Illinois

A Country in Economic Distress

Living in New York City during the Depression, songwriter E. Y. Harburg saw the effects of unemployment all around him. He later recalled, “The prevailing greeting at that time, on every block you passed, by some poor guy coming up, was: ‘Can you spare a dime?’” Harburg turned this observation into a song titled “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” It told of the sense of betrayal felt by many hardworking people who had suddenly become poor. As Harburg explained,

This is the man who says: “I built the railroads. I built that tower. I fought your wars. I was the kid with the drum. Why . . . should I be standing in line [for a handout] now? What happened to all this wealth I created?” -Y. Harburg, quoted in Studs Turkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, 1970

Rising Unemployment Affects Millions of Americans

From 1929 to 1933, almost one in every seven businesses failed. In 1933, when Lorena Hickok began her travels, 13 million Americans were out of work. That number amounted to about 25 percent of the workforce. In comparison, only about 3.1 percent of the population had been jobless before the stock market crash in 1929.

Most unemployed Americans wanted to work. Losing their jobs was a crushing blow to people who were accustomed to providing for their families and who believed in the American ideal of opportunity for all. Those who did manage to keep their jobs often found their hours—and their pay—reduced.

When companies had to lay people off, they first let go of very young, elderly, and minority workers. African American unemployment rose as high as 50 percent in some cities during the Depression. When the New Deal began in 1933, about 20 percent of people listed on government relief rolls were African Americans, even though they made up only about 10 percent of the population.

At first, the economic collapse struck men harder than women. Men tended to work in heavy industries like automobile assembly and steelmaking, which were badly hit by the downturn. Sectors of the economy in which women tended to work declined less. Female secretaries, waitresses, maids, and telephone operators often kept their jobs, at least at first. As the Depression wore on, employers began firing women to give the jobs to men with families to support. Many states refused to hire women for government jobs if their husbands earned a living wage, or a wage high enough to provide an acceptable standard of living.

Unemployment had a cascading effect. The unemployed had little to spend, so many businesses lost customers and had to close—increasing unemployment. In addition to losing their jobs, many people lost their savings and their homes.

Letter from Illinois

February 1936

Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt
Wash., D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

I'm a boy of 12 years. I want to tell you about my family. My father hasn't worked for 5 months. He went plenty times to relief, he filled out application. They won't give us anything. I don't know why. Please you do something. We haven't paid 4 months rent. Everyday the landlord rings the door bell, we don't open the door for him. We are afraid that will be put out, been put out before, and don't want to happen again. We haven't paid the gas bill, and the electric bill, haven't paid grocery bill for 3 months. My brother goes to Lane Tech. High School. he's eighteen years old, hasn't gone to school for 2 weeks because he got no carfare. I have a sister she's twenty years, she can't find work. My father he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep. The next morning I wrote this letter to you in my room. Were American citizens and were born in Chicago, Ill. and I don't know why they don't help us Please answer right away because we need it. will starve Thank you.

God bless you.

[Anonymous]
Chicago, Ill.

North Dakota

Farmers Lose Their Farms
Farmers had faced economic troubles even before the Depression began. But as unemployment reduced consumers' buying power, many farmers could no longer sell their crops. As a result, they could not make mortgage payments to banks that had loaned them money. In desperation, some farmers tried to sell their farms—only to find that their property values had sunk along with the economy. Property value tells what a piece of real estate is worth on the market. During the Depression, many farms lost more than half their value.

Farmers who could find buyers often received far less for their land than they had paid for it. Those who could not sell their farms lost them to foreclosure, a legal process that allows a lender to take over the property it has helped a borrower buy. Farm families that went through foreclosure lost their homes, their livelihoods, and all the money they had invested.

Tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South suffered the most, for these farmers, both black and white, could not afford to buy land. Instead they rented it, borrowing money from the owner to purchase seeds and other supplies. Typically, they did not earn enough selling their crops to cover their debts and rent. To make matters worse, in Mississippi the average annual income per person fell from a meager $239 in 1929 to a pathetic $117 by 1933. When tenant farmers and sharecroppers could no longer pay rent, some landowners forced them to leave.

