‘Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?’

1930–1940: Making do and trying to forget reality during the Depression

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It’s not like you go out on your porch and see the Depression standing there like King Kong. Most neighborhoods, things look pretty normal, not that different from before the Crash. Paint peels on houses. Cars get old, break down. Nothing you’d notice right away. Kids play with their Buck Rogers ray guns. You go to the movies on Dish Night—you like the Fiesta Ware, very modernistic, red and blue.

Definitely, you read in the papers how in Chicago unemployment hit 50 percent, and men were fighting over a barrel of garbage; or in the Dust Bowl, farmers saying they’ll lynch judges who foreclose on their property. That kind of thing. It’s terrible. But most places you don’t see it. Roosevelt can say: “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” That leaves two-thirds where you don’t see the hobo jungles, people lined up for government cheese.

You feel what isn’t there: It’s like on Sunday afternoon, the quiet. You don’t hear carpenters driving nails, you don’t hear rivet hammers going in the city.

Fewer cars in town, just the stoplights rocking in the wind. You don’t hear as many whistles: factory, railroad. You don’t hear as many babies crying. People are afraid to have them.

Down the block there’s a man you don’t see outside his house on workdays. He doesn’t want the neighbors to know he’s out of work again. Smoking cigarettes, looking out the window, waiting for “Amos ‘n’ Andy” to come on the radio.

He was a sales manager for a train wheel company, back when the railroads were buying 1,300 locomotives a year. In 1932, they don’t buy any. The company lets him go.

He takes a job selling insurance. Insurance companies know you can sell policies to your family, your friends. When you can’t sell any more, they let you go.

He sells vacuums, the encyclopedias, door to door. He ends up spending all day at the movies. He won’t let his wife apply for relief. He’s too proud. His son quits high school—he’s out West building a national park for the Civilian Conservation Corps, $30 a month. He sends most of it home so his mother can get her teeth fixed. And put dimes in the chain letters she mails out.

People write songs about tramps—“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”—but you don’t see them unless they come to your back door; people say they make a chalk mark on your fence if
you're good for a handout. You've never found the mark but they keep coming. You wonder how they survive.

One guy's feet are coming out of his shoes but he's got a new tweed overcoat.

You say: "Glad to see you got a warm coat."

He says: "I got it raking leaves for an undertaker. They're good for clothes."

You see the Depression in the papers, the magazines and newscasts: heads getting busted during strikes, dust storms burying cows, Reds parading through Wall Street with their fists in the air, shouting "bread, bread," or Huey Long, the Louisiana Kingfish himself, flapping his arms and shouting about "every man a king." Roosevelt looking over plans for electric power dams in the Tennessee Valley, his cigarette holder pointing up—the columnists say "at a jaunty angle." And the lines: in front of soup kitchens, relief offices, banks that are failing. And cute stuff: Kids hang a sign that says "Depression" on a snowman and throw snowballs at it.

THEN YOU'RE LOOKING AT BLOOD AND BULLET holes from gangster shootouts, a girl drinking a glass of beer at the end of Prohibition, kids jitterbugging to Benny Goodman or Count Basie. Bathing beauties, bathing beauties, bathing beauties, and the glamour girls of cafe society—Brenda Dinauff Frazier, the debutante of the year, smiling from her table at El Morocco or the Rainbow Room. No Depression there.

The Yankees win the pennant. Jesse Owens makes the Olympic team. Soldiers goose-step in front of Hitler or Mussolini or Stalin. Hemingway in the Spanish Civil War, glamorous in that manly way that took over from everybody wanting to look like boys in the 1920s, including the women.

In the new styles, women have waists and busts again. They aren't supposed to look bored anymore, either. You don't get a job, relief, whatever, looking bored. Hemlines go back down. People say hemlines go up and down with the stock market, but they don't just show it in the newscasts.

When Mickey Mouse first came along in "Steamboat Willie" he was a mean little pest, and now Walt Disney is making him the common man, a hero like the common man in the murals the government artists paint in post offices. The little guy as hero. That's a change, all right.

In the "Thin Man" movies, they make William Powell a pal with every working stiff in the city—he stops to gas with the iceman, the news butcher, the local pickpocket before he goes off to drink martinis someplace with white telephones and Myrna Loy sliding around in a bathrobe suitable for a coronation. Witty as hell. You walk out of the theater wanting to not give a damn like that.

She says: "I read you were shot five times in the tabloids."

He says: "It's not true. He didn't come near my tabloids."

Here's the power of the movies: You read that John Dillinger and his gang pretend to be a movie company on location in front of a bank in Sioux Falls, S.D. The whole city gawks while inside, the pretend actors clean out the bank.

The FBI guns Dillinger down outside a movie theater in Chicago. You hear the coroner sent part of his anatomy to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, it was that big.

YOU HEAR A LOT OF STORIES: YOU HEAR ABOUT A smart guy, out of work. He starts an employment agency and takes the first job he was supposed to fill.

