

PART EIGHT



Long Dark Night of the Depression

15 The Shame and Misery of the Depression

T. H. WATKINS

By the beginning of 1929, the nation seemed to have reached a permanent state of prosperity. Business and foreign trade both were expanding, the stock market was rising at a phenomenal rate, and national leadership appeared to be in expert hands. Republican Herbert Hoover had won the presidency the previous November, having easily defeated his Democratic opponent. "For the first time in our history," wrote two economists, "we have a President who, by technical training, engineering achievement, cabinet experience, and grasp of economic fundamentals, is qualified for business leadership." Few Americans would have disagreed. Orphaned at the age of nine, Hoover had worked his way through Stanford University and become a millionaire by the age of forty. During and after the Great War, he headed government agencies that sent shiploads of food to starving people in war-ravaged Europe. In background and qualifications, he was the best of the three Republican presidents in the 1920s. There was reason to be optimistic about the nation's future.

"We in America today," Hoover himself had said, "are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us." Hoover was equally optimistic in his inaugural address in March of 1929: "I have no fears for the future of our country," he proclaimed. "It is bright with hope."

Eight months later, the country plummeted into the most severe and protracted economic depression in American history. It started with the stock market crash in October of 1929 and deepened slowly and inexorably until the entire economy and perhaps even the nation itself approached total collapse. It was the worst disaster the United States had faced since the Civil War, and there were voices of doubt everywhere. How had it happened? What would become of the American dream? Would the nation disintegrate? And who was to blame—President Hoover, the Republican party, or capitalism itself?

We now know that several factors caused the economic collapse—chief among them underconsumption and overproduction, as consumer buying power lagged behind the quantity of goods that American farms and industries turned out. As factories and other businesses found themselves overextended, they began laying off workers, which decreased consumer buying power, which in turn caused more layoffs and resulted in a vicious cycle. By 1932, some 12 million Americans were unemployed. At the same time, factories and businesses themselves shuttered their windows and closed their doors, and banks, unable to call in their loans, began failing at an alarming rate, taking people's savings down with them. In 1930 and 1931, a total of 3,646 banks failed, representing more than \$2.5 billion in deposits. Never, in all the previous depressions and "panics," had the country been confronted with such statistics.

The prosperity of the 1920s had turned into a nightmare. Unemployed men roamed the country in search of work, succumbing to feelings of guilt and worthlessness when they found nothing at all. In the following selection, excerpted from his prize-winning history of the Great Depression, a companion to the popular PBS series on that calamity, distinguished historian T. H. Watkins captures the human misery and the failure of early relief efforts through vignettes of common folk—whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. Watkins also offers an insightful discussion of President Hoover's approach to the crisis and why that failed.

Hoover, like all other previous presidents, viewed economic crises as cyclical. They did not require massive government intervention. Rather, private charities and voluntarism would suffice while people "weathered" the temporary downturn that would one day disappear, much like a storm in the atmosphere. As a self-made man, the president believed that too much government aid might destroy an individual's self-respect and initiative. In the early years of the Depression, Hoover had no way of knowing that, in the words of historian William Manchester, "this was a calamity howling on a cosmic scale." When a journalist asked the great British economist, John Maynard Keynes, if he could recall any event that resembled the Great Depression, he replied: "Yes, it was called the Dark Ages and it lasted four hundred years."

GLOSSARY

ANDERSON, SHERWOOD Anderson was an American short story writer, playwright, and novelist.

BLACK THURSDAY On October 24, 1929, the stock market started a dramatic downward tumble, causing a panic in the business world that served as a warning of the economic crisis that would soon follow.

DEPRESSION Called a "panic" in the nineteenth century, this describes a severe downturn in the economy associated with bank and business failures, high unemployment, and want in the midst of plenty.

GREAT MIGRATION During the first two decades of the twentieth century, African Americans by the tens of thousands migrated from the rural South to the cities of the

Midwest and North. Job opportunities during the Great War were one of the major motivations for this exodus.

GUTHRIE, WOODY A singer, songwriter, and folk musician, Guthrie traveled with migrant workers during the Great Depression and experienced the poverty of the Dust Bowl. His best-known song is "This Land Is Your Land."

HOOVER, HERBERT Born into a Quaker family, Hoover received international recognition for his successful effort to send food to millions of civilian victims of the Great War. He served as secretary of commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge and president from 1929 to 1933. The public blamed Hoover for the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression.

HOOVERVILLES This was a derogatory name for the shantytowns, made from box crates and loose timber, that appeared on the fringes of towns and cities during the Depression. Unemployed families lived in them and called them Hoovervilles because they blamed a seemingly cold and remote president for their misery. The largest of the Hoovervilles was outside Oklahoma City and covered over one hundred square miles.

INTERNATIONAL APPLE SHIPPERS ASSOCIATION This organization devised a plan to sell on credit crates of apples to the unemployed. By November of 1930, as many as six thousand street vendors were peddling nickel apples in New York City alone. Sales soon dropped. Many Americans viewed these desperate fruit vendors as a reminder of the economic problems they wished to forget.

JIM CROW LAWS See glossary in selection 1.