Financial Woes Stress American Families
Families suffered not only financial but also psychological stress when breadwinners lost their jobs. Many jobless men and women felt ashamed of being unemployed, believing they had brought it on themselves. Men also often felt that they lost status and authority within their families when they lost their jobs. One unemployed man put it this way: "During the depression, I lost something. Maybe you call it self-respect, but in losing it I also lost the respect of my children, and I am afraid that I am losing my wife." For some Americans, these strains were too much to take. The suicide rate reached an all-time high during the Depression.

Families struggled to stay together during the lean years. Those who could not afford rent sometimes squeezed in with relatives or friends. But when costs rose too high, thousands of people, many of them teenagers, left home. One man recalled that when he turned 16, his father told him, "Go fend for yourself. I cannot afford to have you around any longer."

The Depression affected family life in other ways as well. The marriage rate declined 22 percent from 1929 to 1933, and the birth rate also dropped. Couples were postponing getting married until their finances improved. The divorce rate also fell, since many couples could not afford to live separately or to pay the legal fees involved in a divorce.

Letter from North Dakota

Dickinson, N.D.
October 30, 1933

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

I just wound up my first day's work in North Dakota. I must say there was nothing particularly joyous about it.

This afternoon . . . I drove . . . to a shabby little country church, standing bleakly alone in the center of a vast tawny prairie land.

Grouped about the entrance to the church were a dozen or more men in shabby denim, shivering in the biting wind that swept across the plain.

Farmers, these, "hailed out" last summer, their crops destroyed by two hail storms that came within three weeks of each other in June and July, now applying for relief.

Most of them a few years ago were considered well-to-do. They have land—lots of land. Most of them have 640 acres or so. You think of a farmer with 640 acres as being rich. These fellows are "land poor." A 640-acre farm at $10 an acre—which is what land is worth hereabouts these days—means only $6,400 worth of land. Most of them have a lot of stock, 30 or 40 head of cattle, 12 or 16 horses, some sheep and hogs. Their stock, thin and rangy, is trying to find a few mouthsful of food on land so bare that the winds pick up the top soil and blow it about like sand. Their cows have gone dry for lack of food. Their hens are not laying. Much of their livestock will die this winter. And their livestock and their land are in most cases mortgaged up to the very limit. They are all way behind on their taxes, of course. Some of them five years! . . .

It doesn't take much, they say, to keep this stock alive. One man said he lost seven milch [milk] cows last winter, and that $15 worth of feed would have kept them alive.

Lorena Hickok

Ohio

"Ill-Housed, Ill-Clad, Ill-Nourished"
In 1937, as Franklin Roosevelt began his second term as president and addressed the nation, he told of improvements made over the previous four years. But he also called attention to the many Americans still suffering from the Depression:

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day . . . I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions. I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished. -Franklin Roosevelt, 2nd inaugural address, January 20, 1937

While the Depression affected all Americans in some way, this 1/3 of the nation suffered the most.

Evictions Force People Out of Their Homes
Without a steady income—or sometimes any income at all—many people could not pay their rent. When they failed to pay, their landlords would evict them. Eviction is a legal process that landlords use to remove tenants from their property. Similarly, if homeowners could not make their monthly mortgage payments, banks would foreclose on their homes, forcing families to find shelter elsewhere.

Those who became homeless did their best to get by. Some crowded into apartments with other families, huddling together against the cold when they could not afford fuel for heat. Others slept on park benches, in doorways, or, as one young homeless man reported, in haystacks, tobacco warehouses, a YMCA, a Salvation Army shelter, and jails. Once he even pried open a church window, climbed in, and pulled two seats together to make a bed.

As an increasing number of people lost their homes, Hoovervilles sprang up around many cities. Seattle's Hooverville consisted of more than 200 shacks made of tarpaper, old crates, and other scrap materials. City officials tried twice to get rid of the makeshift village by burning the shacks to the ground. When that did not work, they agreed to leave the residents alone.

Although divorce rates dropped during the 1930s, desertion rates rose. Some men, finding themselves unable to support their families, left home to live on the streets. "These are dead men," one writer observed. "They are ghosts that walk the streets by day. They are ghosts sleeping with yesterday's newspapers thrown around them for covers at night."

Teenagers also left home, often to ride the railroads in search of work. Hopping on and off moving freight trains, however, carried its own set of dangers. "I nearly was killed on my first train ride," one man who left home at 16 later recalled. "All I could think of was I shouldn't have got on this train. And if I lose my grip I'm gonna die. And what would my mother think?"