The stories about stockbrokers jumping out windows on Black Tuesday, Oct. 29, 1929: the suicide rate was higher right before the Crash than after it, but nobody wants to hear it.

Everybody's brother-in-law knows a banker who works as a caddie at his old country club.

In 1931, Cameroon, in West Africa, sent New York City a check for $3.77 to help the starving. Immigrants are going back to Europe by the shipload. Makes you feel bad.
When Roosevelt closed all the banks in 1933, you hear about one lucky woman who overdrew her account the day before.

In Deming, N.M., the Southern Pacific yard dicks drive so many hobos off the trains, the town has to hire a constable to drive them back on. On the Grand Concourse in the Bronx they have a poorhouse for the rich, the Andrew Freedman home, a mansion, so when the rich lose their money they don’t have to live like the poor.

Eleanor Roosevelt is out visiting the poor and she sees a boy hiding a pet rabbit. His sister says: “He thinks we are not going to eat it. But we are.”

Babies go hungry while farmers in Iowa dump their milk trying to get the price up to where they can keep producing milk so babies won’t go hungry.

Herbert Hoover himself believes that “many persons left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples.”

The apple story is enough to make you think the Reds are right.

In 1930, right after the Crash, Washington State has a bumper crop of apples. Too many to sell. So instead of dumping them, they give them to vendors on credit.

Next thing, men are lined up in Wall Street, wearing hamburgers and selling apples, 5 cents apiece. There are so many of them they start cutting prices on each other. At the same time, the growers get greedy—raise the prices and don’t cul the rotten ones. Pretty soon, you can’t make any money in the apple business, and it’s all over.

The feeling is: damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Like playing the Irish Sweepstakes. Lots of gambling now: bingo, punchboards, slot machines, the numbers.

Some people say communism will save us. Guys in black hats and leather jackets at the union meetings. They know how to organize, they know what they think, but you wonder if they could sell apples any better than anybody else. People are scared of the Reds. A witness tells the House Un-American Activities Committee that out in Hollywood, Shirley Temple is “a stooge of the Reds” for sending money to the Spanish Loyalists. A little girl!

They say J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI will save us from the Reds, the Nazi spies, the gangsters. The kids love him, running around in their Junior G-Man badges.

They say Roosevelt will save us. He comes on the radio in the Fireside Chats, not like Father Coughlin yelling about Reds and Jews. Just talking. “My friends,” he says. Like he knows you know he knows how you feel. He doesn’t have it all figured out like the Reds or Huey Long. He’ll try anything until the Supreme Court knocks it down. The problem is, things don’t get much better. He said in 1932:

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” He’s still right.

And science will save us. You go to the world’s fairs in Chicago and New York and learn how technocrats will build things out of plastic and beryllium bronze, the World of Tomorrow. Diesel trains. Television.

No class struggle because science solved all the problems. You never have to sweat out a toothache. Modern management. All you need is brains, not courage. You wonder, though: Is that the American way?

What you know for sure is, whoever’s running things right now, it isn’t you.

First it was the trusts and the railroads that took control of your life, then Wall Street and advertising, and now it’s Roosevelt’s Brain Trust and the alphabet agencies—NRA, PWA, WPA, CCC, CWA. They prove everything with numbers and polls; 37 percent of housewives spend 22 percent more hours blah blah...

Everything’s scientific. You don’t just get married, you go to college and take a course in “modern marriage.” Half the babies in the country are born in hospitals. A mother isn’t supposed to feed her baby with her own milk. It doesn’t have enough of the vitamins they’ve discovered now. Science turns into a fashion. White tile and stainless steel, waitresses wearing white uniforms. Progress.

One day the out-of-work salesman and his wife down the block are gone. Not a word of goodbye.

The machinist gets a job in an airplane factory, making bombers.

When your nephew comes to the breakfast table, he swings his leg over the back of the chair, like Clark Gable in “It Happened One Night.” Or Mickey Rooney in the Andy Hardy movies with Judy Garland.

Men don’t wear tops on their bathing suits anymore.

Girls wear saddle shoes and apron dresses. They drink Cokes in drugstores. The soda jerk thinks they all have a crush on him, his white paper hat cocked to one side.

If you want to show your social consciousness, you don’t have a “cleaning woman” anymore, you have a “cleaning lady.”

How is vaudeville going to stand up to movies and radio? What will Milton Berle do for a living?

Modern furniture gets crazier. You see a picture of a bedroom in Hollywood with these reading chairs only Milo the Merciless could be comfortable in, and a laminated wood bed you could put on a Mayan funeral barge, everything tapered—table legs, lamps, vases.

You hear stories that Roosevelt, the British and the Jews are trying to get us into a war.

Huey Long gets shot dead in Baton Rouge.

There’s a feeling you hardly notice after a while—a shabby feeling, dust and phone wires, a cold spring wind, things exposed...