labor, and women workers participated in major CIO strikes and union organizing drives, but few women held leadership positions.¹²⁰

Many government programs were not advantageous for women. Fortunately there were some influential women administrators who contributed to the acknowledgement of women as workers:

The needs of women might have been forgotten entirely were it not for the efforts of an informal network of women administrators who held important positions in the New Deal. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman in the cabinet, oversaw many of the social welfare initiatives and Ellen Sullivan Woodward supervised women's relief projects for the Works Progress Administration, while Molly Dewson promoted an issue-oriented reform agenda from her position at the Democratic National Committee. Their effectiveness was dramatically enhanced by access to Eleanor Roosevelt, who used her position as First Lady to advance the causes of women, blacks, and other marginalized groups. Besides serving as a symbol of public-spirited womanhood in a time of national crisis, Eleanor Roosevelt served as the conscience of the New Deal.¹²¹

“Forced to take on even more important roles in their homes and families, women played often unrecognized roles in helping the country through the Great Depression.”¹²² The Depression changed the lives of many women. Some became more powerful, since they had jobs when many did not. Others became completely distressed. No matter what, this was a significant period for women, because it made society recognize that women were no more simply “wives” or “daughters” or “sisters” of men, but were capable of independence.

¹²⁰ Ware, “Women.”

¹²¹ Ware, “Women.”

¹²² Ware, “Women.”

Conclusion

The Great Depression had a very severe effect on the United States of America. People had to face terrible hardships, hardships that were formerly totally unknown to them. These brought along old problems that were beginning to fade before the crisis, such as racism and discrimination. As Americans were struggling for survival, they felt threatened by minorities such as Mexicans and African-Americans, so hatred against these groups significantly grew. On the other hand, Americans showed generosity also, since many charity organizations were active during this period, providing help to the miserable ones.

This era witnessed an important change in gender roles, since many women became breadwinners of families, while traditionally they were only dependants of men. This was a significant step, this way women became more powerful.

Significant social reforms took place while the government was seeking a way out of the depression. Workers were ensured of their right to unionize; unemployment compensation and old-age insurance were introduced. Due to the Depression, Americans realized that society was responsible for taking care of the needy.

The Depression changed the way how Americans thought about themselves. Before the 1930s, they were convinced that they had many opportunities to emerge. During the 1930s they were desperate, helpless; there was nothing they could do to make things right. In the end they survived, and the hardships they had to endure made them stronger.

It is very important to mention that despite the measures taken by the government, the final solution to the problems of the 1930s came in the form of World War II. It is totally ironic that for the devastating Great Depression to end, another much more devastating period had to begin somewhere else. The US economy started to boom, while millions of people were being killed overseas.

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