LYND, ROBERT S. AND HELEN MERRELL These sociologists focused their research on Muncie, Indiana, and wrote *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary America*. It was the first sociological examination of an American community.

MINEHAN, THOMAS He was a sociologist who studied the tramps and hoboes who roamed the country looking for work. Most of these homeless men and women illegally rode on the railroad boxcars from town to town.

MULLIGAN STEW A name for a hobo dinner dish, it included anything that the destitute could beg, scavenge, or steal.

RAILROAD BULLS These security guards were hired by the

railroads to keep hoboes off the boxcars and to make sure that only paying customers were on board. During the Great Depression, perhaps as many as two million men and eight thousand women illegally rode the rails in an attempt to find work.

RECONSTRUCTION FINANCE CORPORATION (RFC) In 1932, Hoover established this federal agency to distribute billions of dollars in funds to support agriculture and industry. It later became a powerful part of the New Deal.

RED CROSS This international philanthropic organization provided relief for the victims of war, floods, storms, and other calamities. Watson gives the Red Cross an abysmal evaluation for its response to the Great Depression. The elite, who could not identify with the unemployed, ran the local chapters, which were "more efficient at withholding aid than in furnishing it."

REPATRIATION From 1929 to 1937, the United States sent as many as five hundred thousand Chicanos back to Mexico. Deportation, or more "benignly" repatriation, was a product of the fear that Mexican Americans were taking jobs from Anglo workers and were a burden on social services. Many of these deportees later returned to the United States, benefiting from "a trip to Mexico at the expense of the country."

TERKEL, STUDS A Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian, Terkel recorded oral histories of average Americans, including those who lived through the worst years of the Depression.

UNIVERSAL FEAR

Gordon Parks was sixteen years old in 1929, a young black man trying to work his way through high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, as a bellboy at a downtown club for white businessmen. One Wednesday afternoon, a notice was tacked to the employee bulletin board: "Because of unforeseen circumstances, some personnel will be laid off the first of next month. Those directly affected will

be notified in due time." This puzzled Parks until the next day, Thursday, October 24, when the evening papers broke the news of the crash. "I read everything I could get my hands on," he recalled,

gathering in the full meaning of such terms as Black Thursday, deflation and depression. I couldn't imagine such financial disaster touching my small world; it surely concerned only the rich. But by the first week of November I . . . knew differently; along with millions of others across the nation, I was without a job. . . . Finally, on the seventh of November I went to school and cleaned out my locker, knowing it was impossible to stay on. A piercing chill was in the air as I walked back to the rooming house. The hawk had come. I could already feel his wings shadowing me.

From *The Great Depression* by T. H. Watkins. Copyright © 1993 by Blackside, Inc. By permission of Little, Brown and Company.

While only a small percentage of the public was directly affected by the collapse of the stock market in October, 1929, it was still a moment of history shared by nearly every American. Like the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor or the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy in our own time, the crash was a point of reference for those of that time. People took the measure of their era by using the crash as an emotional baseline, and it became the one event on which tens of millions could fix their worry as the full dimensions of the debacle slowly began to be discerned. Gordon Parks was not the only one who felt the shadow of the hawk.

President Herbert Clark Hoover, though, apparently remained oblivious to that shadow—or if he felt it, did not want to acknowledge it. Unemployment had grown from about 1.5 million to at least 3.2 million in the five months since the crash, but on March 7, 1930, Hoover gave the American public the results of his own analysis of the situation. "All the evidences," he said, "indicate that the worst effects of the crash upon unemployment will have passed during the next sixty days."

