

UNDERSTANDING PRIMARY SOURCES

Surviving the Great Depression

What is a primary source? It is a document—a speech, a letter, a diary, or an eyewitness account—that provides insight into a particular event. Primary sources, which can also include such objects as photographs and jewelry, enable you to imagine more vividly what it was like to experience events before your time.

The accounts below relate to the Great Depression of the 1930s. When you read them, pay particular attention to the underlined words. Then complete the exercise on the following page. (This article can be read in conjunction with “A Slumping Economy,” which appears on p. 4 of *JS*’s January 5, 2009, issue.)

Life looked great for many Americans in the 1920s, the decade known as the “Roaring Twenties.” The U.S. economy was booming. Factories were producing cars, refrigerators, and other new products that people were buying in record numbers. More and more Americans invested in the stock market, sending it to ever-dizzier heights.

It seemed as if the good times would never end. In 1928, President Herbert Hoover predicted, “We shall soon, with the help of God, be within sight of the day when poverty will be banished from the nation.”

In October 1929, however, stock prices started to tumble. Many people weren’t too worried at first, especially if they didn’t own stock. But as businesses lost money, they began to close. As people lost their jobs, they stopped buying things. Soon, the economy was on the verge of collapse. Banks closed, cutting people off from their life savings.

The U.S. sank into the Great Depression of the 1930s. At its worst, in 1933, 25 percent of U.S. workers were unemployed. Many Americans went hungry.

On March 4, 1933, a new President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, took office. He proposed a massive federal relief program known as the New Deal. It called for U.S. government action to help lift the country out of the Depression. One of his ideas was to create the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA gave millions of unemployed people jobs on public-works projects, such as building roads, bridges, parks, and public

buildings. The pay was low, but the work gave people a sense of dignity and purpose.

The WPA also hired actors, photographers, painters, and writers. Writers were sent to interview ordinary Americans about their lives. They compiled more than 10,000 interviews that included stories of how people weathered the Depression. Here are some excerpts.

Henry Iverson Johnson Retired Undertaker Augusta, Georgia

I was in the undertaking business in Augusta for 41 years, and during that time, I buried 5,000 of its citizens. I followed through to the bitter end with my slogan: “Honesty and Fairness to All.”

When the Depression hit the country, hundreds of people were out of work, and business places were closing every day. . . . But people didn’t stop dying during those hard times, and they had to be buried. I couldn’t refuse to help the people who had made my business, and I made up my mind that I would hang on, and if the ship sank I would go down with it.

At the onset of the Depression, I could have disposed of my business for \$40,000 and walked out with more than \$75,000. But I stayed on, believing the trouble to be only temporary. Then when things got in a bad way, I borrowed money from the bank. . . .

I closed in 1936. . . . I was clear of debt, but I was an old man and broke. However, I had kept my slogan for 41 years and did until the end.

Albert Beaujon Unemployed Knife Maker Thomaston, Connecticut

I worked . . . makin’ knives and made good money. Business got bad, and I went to work in the clock shop. Now I’m 75 years old, and nobody wants me

Words to Know

- **boll weevil: an insect that feeds on and destroys cotton crops.**

anymore. I work on the WPA, but they wanta have me quit that. Say I'm gettin' too old. Say I oughta apply for old-age pension. That would pay seven bucks a week. . . .

I pay sixteen dollars rent. Then there's light and gas and fuel in the wintertime. How'm I gonna do all that on seven bucks a week? . . .

They don't half feed a man. I was talkin' to Mike McDonald today. He gets a couple of days' work from the town. He says he don't get enough [food] to stick to his ribs. . . . Said he had the notion to try dog meat one a these days, but nary a dog could he ketch.

Unnamed Boy

The first hard times I remember came in 1933, when I was in the eighth grade. Travis & Son [where my father worked] shut down, and for six months Dad didn't draw a penny. Things must have been pinching for two or three years before that because by that time the house was mortgaged and the money spent. I don't know much about the details. . . .

Then we were really up against it. For a whole week one time, we didn't have anything to eat but potatoes. Another time my brother went around to the grocery stores and got them to give him meat for his dog—only he didn't have any dog. We ate that dog meat with the potatoes. I went to school hungry and came home to a house where there wasn't any fire. The lights were cut off. They came out and cut off the water. But each time, as soon as they left, my brother went out and cut it on again with a wrench. I remember lying in bed one night and thinking. All at once I realized something. We were poor. Lord! It was weeks before I could get over that.

Mrs. Blount Dressmaker Augusta, Georgia

[My husband] Joe had opened a business of his own. . . . He sold carriages, buggies, wagons, fertilizers, and some commodities. He extended credit to the farmers; then when the Depression came, he was unable to collect and consequently we lost our business and our home.

The **boll weevil** also got in its deadly work. They practically destroyed the cotton and damaged other crops as well. Prices dropped so low that what little [crops] the farmers were able to salvage brought almost

nothing, and consequently they had no money with which to meet their obligations. . . .

After losing our business and our home, we moved to Augusta and made a new start. The children secured work, and it wasn't long before Joe was able to pick up temporary work. I took in sewing and helped all I could.

Mr. Trout Unemployed Union Organizer Atlanta, Georgia

[I was working in a mill when I] joined a labor union. It was the United Textile Workers of America. I was very active in the union work.

Somehow the management found out about it [and I lost my job]. . . . Losin' that job didn't matter so much, but they blackballed me from all the other mills. I'd get all kinds of promises for jobs because I was known as a good worker . . . and then when I'd come back they'd tell me they didn't need me.

Well there was nothin' to do but apply for relief. I did, and finally got a job on the WPA. Worked on a labor project, dug ditches, rolled wheelbarrows, and things like that. I did all sorts of temporary jobs between the WPA work. One time I manufactured my own roach killer and peddled it from house to house.

We don't have anything; no furniture, no car, nothin'. All five of us eat, sleep, and do everything else in one room. I'm way in debt. Owe one hundred dollars and don't know how I'll pay it. . . . We all need dental care because of lack of proper diet.

Afterword

The New Deal helped relieve the hardships that many Americans faced during the Great Depression. But tough times dragged on until the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, when military spending gave a boost to the economy and finally brought Americans out of the Depression.

Interviews courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection.