17 Down and Out

The Depression is an embarrassing thing. It is a shame to the system: the American Way that seemed so successful. All of a sudden, things broke down and didn't work. It's a difficult thing to understand today. To imagine this system, all of a sudden—for reasons having to do with paper, money, abstract things—breaking down.

—STUDS TERKEL,
HARD TIMES: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

A depression is a time of decline in business activity accompanied by falling prices and high unemployment. The Great Depression was a time of severe decline in business activity. Today, the government tries to regulate such drastic ups and downs.

There were no jobs for 12 million. Many more had their hours and pay cut.

By 1932, at least 12 million people were out of work. That was one in four of all those who normally would work. Count your friends: pretend that the parents of every fourth person are unemployed. Start with yourself. Suddenly, your family has no income. What are you going to do?

America had had depressions before. They were supposed to be a kind of self-regulating part of capitalism. All the early depressions had something in common: it was the poorest workers who were hurt. They lost their jobs. They went hungry. The wealthy and the middle class suffered only slightly.

The Great Depression (which is what it came to be called) was different. It hurt more people—rich and poor—than any previous depression. And it went on, and on, and on.

To begin, the census of 1920 had shown that for the first time more than half the nation was urban. (Cities in the 1920s were small by today's measures; still, they were a

U.S. Steel's payroll of full-time workers fell from 225,000 in 1929 to zero on April 1, 1933; even the hands employed part-time in 1933 numbered only half as many as the full-time force of 1929. In Seattle, jobless families whose lights had been cut off spent every evening in darkness, some even without candles to light the blackened room. In December 1932, a New York couple moved to a cave in Central Park, where they lived for the next year.

—WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG

In William Gropper's *Migration* a desperate farm family heads west, carrying their belongings. More than 3 million people left the Great Plains during the 1930s. They were called "Okies" and "Arkies." Why? Read John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* for a great story about their plight.

In 1932, a wagon full of oats didn't pay for a pair of shoes. In Illinois in 1933, a bushel of corn sold for 10 cents. If there are 56 pounds in a bushel, how much does 25 cents' worth of corn weigh? Can you see why farmers had problems? Can you see why some talked about the failure of democracy and capitalism?

big change for people used to farm life.) This was the first major *urban* depression. City people have a terrible time without jobs or income.

Farmers don't have an easy time of it either, but at least they can usually feed themselves. America's farmers, as you remember, had not done well during the '20s. They didn't prosper with the rest of the nation. Crop prices stayed low. So the farmer's income was low, too. In 1929, most farms still didn't have electricity or indoor toilets. During the '30s, things got worse. The price of wheat and other grains dropped so low that it was sometimes below what it cost to grow it. Dairy farmers dumped thousands of gallons of milk onto the land to protest the low price of milk. Other farmers destroyed their own crops. All this waste was happening at a time when city children were hungry. Clearly, something was terribly wrong with our economic system.

Some public relief money for the destitute was organized under Hoover—but how did a family of four manage on $5.50 a week?

Photographer Dorothea Lange took this picture in Elm Grove, Oklahoma, in 1936 (see page 200 for another of her images). It was originally captioned: "People living in miserable poverty."

Farmers' income in 1932 was one-third what it had been in 1929. Even farmers who could feed themselves were often unable to pay their mortages, loans, or taxes. So tens of thousands lost their farms. How would they feed themselves now? By 1932 a million people roamed the country—walking, hitchhiking, or riding boxcars. Starvation was rare, but hunger wasn't. Nor was shame and despair.

To ***abuse*** means to "hurt or to treat carelessly."

Many bankers, brokers, and investors had been wild and irresponsible in the '20s. That irresponsibility caused great hardship in the decade that followed. The American farmer had been irresponsible for generations. Mostly, he hadn't known better, although he should have: European farmers had been practicing crop rotation for over a century.

But, beginning in Jamestown, American farmers had abused land. Farmers used up the fertile land and moved on. They cut down trees and cut up the sod. It didn't have to happen. With careful farming, land can be preserved

Dust Bowl Days

The Dust Bowl is the name given to the region that was devastated by drought during the Depression years. It went from western Arkansas to the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles to New Mexico, Kansas, Colorado, and into Missouri. That area has little rainfall, light soil, and high winds. During World War I (when grain prices were high), farmers had plowed up thousands of acres of natural grassland to plant wheat. When drought struck (from 1934 to 1937), the soil lacked a grassy root system to hold it. Winds picked up the topsoil and turned it into black blizzards. Cattle choked and people fled. The government formed the Soil Conservation Service (in 1935) to teach farmers to terrace the land (to hold rainwater) and to plant trees and grass (to anchor the soil). Artists and writers such as Dorothea Lange, John Steinbeck, and Woody Guthrie photographed, wrote, and sang of the tragedy.

Alexander Hogue saw the awful effects of drought combined with dust and painted *Drought Stricken Area (above).* Woody Guthrie walked the highways of the Dust Bowl and wrote a song called "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh." Here's one stanza: *A dust storm hit, and it hit like thunder/ It dusted us over, and it covered us under/ Blocked out the traffic and blocked out the sun/ Straight for home all the people did run.*

and enriched. For generations, however, there had seemed to be so much land that few people in America worried. They weren't prepared for nature's tricks: for the droughts and wind storms that came, dried up the land, and turned it to desert. Soil—good, rich topsoil—became dust. Much of the Great Plains just blew away. It was so bad that sailors at sea, 20 miles off the Atlantic coast, swept Oklahoma dust from the decks of their ships. For drought-stricken farmers, there was nothing to do but leave the land, head for a city, and hope to find a job.

But there were no jobs to be found in the cities. City people were moving in with relatives on family farms. It was a time of national calamity.

Now, back to you. Remember, everyone in your family is out of work. How are you going to pay the rent? If you don't have any money, you can't do it. That means you're going to get evicted—

thrown out—from your apartment. (If you live in a house and can't pay the mortgage, the bank will take your house.)

What are you going to do? Well, you're lucky: you happen to have a nice aunt and uncle, and they have jobs. So you move in with them. Things are crowded, and everyone gets a bit irritable, but you'll make it.

The family of your best friend—the girl who lives next door—isn't as lucky. They have no relatives to take them in and no place to go. The only thing they can think to do is to build a shack of old boxes and boards on some land near a garbage dump. They are not alone; hundreds of others are camped in that same unhealthy place. Those shanty towns—where people keep warm around open fires—spring up all over the nation. People call them "Hoovervilles," after the president, who says he is trying hard to solve the problem of the homeless and hungry. But nothing he does seems to help. By 1933, a million people in America are living in Hoovervilles.

Above: **a glimpse of the fate of the American dream during the Depression.** ***Below:*** **This Hooverville in Seattle was home to thousands of "forgotten" men, women, and children.**