Handout 2.4: Firsthand Accounts of the Great Depression

Virgina Durr, who later became a civil rights activist, describes the shame and humiliation people experienced:

It was a time of terrible suffering. The contradictions were so obvious that it didn't take a very bright person to realize something was terribly wrong.

Have you ever seen a child with rickets? Shaking as with palsy. No proteins, no milk. And the companies pouring milk into gutters. People with nothing to wear, and they were plowing up cotton. People with nothing to eat, and they killed the pigs. If that wasn't the craziest system in the world, could you imagine anything more idiotic? This was just insane.

And people blamed themselves, not the system. They felt they had been at fault: . . . "if we hadn't bought that old radio" . . . "if we hadn't bought that old secondhand car." Among the things that horrified me were the preachers—the fundamentalists. They would tell the people they suffered because of their sins. And the people believed it. God was punishing them. Their children were starving because of their sins.

People who were independent, who thought they were masters and mistresses of their lives, were all of a sudden dependent on others. Relatives or relief. People of pride went into shock and sanitoriums. My mother was one.

Up to this time, I had been a conformist, a Southern snob. I actually thought the only people who amounted to anything were the very small group which I belonged to. The fact that my family wasn't as well off as those of the girls I went with—I was vice president of the Junior League—made me value even more the idea of being well-born . . .

What I learned during the Depression changed all that. I saw a blinding light like Saul on the road to Damascus. (Laughs.) It was the first time I had seen the other side of the tracks. The rickets, the pellagra—it shook me up. I saw the world as it really was . . . .

The Depression affected people in two different ways. The great majority reacted by thinking money the most important thing in the world. Get yours. And get it for your children. Nothing else matters. Not having that stark terror come at you again . . . .

And then there was a small number of people who felt the whole system was lousy. You have to change it. The kids come along and they want to change it, too. But they don't seem to know what to put in its place. I'm not so sure I know, either. I do think it has to
be responsive to people’s needs. And it has to be done by democratic means, if possible.16

Eileen Barth worked as a case worker in Chicago. Her job was to work with those who needed government assistance during the Great Depression. In one case, a family asked for government assistance in getting clothing, and Barth was instructed by her supervisor to look in their closets to determine how badly they needed the clothing they asked for. She describes what happened:

I’ll never forget one of the first families I visited. The father was a railroad man who had lost his job. I was told by my supervisor that I really had to see the poverty. If a family needed clothing, I was to investigate how much clothing they had at hand. So I looked into this man’s closet—[pauses, it becomes difficult]—he was a tall, gray-haired man, though not terribly old. He let me look in his closet—he was so insulted. [She weeps angrily.] He said, “Why are you doing this?” I remember his feeling of humiliation . . . the terrible humiliation. [She can’t continue. After a pause, she resumes.] He said, “I really haven’t anything to hide, but if you really must look into it. . . .” I could see he was very proud. He was so deeply humiliated. And I was, too. . . .”17

Emma Tiller describes sharecropping during the depression:

In 1929, me and my husband were sharecroppers. We made a crop that year, the owners takin’ all of the crop.

This horrible way of livin’ with almost nothin’ lasted up until Roosevelt. There was another strangest thing. I didn’t suffer for food through the Thirties, because there was plenty of people that really suffered much worse. When you go through a lot, you in better condition to survive through all these kinds of things.

I picked cotton. We weren’t getting but thirty-five cents a hundred, but I was able to make it. ‘Cause I also worked peoples homes, where they give you old clothes and shoes.

At this time, I worked in private homes a lot and when the white people kill hogs, they always get the Negroes to help. The cleaning’ of the insides and the clean up the mess afterwards. And then they would give you a lot of scraps. A pretty adequate amount of meat for the whole family. The majority of Negroes on the farm were in the same shape we were in. The crops were eaten by these worms. And they had no other jobs except farming.

17 Ibid., 420.
In 1934, in this Texas town, the farmers was all out of food. The government gave us a slip, where you could pick up food. For a week, they had people who would come and stand in line, and they couldn’t get waited on. This was a small town, mostly white. Only five of us in that line were Negroes, the rest was white. We would stand all day and wait and wait and wait. And get nothin’ or if you did, it was spoiled meat. . . .

The Government sent two men out there to find out why the trouble. They found out his man and a couple others had rented a huge warehouse and was stacking’ that food and sellin’ it. The food that was supposed to be issued to these people. These three men was sent to the pen.18

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18 Ibid., 232–233.