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1930s

The Human Toll

Period: 1930s

After more than half a century, images of the Great Depression remain firmly etched in the American psyche: breadlines, soup kitchens, tin-can shanties and tar-paper shacks known as "Hoovervilles," penniless men and women selling apples on street corners, and gray battalions of Arkies and Okies packed into Model A Fords heading to California.

The collapse was staggering in its dimensions. Unemployment jumped from less than 3 million in 1929 to 4 million in 1930, to 8 million in 1931, and to 12 ½ million in 1932. In that year, a quarter of the nation's families did not have a single employed wage earner. Even those fortunate enough to have jobs suffered drastic pay cuts and reductions in working hours. Only one company in ten failed to cut pay, and in 1932 three-quarters of all workers were on part-time schedules, averaging just 60 percent of the normal work week.

The economic collapse was terrifying in its scope and impact. By 1933 average family income had tumbled 40 percent, from \$2,300 in 1929 to just \$1,500 four years later. In the Pennsylvania coal fields, three or four families crowded together in one-room shacks and lived on wild weeds. In Arkansas, families were found inhabiting caves. In Oakland, California, whole families lived in sewer pipes.

Vagrancy shot up as many families were evicted from their homes for nonpayment of rent. The Southern Pacific Railroad boasted that it threw 683,000 vagrants off its trains in 1931. Free public flophouses and missions in Los Angeles provided beds for 200,000 of the uprooted.

To save money, families neglected medical and dental care. Many families sought to cope by planting gardens, canning food, buying used bread, and using cardboard and cotton for shoe soles. Despite a steep decline in food prices, many families did without milk or meat. In New York City, milk consumption declined by a million gallons a day.

President Herbert Hoover declared, "Nobody is actually starving. The hoboes are better fed than they have ever been." But in New York City in 1931, there were 20 known cases of starvation; in 1934, there were 110 deaths caused by hunger.

There were so many accounts of people starving in New York that the West African nation of Cameroon sent \$3.77 in relief.

The Depression had a powerful impact on families. It forced couples to delay marriage and drove the birthrate below the replacement level for the first time in American history. The divorce rate fell, for the simple fact that many couples could not afford to maintain separate households or to pay legal fees. Still, rates of desertion soared. By 1940 there were 1.5 million married women living apart from their husbands. More than 200,000 vagrant children wandered the country as a result of the break-up of their families.

The Depression inflicted a heavy psychological toll on jobless men. With no wages to punctuate their ability, many men lost power as primary decision makers. Large numbers of men lost self-respect, became immobilized and stopped looking for work, while others turned to alcohol or became self-destructive or abusive to their families.

In contrast to men, many women saw their status rise during the Depression. To supplement the family income, married women entered the work force in large numbers. Although most women worked in menial occupations, the fact that they were employed and bringing home paychecks elevated their position within the family and gave them a say in family decisions.

Despite the hardships it inflicted, the Great Depression drew some families closer together. As one observer noted, "Many a family has lost its automobile and found its soul." Families had to devise strategies for getting through hard times because their survival depended on it. They pooled their incomes, moved in with relatives in order to cut expenses, bought day-old bread, and did without. Many families drew comfort from their religion, sustained by the hope things would turn out well in the end; others placed their faith in themselves, in their own dogged determination to survive that so impressed observers like Woody Guthrie. Many Americans, however, no longer believed that the problems could be solved by people acting alone or through voluntary associations. Increasingly, they looked to the federal government for help.

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