

Great Depression Primary Documents

There is no better way to understand history than to read personal experiences from the past. To better understand the hardships faced during the Great Depression, this packet is filled with stories of struggle and despair. While reading, there are 3 essential questions you should keep in mind:

- What was it like to grow up during the Great Depression of the 1930s?
- How did the Depression alter family roles?
- Did Depression hardship strengthen or weaken family bonds?

After reading all the primary documents, you are to answer 2 questions, I will show you one of the questions as an example. Use evidence and examples from the primary sources. Text marking would be beneficial.

Hardships of the Great Depression

The economic collapse of the 1930s was staggering in its dimensions. Unemployment jumped from less than 3 million in 1929 to 4 million in 1930, 8 million in 1931, and 12 1/2 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 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 a million gallons a day.

President Herbert Hoover declared, "Nobody is actually starving. The hoboos 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 family life. 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 reason that many couples could not afford to maintain separate households or pay legal fees. But rates of desertion soared. By 1940, 1.5 million married women were living apart from their husbands. More than 200,000 vagrant children wandered the country as a result of the breakup of their families.

Children's author Beverly Cleary

Mother came into the living room. "Daddy has lost his job," she said softly. "The bank is dismissing the employees it took over from the West Coast National and has given them two weeks' notice."

The Depression had come to us. Mother cleared the table and washed the dishes alone. I sensed she preferred solitude to help. I sat filled with anguish, unable to read, unable to do anything. When Dad finally emerged from the bedroom, I felt so awkward I did not know what to say or even how to look at him. To pretend nothing had happened seemed wrong, but seeing him so defeated and ashamed of defeat, even though he was not to blame, was so painful that I could not speak. How could anyone do such a thing to my father, who was so good, kind, reliable, and honest?

A neighbor gave Mother an old pink woolen dress, which she successfully made over into a jumper for me. She contrived a cream colored blouse from something found in a trunk in the attic. One of her friends, now married to an eastern Oregon wheat rancher, had a daughter older than I who passed on two nice dresses. In our neighborhood, no girl would dream of entering high school in half socks. I used hoarded nickels and dimes to buy silk stockings. Five dollars from my Arizona uncle bought a raincoat

We began admiring one another's clothes by saying, "Is it new, or new to you?"

Historian Henry F. May

From the early thirties on, the good times became fewer, the grimness and sadness more pervasive. Part of this, I well knew, was worry about money. Once my father, who usually dressed well, bought a badly made cheap suit that made him look foolish. For a while the house was for sale, and I was deeply troubled to see a For Sale sign on the lawn near the pepper tree. It didn't sell, and eventually the sign was taken down. We resigned from the country club and the tennis club. We got rid of the car, which had never been very important in our lives. In the thirties our standard of living was an odd one a house full of elaborate furniture in a good neighborhood, an old maid who could not be fired, and no car. Only the level of the family meals was never cut I don't think my mother really knew that there were any

alternatives to the round of steaks and roasts. And behind everything, damping every family occasion, lurked the question, What would happen when all the money was gone? We were living, I later learned, on what remained of my father's investments. Even before the crash of '29, some of them were turning out badly

A 13-year-old boy

The happy days I had spent in my home, Clinton, Mass., were real good days until one sad day the factory or mill in which my father had worked gave a notice that their factory would only operate three days a week. My father came home that day planning of what to do, because of the notice given him and the employees of the factory. As the days passed one after another my father was still at his plan thinking of where he could get a better position to support our family...

My little sister and I tried to help my father in a way which we thought best. My little sister thought of helping the lady next door by taking care of the lady's baby while the lady went shopping. Thus she earned fifty cents. I tried to help my father by having a paper route after school hours. Thus I received my salary of one dollar and fifty cents per week. My little sister and I gave our salary to my father in order to help him and keep our home that we loved since we were very young. But now the factory only operated two days a week and our salary of two dollars a week wouldn't help my father any in buying our clothing and food.

John Steinbeck

This is a family of six; a man, his wife and four children. They live in a tent the color of the ground. Rot has set in on the canvas so that the flaps and the sides hang in tatters and are held together with bits of rusty baling wire. There is one bed in the family and that is a big tick lying on the ground inside the tent.

They have one quilt and a piece of canvas for bedding. The sleeping arrangement is clever. Mother and father lie down together and two children lie between them. Then heading the other way, the other two children lie, the littler ones. If the mother and father sleep with their legs spread wide, there is room for the legs of the children

The tent is full of flies clinging to the apple box that is the dinner table, buzzing about the foul clothes of the children, particularly the baby, who has not been bathed nor cleaned for several days There is no toilet here, but there is a clump of willows nearby where human feces lie exposed to the flies the same flies that are in the tent.