Letter from Ohio

Cleveland, Ohio
November 10, 1940

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am a boy of 17, I quit school 2 years ago in order to find a job. Since my dad died 3 years ago we haven't been able to do so good. We stretched his insurance money so far as it would go, but now we have to face it.

We are behind 2 months in our rent and the 3rd falling due this Wednesday, the 13th. We pay $15 a month for 4 rooms. There are 5 of us, mother, 3 boys and myself. I really wouldn't be writing this, but I can't see ourselves evicted from our house. We've got till Wednesday to get either all or at least half of our rent paid up. It would be all right if it was only me because I could take care of myself one way or another. My mother can't get work because she just recovered from tuberculosis and must rest. I am afraid that if nothing comes up I will turn to crime as a means of getting financial help.

My little brothers are shoeshiners. They go out at night and shine shoes. They go mostly in beer gardens. Their little money even helps. You might say, why don't we go on relief, well you just can't convince my mother on that. She said she would rather starve than get relief.

I am working as a grocery store clerk at $8.00 a week. We could get along on this in summer but not in winter on account of the coal problem.

I was wondering that maybe you could loan us about $35.00 or more, we could get on our feet again and once again hold up our heads. We will greatly appreciate this second start in life with all of our hearts.

Will you please be so kind as to answer this letter in some way . . .

Thanks Ever So Much
V. B. F.

P.S. Please, again I say, try to answer this letter before Wednesday somehow. I'll be praying every night for your loan. I'll give you $1.00 a month with interest until it is all paid up.

P.S. The reason I marked it personal is that I was afraid it might be thrown out by your secretaries before you even read it.

New Jersey

Millions Face Hunger and Starvation

In addition to homelessness, loss of work often led to hunger. For many, going hungry was a new experience. One teenager who left home to find work later recalled, “I was hungry all the time, and I wasn’t used to hunger. I’d never been hungry before, dreadfully hungry.” In a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, another teenager reported, “My brother and I some times even went to bed with out supper because we understand that the others [in our family] need it more than we do.”

Hunger led to malnutrition—a physical condition that results from not getting an adequate diet of healthy food—among the poor. According to surveys conducted in the 1930s, as many as one in five children in New York endured malnutrition at the peak of the Depression. In coal-mining areas, childhood malnutrition rates may have risen as high as 90 percent.

Lack of proper nutrition left people vulnerable to diseases. One study reported that the illness rate among families of the unemployed soared to 66 percent higher than that of families with a full-time wage earner. Not surprisingly, the poor could rarely afford the medical care their sicknesses required.

People did their best to feed themselves and their families. Some picked through garbage cans looking for scraps, some stole, and still others begged. Families were known to subsist on potatoes, crackers, or dandelions. Lorena Hickok witnessed desperate mothers in South Dakota feeding their children a soup made of Russian thistle, a plant Hickok likened to barbed wire. Reporter Louis Adamic described being at home one morning when his doorbell rang. He looked out expecting to see the postman. Instead, he saw

> a girl, as we learned afterward, of ten and a boy of eight. Not very adequate for the season and weather, their clothing was patched but clean. They carried school books. “Excuse me, Mister,” said the girl in a voice that sounded older than she looked, “but we have no eats in our house and my mother said I should take my brother before we go to school and ring a doorbell in some house”—she swallowed heavily and took a deep breath—“and ask you for something to eat.”—Louis Adamic, My America, 1938

To feed the hungry, soup kitchens sprang up across the country. Soup was easy to prepare and could be increased in order to feed more people by adding water. Breadlines—long lines of people waiting for their bowl of soup and piece of bread— became a common sight in most cities. For many, that soup kitchen meal was the only food they would eat all day. At one point, NYC had 82 soup kitchens, which provided the needy with 85,000 meals a day.

Letter from New Jersey

Verona, N.J.
November 10, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am a young girl nineteen (19) years old. I have had a lot of sickness in my younger day which delayed my schooling. I am finishing High school in February. Dad has been out of work since last June. We lost our house in Newark . . . which we had for almost twenty (20) years. Unable to find any houses in Newark, we moved to Verona. I have an older brother who is the only one working, and he makes only $15 a week, which is just about enough to keep up the rent. There are six (6) children in the family, a sister and brother in Vocational schools and a younger one in grammar school. We have little to eat . . .