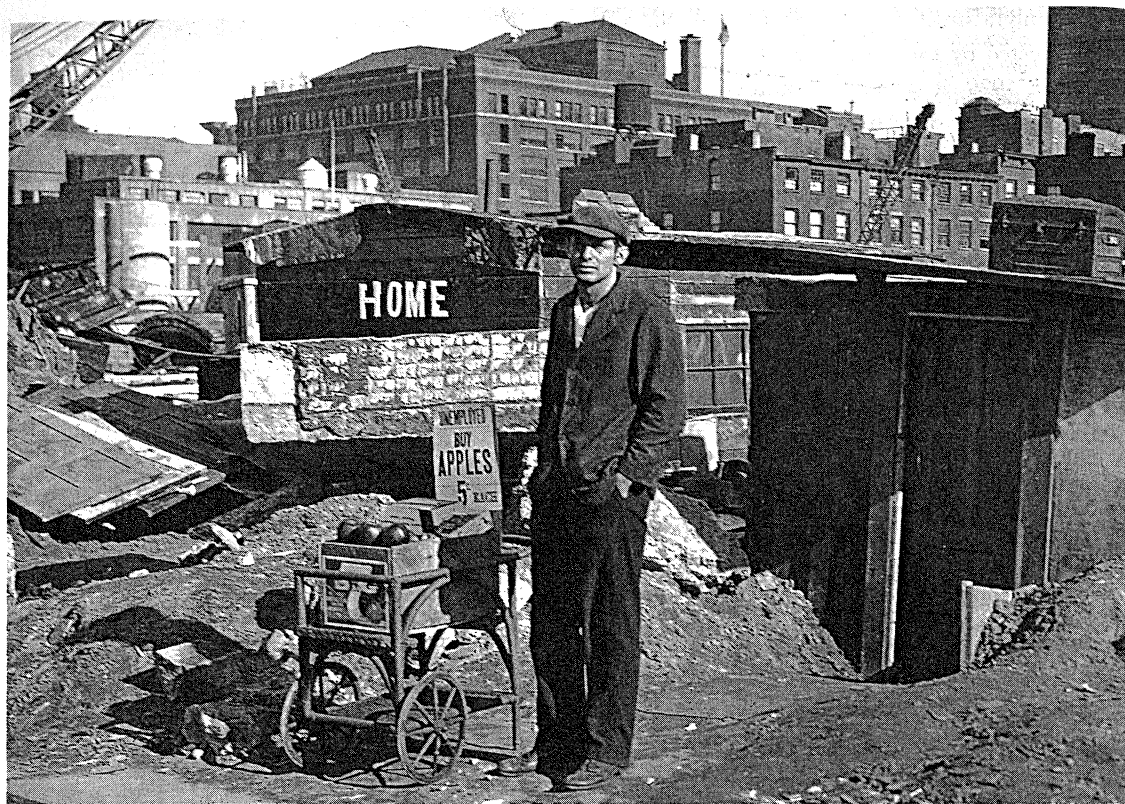
A more accurate measure could have been found in an unnamed southern city that Sherwood Anderson visited that same month. The writer spent some time standing outside a big basement soup kitchen, where on a single day he watched seven hundred people go inside to get fed. He was struck by the number of those who did not want him to know their hunger. The man, for example, who approached the soup kitchen three times before swallowing his pride and going down the steps. "I am not here for soup," he told Anderson, who had not said a word. "I came here to meet a friend." Or the young woman who asked him where the soup kitchen was. "I do not want any soup," she assured him when he obliged. She just wanted to say hello to some of the women who were serving the needy. "They are friends of mine."

"They were Americans, such people as you and I," Anderson wrote. "I stood watching them. I was ashamed of my warm overcoat, my stout shoes. I made men ashamed standing there."

Most of those who were still coming to the soup kitchen six months later, as the first anniversary of the crash approached, probably would have put little or no faith in anything Herbert Hoover said on the subject of what was now being called, openly and increasingly, a depression. Unemployment had not declined; it had risen, implacably, and in another six months would hit at least 7.5 million. And they would have found plainly incomprehensible the confidence of Rome C. Stephenson, vice president of the American Bankers' Association, if they had heard the pep talk he gave his fellow bankers in downtown Cleveland on September 30. The bankers should not worry, Stephenson said, because business was about to get better. The slump, he insisted, was largely a matter of misperception:

The depression of the stock market impressed the general public with the idea that it would depress general business. Because of a psychological consequence, it did, but it should not have. There are 120,000,000 persons in the country and at the maximum not more than 10,000,000 were involved in stock-market transactions. The remaining 110,000,000 persons suffered no loss.

The bulk of the American population may not have suffered the loss of stock investments, but there were plenty of other ways to calculate loss, and by the end of 1929, with unemployment rising, with shops and factories suddenly ornamented by Closed or Out of Business signs, and, perhaps most terrifying of all, with scores of banks failing and taking with them millions of dollars in deposits (which were at that time uninsured), the "general public's" confidence in the financial health of the country and the wisdom of its leaders was shaky at best. Confidence fell even further when 256 banks failed in the single month of November, 1930, and further yet on December 11, when the United States Bank, with deposits of more than \$200 million, went under. It was the largest single bank failure in American history up to that time, and contributed no little portion to an economic hangover in which, in the words of banker J. M. Barker, "cupidity turned into unreasoning, emotional, universal fear."



Culver Pictures, Inc.

Unemployment reached staggering levels during the long dark night of the Depression. To raise a little money, this man, in 1932, is forced to sell apples on West Street in New York City. In back of him is a "Hooverville," a collection of wrecked and abandoned buildings that became "home" for unemployed New Yorkers and their families.

FIGHTING FOR THE SCRAPS

There was reason enough for fear. . . . By the end of 1931, unemployment had climbed to 8 million and in a few months would be approaching 12 million.

There had never been such statistics in our history, and there have been none like them since. Their true meaning, the effect they had on individual human lives, could be seen everywhere, as people struggled blindly and bravely to survive. Which is not to say that everyone was willing to see them for what they were. Like those who attempt to dismiss the homeless of our own day as aberrations, not indications, of

the nation's economic condition, many of the pundits of the depression years spent a lot of time explaining away the presence of the poor and the hungry. These were temporary phenomena, it was said, transient indications of a momentary lapse in economic health. Many of the people were not even victims—they were just beggars too lazy or too ignorant to work. But the deprived of the depression years were even more difficult to ignore than the doorway sleepers and street-corner panhandlers of modern America. They could not be explained away, because they would not go away—and their numbers grew day by day, week by week. Like a plague, the disease of deprivation spread with such speed and

across so many lines that there were few families in the United States who did not either experience or witness its pain. When neighbors you had known all your life were found one morning with all their furniture stacked on the sidewalk, nowhere to go, no hope in sight, it did not take much imagination to see yourself standing there with them.

You did not even have to be especially vulnerable to feel the power of deprivation. Daniel Willard, president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and in no danger of having his furniture stacked on anybody's sidewalk, for instance, received an honorary doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania in June, 1931, but instead of mouthing the usual platitudes on this happy occasion, burst out with a jeremiad against the very economic system that had made him rich:

A system—call it what you will—under which it is possible for 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 of willing and able-bodied men to be out of work and unable to secure work for months at a time, and with no other source of income, cannot be said to be perfect or even satisfactory. . . . I would be less than candid if I did not say in such circumstances I would steal before I would starve.

"No one is going hungry and no one need go hungry or cold," President Hoover still insisted in the winter of 1931. Willard would have disagreed. So would Louise V. Armstrong. "We saw the city at its worst," she wrote in *We, Too, Are the People* (1941). "One vivid, gruesome moment of those dark days we shall never forget. We saw a crowd of some fifty men fighting over a barrel of garbage which had been set outside the back door of a restaurant. American citizens fighting for scraps of food like animals!"

"Why does Every Thing have Exceptional Value Except the Human being," one destitute person wrote the president, "—why are we reduced to poverty and starving and anxiety and Sorrow So quickly under your administration as Chief Executor. Can you not find a quicker way of Executing us than to starve us to death."

On Chicago's South Side, wandering reporter Edmund Wilson took a look at the old Angelus

Building, a tottering, stinking wreck of a place whose owner would have demolished it if he had found the money to do so. It was now stuffed with black people who could afford to live nowhere else. The place, Wilson said, was

seven stories, thick with dark windows, caged in a dingy mess of fire-escapes like mattress-springs on a junk-heap, hunched up, hunchback-proportioned, jam-crammed in its dumbness and darkness with miserable wriggling life. . . . There is darkness in the hundred cells: the tenants cannot pay for light; and cold: the heating system no longer works. . . . And now, since it is no good for anything else, its owner had turned it over to the Negroes, who flock into the tight-packed apartments and get along there as best they can.

In an Appalachian Mountains school, a child who looked sick was told by her teacher to go home and get something to eat. "I can't," the girl replied. "It's my sister's turn to eat."

The city fathers over in Muncie, Indiana, did not like to think of people being that hungry in their all-American town. Muncie, after all, was the "Middle-town" of the famous 1929 study of Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, and was generally proud of it, too. But by the spring of 1932, the layer of confidence with which the city had consistently blanketed the depression began to grow a little tattered. That year, a Muncie businessman later told the Lynds, "people would go around saying in low tones, 'Have you heard that they're boarding up the so-and-so plant?' And a few days later, 'Have you heard that so-and-so-many trucks of machinery were moved out of town today? They say that half the floor at the plant is stripped already.' It got on our nerves as this went on!" The plant in question was a General Motors assembly plant, and by the end of the summer it had indeed stripped its floors of machinery, closed down, and left Muncie.

New Orleans did its best to keep reality from the door, too. Unemployment was greatly exaggerated, a writer to the letters column of the *Times-Picayune* said in February, 1930, a rumor spread by a "host of fly-speckers, calamity howlers and woe-be-tiders

[who] are barnacles on prosperity," but a week later an estimated three to four hundred men showed up to answer a single classified advertisement for work available in Texas. When the advertisement turned out to be a fraud, the crowd started a small-scale riot and the police had to be brought in to put it down.

Out in Yavapai County, Arizona, depression was even harder to ignore for long. Hundreds of men who had been laid off from the copper mines in the southern part of the state wandered north to the vicinity of Prescott. During the summer of 1932, they spread "out into the hills and mountains in the hope of placer mining and getting a few cents a day out of the gravel-bars that were worked fifty years ago," Prescott poet Sharlot Hall wrote a friend in June. "Sometimes they really do pan out a few cents—or once in a while get a dollar or more—but the old diggings are very lean of gold. . . ." Others were trying the same thing up in Nevada, where in one lonely canyon a reporter found a man shoveling dirt into a primitive riffle chute to wash out gold. "Me a minin' man?" he replied when asked. "Yes, I'm a miner—all of ten weeks now. Before that, I'd been a sailor all my life. Now it's a simple case of 'root, hog, or die, so I'm rootin'.'"

Hundreds of thousands of people were on the move by then. The Southern Pacific Railroad estimated that its "railroad bulls" had thrown as many as 683,000 transients off its boxcars in a single year. At least 200,000 of the transients were adolescents, most of them male but with no small number of females among them. In the summer of 1932 sociologist Thomas Minehan began a study that took him on the road with young tramps and hoboes. Most of them, he noted, traveled in gangs for safety, an especially important consideration for the young women among them. "Girls in box cars," he wrote, "are not entirely at the mercy of any man on the road whatever their relations with the boys may be. In event of loneliness or illness, the boys and girls have friends to comfort and care for them."

