



Men, traditionally seen as the breadwinners of the family, spend hours each day queuing for free food during the Depression, Chicago, 1931

# LIFE GOES ON

The Great Depression was epoch-marking and often devastating, but aside from those unfortunates who took their own lives, it didn't mean the end of the world

Words Sean Egan

**F**or the unemployed in the Depression, the day would start with the search for a job. The experience could be humiliating where it wasn't merely frustrating. The jobless would line up at factories and shipyards in the hope that managers or foremen would materialise to make that magic announcement, "Men Wanted". The number of jobs on offer, of course, would be a small fraction of the people milling hopefully around. Fights frequently ensued to get to the front of the queue.

By midday, therefore, the quest for work - the thing that had gotten people out of bed and out the house - had in many cases been abandoned. As the spirit deflated at the lack of opportunities, the mind turned to the task of filling the rest of one's waking hours, especially for those living without home comforts, such as the inhabitants of 'Hoovervilles'. Libraries had never seen such trade, although their warm environs were often more the source of their attraction than the books on their shelves.

Mortification wasn't only the currency with the unemployed. Those fortunate enough to be in work learned to accept low remuneration and petty injustice as part of their lot, frequently reminded by their bosses that if they slackened, there were plenty willing to take their place.

For either the employed or unemployed, part of the day was often taken up with crime. Resistance to law-breaking was to some extent breaking down, especially among parents desperate to feed their children. There may have been little talk of revolution, but many more people than before saw acts of petty crime as justified, whether it be shoplifting or putting 'jumpers' on electricity meters. Then there was what might be termed



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# THE CRASH



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Boys attend a camp hosted by the Kent Scouts for those whose fathers were unemployed. Opportunities for experiences such as these were limited for many as families struggled in the Depression

moral crime, such as the non-religious professing to believe in a deity in order to take advantage of the food and shelter offered by the likes of the Salvation Army. The sinister contrast to such victimless crime was mugging and robbery: people had to guard their pay packets carefully on their way home at the end of a working week.

Crime, though, was never the widespread menace that people got the impression it was. The exploits of the likes of Bonnie and Clyde assumed an artificial significance by virtue of the fact of

being disseminated via the mass media, then still new. In reality they were in a small minority, and society remained orderly.

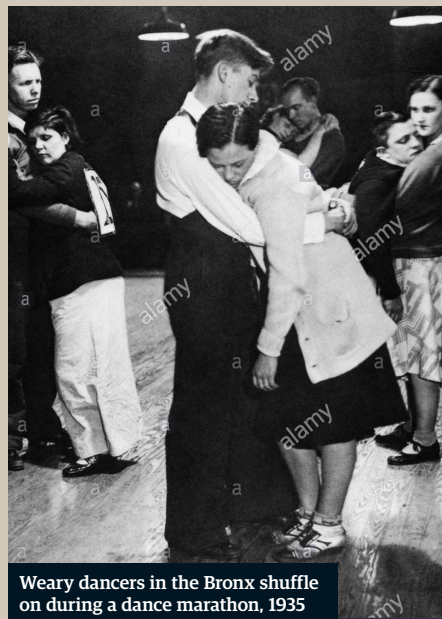
Pawning, bartering and begging became everyday methods of negotiating one's way through life. Payment in kind was accepted because clients had no other means of paying. There was a thin dividing line between begging and using soup kitchens. Visiting the latter became a routine occurrence for many. Those parents too proud to accept charity themselves would send along their

children, knowing that kids had a less ingrained sense of shame.

Another new but regular activity was growing one's own produce. This, though, was not the hobbyism of working an allotment, but the maintaining of kitchen gardens as a means of obtaining food one didn't always have the money to buy. Making or repairing clothes also boomed. The poor didn't simply wear handed-down clothes any more, but had to devote parts of their week to fashioning cardboard soles for their worn-out shoes and sewing underwear from potato sacks.

While it might be assumed that sex was unaffected by the Depression - even increased as people sought solace from their problems - birth rates began declining across the developed world. In part this was down to less sexual activity, but it was also down to contraception being used more frequently. Families were wary of the idea of another mouth to feed, especially as most families were already larger than they are today. Marriage rates also declined, with people hesitant to make plans for the future when that future looked so uncertain.

Psychological health was poor. A rite of passage for children is realising that their parents are not infallible, but that cognisance frequently came a lot sooner in the Depression as youngsters observed that mother and father seemed as helpless as babes at their circumstances. Moreover, men were increasingly feeling emasculated. The female workforce actually expanded during the Depression. In a society where gender roles were rigidly demarcated, it was only women who



Weary dancers in the Bronx shuffle on during a dance marathon, 1935

## DANCING WITH TEARS IN MY EYES

### How the public turned to dance for diversion, and even food

Visits to dance halls enabled people to foxtrot, tango and waltz their Depression troubles away. Many people also attended dance marathons. Essentially endurance tests, they involved couples attempting to dance non-stop for days, providing income for the organisers, who charged people to watch.