My eyes have been bad . . . and now I need my glasses changed I don't have the money and it is very difficult for me to continue my studies. We have had no money to buy clothing and use only what people gave us.

Graduation is very expensive because there are so many things to get and pay for. Could you loan me twenty-five dollars so I can graduate. I am trying to get a job after school, but I need my extra time for studies, and the only work I can get is day work . . After graduation I will try and get a job, for I have but one ambition, to be a nurse. I will save and send you back your money then I will help my family, and if I can save a little maby by September, I will have enough for my entrance fee, into some Hospital. It is very embarrassing not to be able to dress like the other girls, and not have money for my class dress . . .

Having no one else to turn to I am asking you, can't you help us or tell us something to do. I will be waiting to hear from you and please keep this personal between the two of us.

Yours very truly,
[Anonymous]

Texas

Natural Disasters Intensify the Suffering
As the year 1931 began, most farmers on the Great Plains were feeling optimistic. Wheat prices were holding up despite the Depression, and prospects for a record- breaking crop looked good. That summer, however, the rains abruptly stopped, and crops began to wither; then strong winds began to blow across the plains. As one wheat farmer recalled, “The winds unleashed their fury with a force beyond my wildest imagination. It blew continuously for a hundred hours and it seemed as if the whole surface of the earth would be blown away.” The farmer was hardly exaggerating—he was describing the beginning of one of the worst natural disasters in the nation’s history. Over the course of the next decade, drought, dust storms, and floods would add to the human misery already brought on by the hard times of the Great Depression. Black Blizzards Plague the Great Plains

At first, farmers on the Great Plains viewed the disastrous summer of 1931 as a freak of nature. The following year, they once again planted their fields and waited for the rain needed to nourish their crops. However, that rain never came—not that summer, nor the summers that followed. The prolonged drought devastated farmers, who could not get their land to produce anything but dust.

As disruptive as the drought was, the dust storms proved to be worse. Winds whipping across the plains picked up the dried-out topsoil and formed ominous black clouds. The blowing dust became so thick that people called the storms black blizzards. As one eyewitness recalled decades later,

> The wind kept blowing harder and harder. It kept getting darker and darker. And the old house is just a-vibratin’ like it was gonna blow away. And I started trying to see my hand. And I kept bringing my hand up closer and closer and closer and closer. And I finally touched the end of my nose and I still couldn’t see my hand. That’s how black it was.

People tried to protect themselves by covering their faces with pieces of cloth and tacking sheets over doorways, but these efforts did little good. By the time a storm ended, one housewife reported, “Everything was full of dust.”

The prolonged drought affected 100 million acres of farmland in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. A journalist traveling through the region at the time described it as a Dust Bowl—a name that stuck.

The Natural Impact of the Drought: Desertification
In 1932, the weather bureau reported the occurrence of 14 dust storms. Within a year, the number nearly tripled, reaching 38. The Great Plains was experiencing desertification, a process in which land becomes increasingly dry and desertlike.

Several factors contributed to the desertification of the Great Plains. Drought, of course, was one, since without rain nothing would grow in farmers’ fields. Decades of poor farming practices worsened the situation. During World War I, the federal government had encouraged farmers on the Great Plains to raise as much wheat as possible. After the war, as crop prices dropped, farmers had tried to increase their harvests even more to make up the difference. To do this, they had plowed and planted every tract of land they owned. By 1930, Great Plains farmers were harvesting far more wheat than they had been 10 years earlier, and they were also grazing more cattle. Such intensive use of the land depleted the soil of nutrients and left it stripped of its native drought-resistant vegetation. Once the drought came, there was no plant covering to hold the soil in place. The wind easily picked it up and blew it away.

In 1935, the federal government responded to the loss of so much valuable topsoil by establishing the Soil Conservation Service. The service promoted new farming methods designed to reduce soil erosion. It planted about 18,000 miles of trees to act as windbreaks, reducing the force of winds blowing across the plains.

The Human Impact of the Drought: Depopulation
Although the federal government geared up to combat the drought, it took action too late for many farmers. During the 1930s, a quarter of the people living in the Dust Bowl left the region. Some had no option but to depart after banks foreclosed on their farms. Others moved away because breathing in the dust was making their families sick. Still others simply gave up, loading their possessions into a car or truck and driving away.