One of the tramps with whom he traveled for a time was a Pennsylvania Dutch boy nicknamed Blink—so named because he had lost an eye when a

live cinder blew into his face while he was riding an open car on the Santa Fe railroad. "A bloody socket forms a small and ever-weeping cave on the left side of his face," Minehan wrote. "Tears streak his cheek, furrowing the dirt and coal soot, leaving a strange moist scar alongside his nose." The boy showed Minehan a diary he had been keeping since August, 1932, when he had run away from an abusive father. The entry for September 10 was eloquently typical:

Slept in paper box. Bummed swell breakfast three eggs and four pieces meat. Hit guy in big car in front of garage. Cop told me to scram. Rode freight to Roessville. Small burg, but got dinner. Walked Bronson. N. G. Couple a houses. Rode to Sidell. N. G. Hit homes for meals and turned down. Had to buy supper 20 cents. Raining.

Young and old, male and female, the transient army drifted in a dark caravan of desperation from hobo jungle to hobo jungle, city mission to city mission, begging for leftovers at the back doors of homes, panhandling for pennies on city sidewalks, stealing chickens where chickens could be found, cooking up "mulligan" stews out of whatever could be boiled into edibility, being seduced and raped, thrown into jail, beaten by yard bulls. Those homeless who did not drift—and there were thousands in every city of any size at all—slept in lice-ridden and rat-infested flophouses when they could afford the ten or fifteen cents for a urine-stained mattress on the floor, and on park benches, under park shrubbery and bridge abutments, in doorways, packing crates, concrete pipes, culverts, construction sites, and abandoned automobiles when they could not afford it. The more ambitious among them contrived fragile shelters from scraps of wood and cardboard, old beer signs and fence posts, anything they could find that would keep off the wind and rain of winter and the direct sun of summer. They built them anywhere they could, but most of the time on the outskirts of cities and towns big enough to have outskirts, where outlandish villages began to coalesce like ramshackle suburbs. Everyone called them Hoovervilles; it was not a term of endearment.

THE LIMITS OF CHARITY

Like most of his contemporaries—and, indeed, most of the American middle class—if President Hoover believed in anything more profoundly than the virtues of self-reliance and individual initiative, it has not been recorded. This was, after all, the very ethos of a white, Protestant culture, the image that Hoover and his kind held up as the ideal of Americanism. Hard work, honesty, and independence, they believed utterly, had brought this country to the forefront of nations, had built a breed of men (and women, too, some conceded, though not often) who had taken the institutions of the founding fathers and made them the wonder of the world. Anything that might weaken the strength of that tradition would weaken the very character of America and was, by definition, evil. Government charity, especially, by robbing people of initiative, would be the very embodiment of error. The national government should stay out of the personal lives of its citizens, even if they were in trouble. For Hoover and for the millions of Americans who shared his convictions, the idea that people would turn to Washington, D.C., to help them out of a bad spot was nearly unthinkable.

It was a hard theory, but part of the accepted wisdom of the time and difficult for Hoover to abandon even in the face of the present situation. Still, when the dimensions of the crisis reached proportions that simply could not be ignored, he did not, as is often supposed, coldheartedly refuse to do anything about it. What he did do, for the most part, was call upon the natural generosity of the American people and the paternalism of local governments. Throughout his term he held to the firm belief that direct aid to the individual was not the business of the federal government—unless there were no other course, in which case he made it clear he would act, though almost certainly in great fear of permanently crippling the national character. “This is not an issue as to whether people shall go hungry or cold in the United States,” he said in a statement to the press in the winter of 1931.

It is solely a question of the best method by which hunger and cold shall be prevented. . . . I am willing to pledge myself that if the time should ever come that the voluntary agencies of the country, together with the local and State governments, are unable to find resources with which to prevent hunger and suffering in my country, I will ask the aid of every resource of the Federal Government. . . . I have faith in the American people that such a day will not come.

In the meantime, Hoover authorized the expenditure of about \$700 million on various public works projects. He also set up the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which in early 1932 began doling out the \$2 billion that Congress had appropriated to stimulate and prop up industry and agriculture in their time of need. The RFC was one of the few such efforts that amounted to much (it would survive to become one of the most powerful agencies in New Deal Washington). . . .

It must be said that many Americans tried to sustain self-reliance, as Hoover advised. Probably the best-known examples were the apple sellers who for a time appeared on the sidewalks of nearly every major city. In the fall of 1930, the hard-pressed International Apple Shippers Association came up with the idea of selling apples to the unemployed on credit at \$1.75 a crate. The apples would retail on the street at a nickel apiece and if a seller got rid of all the apples in his or her crate, the net could be as much as \$1.85. By the end of November, 1930, there were six thousand apple sellers on the streets of New York City alone, crouching, in the words of newspaperman Gene Fowler, “like half-remembered sins sitting upon the conscience of the town.” Down in New Orleans, the same device was tried with Louisiana oranges—“Health for You—Help for the Needy,” the *Times-Picayune* declared. While people at first responded with sympathy to these peddlers, they were altogether too visible a reminder of the nation’s troubles; sales fell off drastically in a few months—not aided in the slightest by Hoover’s peculiar public assertion at one point that “many persons left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples.”

Many people tried to "maintain the spirit of charity" and the dogma of self-reliance in other ways, and many local governments struggled valiantly to meet the crisis themselves, as Hoover so fervently wished. Nothing worked for very long, even in the most successful instances. In Seattle, for example, a few Socialists got together and formed the Unemployed Citizens' League in July, 1931. The organization swiftly grew to a membership of somewhere between forty and fifty thousand. The UCL organized numerous self-help projects—cutting wood on donated land, picking unwanted fruit crops, fishing in Puget Sound, setting up commissaries for the distribution of food and wood, negotiating with landlords to prevent evictions, and putting together a kind of barter economy in which members exchanged services and goods. In response, Seattle mayor Robert Harlin formed the Mayor's Commission on Improved Employment to work with the UCL, and when a million-dollar bond issue was raised to finance it, put the leaders of the UCL in charge of the District Relief Organization. The UCL remained the principal distributor of food and work to the city's estimated forty-five thousand unemployed until the money began to run out. . . .

Volunteerism had not worked . . . and neither it nor self-reliance would be enough anywhere they were tried. They certainly were not enough in those states in which one of the worst droughts in history gave the overall economic calamity an almost biblical character. The hardest hit was Arkansas, which in July and August, 1930, received only 4.19 inches of rain—35 percent of what it had gotten during the same two months the previous year—but rainfall in another twenty-two states in the Midwest, Great Plains, and South also dropped by an average of nearly 40 percent in those two months. "The families that are suffering now, or on the verge of it," the Red Cross representative for Arkansas wrote national headquarters in August,

are not singled out as by flood or tornado or fire, but are just in their homes, with gardens ruined, sweet potatoes not making a crop, the prospect of being in debt to the landlord when the pitiable cotton crop is gathered instead of

having money with which to buy food and clothing for the winter.

Hoover immediately formed another committee—several committees, in fact. At a conference of governors from the affected states on August 14, he told them that they should establish local and state drought committees to handle the problem. For the most part, he insisted, local communities were going to have to carry the burden alone. Furthermore, he believed that the Red Cross should provide the lion's share of any help beyond that. During the terrible floods in the southern Mississippi River Valley in 1927, the Red Cross had stepped in and brought relief to hundreds of thousands of people whose homes and lives had been devastated. The organization had sheltered the homeless, fed the hungry, had helped thousands of people to survive the disaster. Surely, it could do so again.

But the drought of these years was not a single, isolated event like a flood; it had gone on for a long time already and would go on for some time to come, and its disruptive effect was magnified by the larger economic situation which the Red Cross would not have been in a position to do anything about in any event. The organization's institutional inadequacy to accomplish what Hoover expected of it was compounded by the philosophy of its leader, national chairman Judge John Barton Payne. Payne was a close friend of Hoover's and shared the president's reverence for self-reliance. He made it clear from the start that the local and state Red Cross chapters would depend on volunteers and money from the local and state regions, and only under the most extreme circumstances would the national organization step in to help.

The system thus established was more efficient at withholding aid than in furnishing it. The state and local Red Cross chapters, like the state and local drought committees, usually were headed up by the "best people" who had been part of the oppressive plantation system for generations, and were prepared to think the worst of those who sought direct help. Many people worried that if food were distributed,

workers might refuse to pick cotton at the wages plantation farmers were willing to pay. "Some, you know," the Red Cross chairman for Monroe County, Arkansas, wrote in early September,

are ready to let the Red Cross do it all, we think after the cotton is out we can raise some money, and as the worst is to come in the cold winter months, we think it best to postpone doing only what is absolutely necessary at this time, knowing that a person can get along on very little during warm weather.

By November, even the planters were calling for direct aid, because they could not feed the families of their workers. Still, most local chapters continued to tell the national headquarters what it wanted to hear and people at headquarters ignored the streams of letters from the desperate, like that from an African-American farmer in Jefferson County, Arkansas:

There is thousands of collard farmers in Jefferson and Lincoln counties that has not bread. They are Bairfooted and thin closed many has went to the County Judge and to the



Library of Congress

Falling farm prices and one of the worst droughts in American history plagued rural families during the Depression. In 1935, photographer Walker Evans, working for the federal Farm Security Administration, asked Bud Fields and his family to pose for this picture. The pain of hunger and poverty is reflected in the faces of these Alabama sharecroppers.

local Red Cross they Both say that they has no Funds We are planning on sending a Collard men to Washington to lay our Trubles more clearly before you.

Stubbornly holding to his principles, Hoover himself continued to insist that the burden of relief should be carried by the Red Cross, not the government, and he did not even support legislation that would have provided \$60 million for feed and seed loans from the Department of Agriculture. And Judge John Barton Payne continued to hold back the distribution of funds from the national Red Cross. But by January the situation was so terrible that even the local chapters had abandoned the pretense that local and state resources could provide sufficient relief, and national headquarters finally responded with a fundraising drive that began on January 10 and ultimately raised a little over \$10 million. Between then and the end of the program in the spring, 2,765,000 people had been fed just enough to get them through the winter. It was pinch-penny charity at best, and no one will ever know how many suffered how much during all the months in which virtually nothing had been handed out. And since records were as carelessly managed as the relief program itself, no one will know how many died.

Some "relief" efforts did not even pretend to charity. Chief among these was the attempted deportation of Mexican Americans, which managed to combine racism with selfishness and desperation in one of the least edifying episodes in American history. By the beginning of the thirties, there was a Mexican-American, or Chicano, population in the United States of about 1.5 million, much of it the result of immigration—some legal, some not (slovenly kept records and conflicting estimates between Mexican and U.S. officials made it impossible to say how many belonged in either category). Thousands of the immigrants had gone north to work the sugar-beet fields of Michigan and the other Great Lakes states, while others had refused stoop labor as a career, moving to Chicago, East Chicago, Gary, and Detroit to look for work in steel mills, automobile plants, and other industries. By 1930 there were 19,362 Mexican Americans living in Chicago, some 9,000 in East Chicago and

Gary, and another 8,000 in Detroit, where the allure of the Ford Motor Company had reached into the towns of northern Mexico to call young workers to the "wonderful city of the magic motor."

Most of the immigrants, however, had spilled into the sugar-beet and cotton fields of Texas, Colorado, and Arizona, or on into the huge agribusiness farms of the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys of California. Those who had not joined the stream of migrant labor had gravitated toward the growing Mexican-American settlements in the larger cities. The biggest of these settlements was in Los Angeles, where the Chicano population had increased from 33,644 in 1920 to 97,116 in 1930, making the city the "Mexican capital" of the United States, exhausting the bounds of the older Chicano settlements and spreading out into the neighborhoods of East Los Angeles, where it would remain the largest single segment of the city's minority population.

The bigotry exercised against these people rivaled that endured by African Americans, and when the weight of the depression began to fall upon cities with large Chicano populations, unabashed racism was buttressed by the theory that unemployment among Anglo workers could be blamed on the presence of a labor force willing to work cheap and under conditions that "real" American workers would not tolerate—the Mexican Americans. The answer, some concluded, was deportation—or repatriation, as it was described more benignly. In Gary, Detroit, and other industrial centers, open discrimination, physical threats, racist propaganda campaigns, and free transportation helped to persuade thousands of Chicanos to return to Mexico.

Nowhere was the movement more vigorous than in Los Angeles, however, where the first consignment of 6,024 *repatriados* (songwriter-activist Woody Guthrie would call them "deportees" in one of his most famous songs) left Union Station aboard the cars of the Southern Pacific Railroad in February, 1931. At \$14.70 a head, it cost the city and county of Los Angeles \$77,249.29 to ship them out, but the savings in relief payments for that year amounted to \$347,468.41—a net gain of \$270,219.12. "In the last analysis," historian Rudolfo Acuña writes, "President

Coolidge's maxim—"the business of America is business"—was applicable, and repatriation proved profitable, at least in dollars and cents." Over the next three years, Los Angeles County would do a pretty good business, deporting 12,688 Chicanos back to Mexico—though Carey McWilliams, who had been on hand to watch the first trainload leave Los Angeles in February, 1931, later pointed out, "Repatriation was a tragicomic affair: tragic in the hardships occasioned; comic because most of the Mexicans eventually returned to Los Angeles, having had a trip to Mexico at the expense of the county."

Elsewhere, there was little comedy, even dark comedy, to be found. In New York City, the apple sellers had vanished by the end of 1931 and by April, 1932, 750,000 people were living on city relief efforts that averaged \$8.20 a month per person—about one-fifth of what it took to keep one human being decently—while an estimated 160,000 more waited to get on the rolls as soon as the money became available. . . .

In Detroit, the Ford Motor Company was forced to shut down production lines on its spectacularly successful Model A. Introduced to a clamorous public in December, 1927, the Model A had taken the lead in sales away from Chevrolet, and even in 1930 the company had sold 1.4 million cars. But by August, 1931, sales were running at rates only half those of 1930, and Ford simply stopped production. Up to then, Detroit had been carrying a welfare budget of \$14 million; it now was cut to \$7 million, while the number of those in need of relief swelled. Similarly, a \$17 million public works program was slashed to \$6 million. Michigan Senator James Couzens offered to start a private relief fund with a personal donation of \$1 million if Detroit's other rich people would come up with an additional \$9 million; no one appeared interested.

A PRIVATE KIND OF SHAME

However desperate the measures taken against it by private and public agencies alike, nothing seemed powerful enough to lift the weight of the depression.

For those in the middle class or those who might have hoped to work and save their way into the middle class, much of the weight was psychological. "What is surprising is the passive resignation with which the blow has been accepted," newsman Marquis Childs wrote, "this awful pretense that seeks to conceal the mortal wound, to carry on as though it were still the best possible of all possible worlds." Louis Adamic said of American workers, "I have a definite feeling that millions of them, now that they are unemployed, are licked," and many did seem to be finished, burdened beyond the bearing of it by a terrible load of guilt. They had been taught all their lives that hard work and thrift and honesty would be rewarded with at least security, if not wealth. That hope had failed them, and the fault must be in themselves; millions, Studs Terkel remembered, "experienced a private kind of shame when the pink slip came."

The architecture of despair could be seen everywhere, even among those, like most African Americans, who had been at the bottom so long that it might have seemed that nothing could possibly get any worse. But the hopes and psychic toughness of many black people, too, were tried as they had never been tried before—in the black working-class ghetto of Detroit's "Inkster," for example, where Ford Motor Company worker Odie Stallings scratched to keep his family alive.