Couples had the chance of winning big money should they be the last pair standing, but the grim reality was that some took part simply because organisers were required to feed them. The phenomenon was immortalised by novelist Horace McCoy in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, later adapted into a celebrated 1969 film with Jane Fonda.

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were prepared to take up posts as secretaries and telephone operators. While the additional household income was welcome, men's status as breadwinners was undermined. This, though, was not necessarily reflected in divorces, which were still socially taboo and economically expensive. Either husbands simply abandoned wives or couples remained under the same roof in strained circumstances.

While births declined, death by suicide was on the rise, whether it was the spectacular and fabled plummets from Wall Street windows or countless quiet demises that never made the headlines involving foreclosed farmers or laid-off factory workers who could see no end to their plight. Taking one's own life was sometimes made actively palatable by insurance policies that would provide security for spouses and children. Debilitation was often just around the corner. Health was jeopardised because of the reluctance of people to visit a doctor, which in many countries carried a fee. Meanwhile, there were frequent faintings on public transport from sheer hunger.

For many, there simply was no daily routine. There was much itinerancy, especially among teenagers who were uncomfortably conscious that they were another mouth for their families to feed. People wandered in search of seasonal work or train-hopped to the big cities where employment was theoretically more plentiful, with married men sending money home and even every so often visiting their families.

Another thin dividing line was the one that lay between itinerancy and homelessness. Vagrancy was a criminal offence in some countries, and people could get fined or jailed for sleeping rough. While incarcerating such people might seem a false economy, in fact, in prison they would often be put to work, thus providing free farming or manufacturing labour for their government.

In the US the increase in wanderers gave rise to the famous Hobo Code, whereby the homeless would helpfully chalk symbols on houses to indicate to people in the same predicament whether the inhabitants were hostile or generous to rough sleepers knocking on the back door.

Entertainment-wise, radio was the people's primary source of entertainment. Soap opera, music and variety were popular, although the panic induced by the most notorious radio broadcast of the era - Orson Welles' pseudo-journalistic 1938 adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* - accidentally tapped into the foreboding in the American psyche.

The popular songs played on the radio - and, if one was fairly solvent, the gramophone player - were escapist: the likes of social commentary like *Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?* were far outnumbered by feel-good creations such as *We're in the Money*. The upbeat tones of swing music predominated from the mid 1930s onwards.

Curiously, while the 'flickers' boomed at this juncture in the UK, where cinema attendances



A photo of destitute pea-picker Florence Thompson by Dorothea Lange in California. The Great Depression was damaging to the health of families, both physically and psychologically

peaked at 990 million in 1939, they went into something of a decline in the States. Going to the movies was still massively popular Stateside - cinema, after all, was a rapidly developing art form, with 1927 having seen the advent of 'talkies' - but over a third of the nation's cinemas closed between 1929 and 1934. Americans instead turned to cheaper forms of entertainment like board games and miniature golf. Movie fare, again, tended not to dwell on the current situation, being oriented toward musicals and romances.

Although declining in popularity, what the British called music hall and the Americans vaudeville was still a live draw, albeit one mutating into variety. It would continue to be so until the dawn of television.

Sporting events provided diversion, especially, of course, if one's team was victorious. In the UK, then, as now, the national game was soccer. The existence of the maximum wage meant most football players were on the same economic footing as the people who cheered them on. Although things were different in classless America, sport there was not unaffected by the Depression. In baseball attendances fell by 40 per cent between 1930 and 1933, and players had to swallow average salary cuts of 25 per cent. Meanwhile, bicycle racing - a stadium sport very popular in the 1920s - went to the wall and never came back.

Reading was still a major leisure activity across society, even if in the case of the working classes it often took the lamented form of pulp magazines and sensationalist newspapers.

There was also more elevated prose around. Naturally, the terrible events of the world leaked into it. The likes of James T Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Walter Greenwood's *Love on The Dole* and George Orwell's non-fiction *The Road to Wigan Pier* were bleak mirrors of the current reality, but at the same time a comfort to those going through it in assuring them that reality was understood. They now provide for posterity a valuable, detailed picture of a world gone wrong.

## OLD HABITS DIE HARD

In a flatlining economy, people learned to economise - they never unlearned it



Studs Terkel, who collected an oral history from ordinary people alive during the period, revealed how the Depression shaped a generation

"These kids amaze me today. I mean, they're smokin' and a bus comes, and they throw away the whole butt. I can't. I gotta ... put it in my pocket." So said refuse collector Frank Czerwonka to Studs Terkel in the latter's acclaimed history, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*.

What is remarkable is that Czerwonka was speaking at the turn of the 1970s. His observations indicate how the scarcity and unobtainability endemic of the Depression ingrained lifelong habits of thrift. Such penny-pinching greatly amused Depression veterans' grandchildren, who had never known anything but relative affluence.



Children were often sent to beg or go and seek food from soup kitchens