

# Two Views of the Great Depression (1929-41)

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*For those already living at barely a subsistence level, the onset of the Great Depression had an impact different from its effect on those enjoying affluence. The following accounts convey the difficulties of surviving the economic downturn. The first interview is with a retired black worker named Clifford Burke, living in Chicago. The second is the recollection of Jane Yoder, whose immigrant father was a blacksmith in a small Illinois mining town. The Yoders had seven children. In 1929 the mines closed down, and her father was forced to move from town to town in search of work. Take note of their references to New Deal programs, such as the Works Progress Administration, intended to relieve the distress of prolonged unemployment by providing government jobs.*

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From Studs Terkel, "Two Views of the Great Depression;" *Hard Times*, pp. 82-83. Reprinted by permission of Donadio & Olson, Inc. Copyright 1970 Studs Terkel.

## **A Black Man's Perspective**

The Negro was born in depression. It didn't mean too much to him, The Great American Depression, as you call it. There was no such thing. The best he could be is a janitor or a porter or a shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man. If you can tell me the difference between the depression today and the Depression of 1932 for a black man, I'd like to know it. Now, it's worse, because of the prices. Know the rents they're payin' out here? I hate to tell ya....

We had one big advantage. Our wives, they could go to the store and get a bag of beans or a sack of flour and a piece of fat meat, and they could cook this. And we could eat it. Steak? A steak would kick in my stomach like a mule in a tin stable. Now you take the white fella, he couldn't do this. His wife would tell him: Look, if you can't do any better than this, I'm gonna leave you. I seen it happen. He couldn't stand bringing home beans instead of steak and capon. And he couldn't stand the idea of going on relief like a Negro.

You take a fella had a job paying him \$60, and here I am making \$25. If I go home taking beans to my wife, we'll eat it. It isn't exactly what we want, but we'll eat it. The white man that's making big money, he's taking beans home, his wife'll say: Get out. (Laughs.)

Why did these big wheels kill themselves? They weren't able to live up to the standards they were accustomed to, and they got ashamed in front of their women. You see, you can tell anybody a lie, and he'll agree with you. But you start layin' down the facts of real life, he won't accept it. The American white man has been superior so long, he can't figure out why he should come down.

I remember a friend of mine, he didn't know he was a Negro. I mean he acted like he never knew it. He got tied downtown with some stock. He blew about twenty thousand. He came home and drank a bottle of poison. A bottle of iodine or something like that. It was a rarity to hear a Negro killing himself over a financial situation. He might have killed himself over some woman. Or getting in a fight. But when it came to the financial end of it, there were so few who had anything. (Laughs.)

I made out during that ... Great Depression. (Laughs.) Worked as a teamster for a lumber yard. Forty cents an hour. Monday we'd have a little work. They'd say come back Friday. There wasn't no need to look for another job. The few people working, most all of them were white.

So I had another little hustle. I used to play pool pretty good. And I'd ride from poolroom to poolroom on this bicycle. I used to beat these guys, gamble what we had. I'd leave home with a dollar. First couple of games I could beat this guy, I'd put that money in my pocket. I'd take the rest of what I beat him out of and hustle the day on that. Sometimes I'd come home with a dollar and a half extra. That was a whole lot of money. Everybody was out trying to beat the other guy, so he could make it. It was pathetic.

I never applied to the PWA (Public Works Administration) or WPA (Works Progress Administration), 'cause as long as I could hustle, there was no point in beating the other fellow out of a job, cuttin' some other guy out.

## A Woman's Account

We were struggling, just desperate to be warm. No blankets, no coats. At this time I was in fourth grade. Katie<sup>1</sup> went to Chicago and bought an Indian blanket coat. ...

Before that I had one coat. It must have been a terrible lightweight coat or what, but I can remember being cold, just shivering. And came home, and nothing to do but go to bed, then you put the coat on the bed and you got warm.

The cold that I've known. I never had boots. I think when I got married, I had my first set of boots. In rainy weather, you just ran for it, you ran between the raindrops or whatever. This was luxuriating to have boots. You simply wore your old shoes if it was raining. Save the others. You always polished them and put shoe trees in them. You didn't have unlimited shoe trees, either. When the shoes were worn out, they're used around the house. And of the high heels, you cut the heels down and they're more comfortable ....

If we had a cold or we threw up, nobody ever took your temperature. We had no thermometer. But if you threw up and were hot, my mother felt your head. She somehow felt that by bringing you oranges and bananas and these things you never had-there's nothing wrong with you, this is what she'd always say in Croatian; you'll be all right. Then she gave you all these good things. Oh, gee, you almost looked forward to the day you could throw up. I could remember dreaming about oranges and bananas, dreaming about them....

I can think of the WPA ... my father got immediately employed in this WPA. This was a godsend. This was the greatest thing. It meant food, you know. Survival, just survival.

How stark it was for me to come into nurses' training and have the girls . . . give their impressions of the WPA. How it struck me. Before I could ever say that my father was employed in the WPA, discussions in the bull sessions in our rooms immediately was: these lazy people, the shovel leaners. I'd just sit there and listen to them. I'd look around and realize: sure, Susan Stewart was talking this way, but her father was a doctor, and her mother was a nurse. Well, how nice. They had respectable employment. In my family, there was no respectable employment. I thought, you don't know what it's like.

How can I defend them? I was never a person who could control this. It just had to come out or I think I'd just blow up. So I would say, "I wonder how much we know until we go through it. Just like the patients we take care of. None of them are in the hospital by choice." I would relate it in abstractions. I think it saved me from just blowing up.

I would come back after that and I'd just say: Gee, these are just two separate, separate worlds.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did Burke mean when he asserted that the "Negro was born in depression"?
2. Why did Burke feel so many whites committed suicide as a result of the economic collapse? What stereotypes did he hold about whites?
3. Describe some of the hardships that Yoder endured as a child. What did she consider to be luxuries that many people now take for granted?
4. What seemed to cause the differences in opinion regarding government relief programs?

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<sup>1</sup> An older sister.