Stallings, whose story was told in *American Odyssey*, Robert Conot's history of Detroit, had come to Detroit from Virginia after serving in World War I, joining an internal migration that had changed the face of urban America. If World War I had offered the wheat farmer of the Midwest the dream of avareice, it had given the African American of the South the dream of escape. Wartime America had needed bodies, and blacks had responded. Half a million had departed the rural South between 1916 and 1919 alone, and another million or more had migrated during the twenties. Most had found the promised land close to home—in such cities as Birmingham, Alabama, where the black population had nearly doubled in twenty years; or Memphis, Tennessee, where it had more than doubled; or Houston, Texas, where it had nearly tripled. But many of those who

joined the Great Migration also had found opportunity winking at them from the Northeast and Midwest. "I'm tired of this Jim Crow," they sang, "gonna leave this Jim Crow town, / Doggone my black soul, I'm sweet Chicago bound," then had boarded trains by the carloads and headed north for Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York. "I should have been here 20 years ago," one transplant had written from Chicago to the folks back home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you got some privileges. My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don't have to umble to no one. I have registered—will vote the next election and there ain't any 'yes sir'—it's all yes and no and Sam and Bill.

Odie Stallings had been seduced by the same dream, settling in Inkster after finding work in the "black department" at the Ford Plant in River Rouge. He married, and he and his wife, Freda, soon produced two sons. She was pregnant with their third when Ford shut down operations in August, 1931. Shortly afterward, Freda gave birth to another boy. With no income, the Stallings family, like most of those in Inkster, lived on a diet that often was reduced to nothing but starches and water, and Odie dropped from 160 to 125 pounds. His wife was even more wasted, and her breasts were nearly dry; she fed the baby from a bottle filled with flour and water when she could not nurse him herself. Odie trudged the city streets and country roads all over Wayne County in search of any kind of work until his shoes were worn to less than shreds and he could no longer walk long distances. He patched his lightless and heatless shack with newspapers to keep out the cold, but when winter closed down on the ghetto like a fist, the children hacked and coughed incessantly, including the baby, who grew increasingly sick. The parents slept with the infant between them on a narrow bed to keep him warm, but nothing helped, and one morning when they woke he was dead. They put the tiny body in a cardboard box and walking close together under a gray morning sky the

family carried their burden up the rutted muddy street and buried it in the makeshift cemetery next to the little community church.

So much, then, for belief in a system whose inherent strengths were supposed to prevent such misery from ever taking place—or if it could not guarantee that, would at least move swiftly and purposefully to repair the damage that had been done. That faith had been tested and had failed—in Detroit, in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, in the farm fields of the Midwest, the cotton plantations of the South, everywhere, resoundingly. What was left, then? Despair, certainly—the bleak anguish of a psychological depression whose dimensions matched the somber statistical dirge of the economic slump. But in human terms, depression often is just another form of anger. And in the end it would be anger, not despair, that would question conventional wisdom, dismantle comfortable assumptions about American society, challenge the machinery of government itself, and bring the first light to the long darkness of the Great Depression.

People everywhere protested their lot. In Arkansas, angry farmers invaded the town of England and demanded food for their hungry families. With reassurances from the Red Cross that they would be reimbursed, merchants distributed bread and other food to the farmers. In Oklahoma City, a mob of hungry men and women invaded a grocery store and seized what they needed. Despite tear gas fired by police, hundreds of workers staged a hunger march on the Ford Motor Company at Dearborn, Michigan. In 1932, 20,000 veterans of the Great War marched on Washington after Hoover withheld bonuses promised them for their service in that savage conflict. Hoover sent in the army and six tanks to disperse these "dangerous radicals." That same year an angry and fearful electorate voted Hoover out of office, replacing him with a patrician Democrat who assured Americans that they had "nothing to fear but fear itself."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why do you think that Herbert Hoover failed to understand the severity of the economic crisis that

occurred during his presidency? What were his views on government intervention into "the personal lives of its citizens"?

2 Why did Sherwood Anderson decide to leave the area around the soup kitchen where he was standing? What does it tell you about the American character that men and women were ashamed to admit that they were hungry and in need of soup?

3 During the Hoover presidency, the federal government focused on relief through private charities, voluntarism, and self-reliance. How did the apple sellers reflect this strategy, and why did the sale of fruit ultimately fail to relieve their suffering? Why would the author criticize the Red Cross as an agency "more efficient at withholding aid than in furnishing it"?

4 What drew an ever increasing number of Chicanos to the United States? Describe the bigotry that they faced. Why did the government feel that repatriation would benefit the economy? Why would one observer refer to repatriation as a free visit to Mexico at the expense of the United States?

5 How did the Depression affect ordinary Americans, both economically and psychologically? How do the stories of Gordon Parks and Odie Stallings illustrate the personal tragedies that people and families faced during these economic hard times?

6 Given the poverty, frustration, anger, and disillusionment of millions of Americans during the Depression, how do you explain the relative lack of violence or popular demands for radical change?