Two weeks ago there was another child, a four year old boy. For a few weeks they had noticed that he was kind of lackadaisical, that his eyes had been feverish. They had given him the best place in the bed, between father and mother. But one night he went into convulsions and died, and the next morning the coroner's wagon took him away...

They know pretty well that it was a diet of fresh fruit, beans and little else that caused his death. He had no milk for months.

During the Great Depression, many children wrote to the president and the first lady for support and guidance. A number of their letters follow.

Ten-year-old Ohio girl

Please help us my mother is sick three year and was in the hospital three month and she came out but she is not better and my Father is peralised and can not work and we are poor and the Cumunity fun gives us six dollars an we are six people four children three boy 15, 13, 12, an one gril 10, and to parents. We have no one to give us a Christmas presents please buy us a stove to do our cooking and to make good bread.

Please excuse me for not writing it so well because the little girl 10 year old is writing.

A fourteen year old girl

Dows, Iowa
March 24, 1934

Dear Mis. Roosevelt

I am a girl 14 yrs. old I am asking a favor of you & a big one to. Will you please send me some cloths or some money for some If you can. My girl friend wrote to. we both don't have any cloths. The kids at school all make fun of you if you can't dress just so please let me here from you & please dont publish this letter or us girls shall get a terriable beaten.

May god bless you

A Nine Year Old Girl

My dear Lady,

I am a little girl 9 years of age, I have a mother, and father, and two smaller sisters.

About four months now, my father opened a small grocery store . . . It isn't easy for him to pay all of his bills, because his money is very little. Nobody seems to help us. And sometimes my mother cryes because maybe we'll loose the store. I'm always sorry because I'm still young and I can't help much. I was thinking of You, because I always see You in the paper with a smile in Your face. And I know that You have a kind heart. I thought if I wrote to You, maybe You would help us, with a little money and then with Your help I can help my father.

A seventeen year old girl

Buffalo, N.Y.
Jan. 6, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I heard that you have been very good to the poor, and I am writing this letter to see if you can help me. I had to leave school because I didn't have any clothes to wear. I will be very thankful to you if you can gather some clothes sizes 18 or 20.

I am 17 years of age and was in my 3rd year of high school when I have to leave. My height is 5 ft. 4 1/2 in. and weigh 135 1/2 Ibs.

My father is working and making a little money but we are barely living. He has 3 children besides myself to support. I've looked for work every day but I don't seem to have any luck. I am still wearing my summer coat and have a very bad cold.

All I am asking for is a few dresses and a winter coat.

Thanking you for any thing you can do

P.S/ Please do not have this letter published in any way, as I am writing this unknown to my parents.

A sixteen year old girl

Royse, City, Texas
Sept. 6, 1934

Dear Friend:

Well I don't suppose you know who I am. But I'm a 16 year old mother-less girl that has to work hard for all she gets. I have a brother & a sister & daddy We are working at day labor for a living and don't get much of that to do. In the winter I could piece quilts if I had any scraps. We are trying to keep off the relief this winter so we are keeping every penny we can to buy groceries this winter, Whether we have sufficient clothes or not. We haven't even enough furniture. We haven't any bedsteads, a stove, or cabinet. some of our Neighbors are letting us use their stove, cabinet, & one bedstead. I thought you might have some old clothes, coats, and shoes. or any kind of clothing you could send to us. I have read so much about your kindness I know if you have any you will send them. I would send some money for postage but haven't any. Address to your loving friend Miss D. H.

A Seventeen Year Old Boy

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 our-selves evicted from our house. We've got till Wednesday to get either all or at least a 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 our hearts.

Will you please be so kind as to answer this letter in some way. And will you please congratulate your husband for us for winning the election. I read all about how angry Hoover and all the rest were about not letting your husband have a 3rd term. The reason for that is because they weren't even good enough to be re elected for a second term and are angry. We all have faith in our president.

Thanks Ever So Much

V.B.F.

Directions: Answer questions 2 and 3 in paragraph form (5 to 7 sentences each) based on evidence from the primary sources to support your answers.

1. What was it like to grow up during the Great Depression of the 1930s?
2. How did the Depression alter family roles?
3. Did Depression hardship strengthen or weaken family bonds?