As the dry years piled up, depopulation, or the loss of residents from an area, took a heavy toll on the region. With their customers moving away, banks and business failed. Since few students arrived to fill classrooms, schools closed. Even churches shut their doors, as few people remained to come together in prayer on Sundays. Once-bustling farming communities turned into ghost towns.

Some of the Dust Bowl refugees headed for nearby cities in hopes of finding work. However, with the unemployment rate still high, jobs were scarce, so many more people left the region entirely. Like the fictional Joad family in John Steinbeck’s novel about Dust Bowl migrants, The Grapes of Wrath, those who left often followed U.S. Route 66 to California. California appealed to migrants for its promise of farmwork in the fertile Central Valley. Californians nicknamed the newcomers Okies because many of them came from Oklahoma.

During the 1930s, more than 300,000 people migrated from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri to California. Once they arrived, however, their travels were not always over. Many trekked along a migrant-farmworker circuit that followed the ripening of crops up and down the state. Starting near the Mexican border in the spring they picked peas and later moved north to pick strawberries. Then they headed farther north until they reached the San Joaquin Valley, where cotton was blooming. All summer long, they followed ripening fruit up and down the Central Valley, moving from one farm labor camp to the next as the crops required. In time, however, most of the migrants would find steadier work and put down roots.

Lyrics About the Dust Bowl (Texas)

Dust Bowl Refugee

I'm a dust bowl refugee,
Just a dust bowl refugee.
From that dust bowl to the peach bowl,
Now the peaches is killing me.

'Cross the mountain to the sea,
Come the wife and kids and me.
It's a hot old dusty highway
For a dust bowl refugee.

Hard, it's always been that way,
Here today and on our way
Down that mountain, 'cross the desert,
Just a dust bowl refugee.

We are ramblers so they say,
We are only here today.
Then we travel with the seasons,
We're the dust bowl refugees.

From the southland and the droughtland,
Come the wife and kids and me.
And this old world is a hard world
For a dust bowl refugee.

Yes we ramble and we roam,
And the highway, that's our home.
It's a never-ending highway
For a dust bowl refugee.

Yes we wander and we work
In your crops and in your fruit.
Like the whirlwinds on the desert,
That's the dust bowl refugees.

I'm a dust bowl refugee,
I'm a dust bowl refugee.
And I wonder will I always
Be a dust bowl refugee.

—Woody Guthrie

Pennsylvania

From Drought to Deluge: The Great Flood of 1936
While the Great Plains suffered from drought, a different natural disaster—the Great Flood of 1936—struck the Northeast. In March 1936, a series of heavy storms pounded the region. The rain, combined with heavy melting snow, caused rivers to spill over their banks. Floodwaters inundated cities, towns, farms, and mines. The New York Times wrote of the disaster: “From New England to the Potomac scores of communities stand under water as their inhabitants row in boats past homes submerged to the eaves.”

The Great Flood of 1936 hit Pennsylvania the hardest of all states in the region. Across the state, the flood caused the deaths of 84 people and the destruction of more than 82,000 buildings. The disaster paralyzed Pittsburgh, a leading industrial city in the western part of the state. Floodwaters knocked out the city’s electricity and telephone service. Fires burned unchecked because fire trucks could not travel through flooded streets. Without power, the city’s water system shut down. On March 20, 1936, the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph reported to its readers,

> Water famine hit devastated Pittsburgh today. The specter [ghost] of thirst and pestilence [infectious disease] joined the twin horror of fire and flood. Squirrel Hill was the first to feel the blow. Water faucets trickled dry early today. In other sections of the city supplies will be exhausted within a few hours.

The rising rivers called the government’s attention to a new concern: the safety of the nation’s capital. As Congress debated the creation of a national flood-control program, members of the Civilian Conservation Corps labored feverishly to build a sandbag levy around the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, which were located not far from the Potomac. In the past, lawmakers had offered only weak support for flood- control measures. However, after the floods of 1936, Business Week reported, flood- control legislation “has tremendous support in Congress.” Within weeks, President Roosevelt signed a national flood program into law.

Letter from Pennsylvania

Muncy, Pa.
April 3, 1936

The President of the United States
White House
Washington, D.C.

Your Excellency:

On March the seventeenth and eighteenth, our little borough of Muncy, Pennsylvania was flooded, the largest flood ever recorded in our town, and over three hundred families forced to flee their homes. I must say it was a terrible sight to see the water coming into the homes and being powerless to stop it. Being only able to move and save what we could.

Our borough is small but we were fortunate in having two organizations that done very fine work. The Keystone Hook and Ladder Company (a volunteer fire company), moved families and furniture from the flooded area, rescued livestock and did night patrol service to prevent looting.

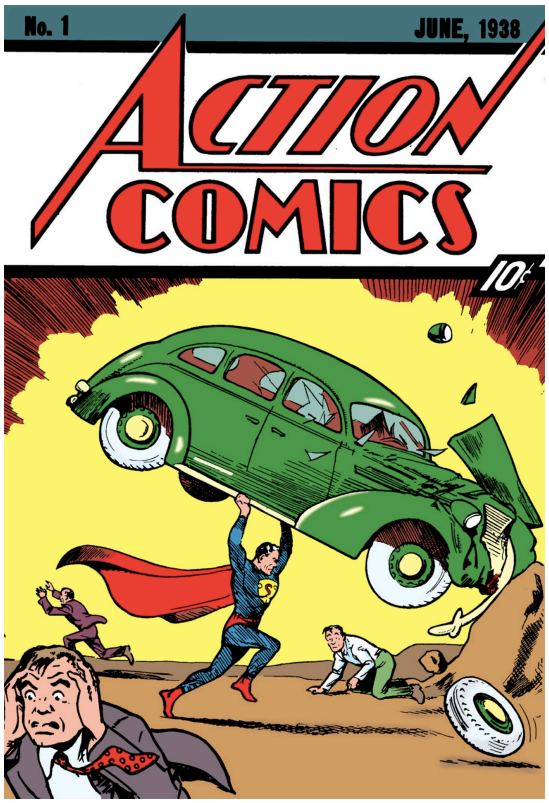
The American Legion, Roland Ritter Post 268 furnished food and hot coffee to rescue workers and flood victims immediately. They arranged with our churches to provide emergency sleeping quarters and established regular meals for flooded families . . .

Thru the efforts of the American Legion, Roland Ritter Post 268 and The Keystone Hook and Ladder Company, no lives were lost, no disorder occurred, and epidemic of disease was prevented. For such a fine service to our community, I feel certain nothing could be more appreciated and honored than a letter of commendation [praise] from The President of the United States . . .

Hoping that you will grant me such a kind and appropriate favor, I am

Sincerely yours

Clark B. Kahler



Coping with Hard Times

Americans found many ways to deal with the grim realities of the Depression years. A Cleveland teenager named Jerry Siegel coped by escaping into a world of fantasy and adventure. In particular, tales of men with superhuman strength tickled his imagination. While tossing in bed one night, he envisioned something new: a character like “all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so.” The next morning he explained his idea to a friend who could draw well. Within hours, the two Cleveland teenagers had created the first in a long line of superheroes: Superman, the man of steel. Average Americans were not as strong as Superman, but, using their wits, they did manage to endure.

Struggling to Get By

People who lost their jobs did whatever they could think of to survive. Those who owned land often grew food, both to eat and to trade for other necessities. In cities, some people sold apples on the street, from which they might make $1.15 on a good day. Others sold anything they could to earn a little money for food. One young artist traveled around the country painting and selling portraits on the street for 25 cents each. Another man described his “racket” this way: “I go around to the houses and ask if they’ve any tight windows or bureau drawers they would like to have loosened.”

Scraping by to meet basic needs, many Americans made sacrifices in all realms of life. The financial crisis forced some 80,000 college students to drop out of school during the 1932–33 school year. Most would never return to complete their education. Middle-class men traded in their white collars for overalls in order to bring home a paycheck. The work might not be what they had once hoped for, but they preferred it to going on government relief.

Letter from Oregon

July 25, 1939

Mr. and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir and Madam:—

Hardly expect this to reach you personally but I simply have to write to some one about the hopelessness of our trying to earn an honest living.

We are a family of four, one boy to enter high school this fall, the other boy in junior-high. We've been married sixteen years, happily, in spite of the terrific struggle trying to make both ends meet.

Our problem is the same as hundreds, more likely thousands of others. We started out with doctor and hospital bills the first few years of our married life and are still trying to pay them off. We make a fair living wage but can't live even comfortably on it as most of it goes to pay these old bills, all drawing interest now. We have tried to get on a cash basis but then the creditors press us. No matter how we try the future hasn't a sign of a rose tint. Is there a solution? . . .

We don't ask for charity or relief, but just help to get on our feet and free of debt.

Isn't there aid of some sort for the honest people, trying to get along? How can people be happy, contented and good Americans when every cent is needed for old accounts? I personally know dozens of families, struggling just as we are. What is to become of us? We can't save for a rainy day because every cent is needed for bills.

We want to educate our boys but we can't even be sure we can manage high school. We've tried to get a loan at the bank, enough for all bills, not more than $500, then we'd only have to pay interest on one account and could easily pay interest on one account and could make monthly payments on one account. The banker advised bankruptcy, said we didn't have a chance other wise. They are justly owed bills and we want to pay them if possible . . .

You are both doing a wonderful job but I'm hoping you can give us a bit of advice too.

Very sincerely
Mrs. Ivan G. Martin
Foster, Oregon

Georgia

Looking for Help

Despite people's efforts, the day often came when even the proudest family had to look for relief. However, as Lorena Hickok heard repeatedly on her travels, many found it difficult to admit they needed help. Before he could seek relief, "I simply had to murder my pride," an engineer explained to her. Similarly, an unemployed insurance agent confessed, "We'd lived on bread and water three weeks before I could make myself do it."

Before Franklin Roosevelt launched his New Deal in 1933, there were few places the poor and unemployed could turn for help. Herbert Hoover had believed that private charities could cope with the economic crisis, as they had with earlier downturns, and he had encouraged Americans to rely on them to do so. Many wealthy Americans generously supported charities to help the less fortunate. In New York City, charitable donations for the needy increased from $4.5 million in 1930 to $21 million in 1932.

At times, charity also came from unexpected sources. For example, the notorious gangster Al Capone and his gang established the first soup kitchen in Chicago in 1930. Capone hoped that this act of charity would help clean up his shady image and keep him out of jail. It did not—he was tried and convicted of income tax evasion the following year.

Local and state governments also attempted to aid people who were out of work. They offered public assistance —support in the form of money, goods, or services provided to those in need. However, local and state relief agencies soon drained their funds. There were simply too many people in need of help. "I have seen thousands of these defeated, discouraged, hopeless men and women, cringing and fawning as they come to ask for public aid," reported the mayor of Toledo, Ohio. "It is a spectacle of national degeneration."

Harry Hopkins, the man who had hired Hickok, agreed with the mayor's sentiment. In his first few months as director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, an agency established to grant money to states for relief projects, he had come to understand that doling out his limited funds would not adequately deal with the crisis. He knew that putting people back to work—and soon—was imperative. When his critics argued that doing more would cost too much, Hopkins responded bluntly, "Hunger is not debatable. People don't eat in the long run—they eat every day."

Letter from Georgia

Brunswick, Ga.,
Aug. 4, 1934

Dear Mrs Roosevelt,

Having the highest respect for you as "First Lady of the Land" and feeling that you have much interest in and deepest sympathy for suffering humanity, I am appealing to you on the behalf of the aged people of my race and community who are in need of care and attention.

I am a colored girl nineteen (19) years of age and a high school graduate. My main source of pleasure lies in caring for helpless people and especially the aged.

There are unfortunately in my community many people who are old and unable to care for themselves properly, and it is for those people I am seeking aid.

I am quite sure those in charge of this work are doing their duties yet the physical conditions of these people will not allow them to care for themselves properly.

My one hope is to have an institution established for the purpose of caring for the aged, one in which they might be able to enjoy real comfort, well-prepared meals which are so essential to health, happiness and peace, as well as are comfortable surroundings.

I feel as though they deserve consideration along this line in as much as their lives have been for the most part, lives of hard work and sacrifice; and perhaps most of them have never actually known real pleasure, and being deeply indebted to them for their many sacrifices, I feel it my duty to appeal for aid on their behalf . . .

I am not asking you for a personal donation, but am humbly begging that you consider my plans and aid me in securing funds for carrying them out . . .

Please help me, I beg of you in my effort to aid these unfortunates. And may I, please except a reply?

Sincerely Yours,
H. E. G.