

History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for March 4, 2021

Main Reading: Yawp, chapter 23 + Baker, Growing Up, chap. 5-9

This Yawp chapter covered the onset of the Great Depression and the rise of FDR and his New Deal. These chapters in Russell Baker's memoir concern how his family dealt with the aftermath of his father's death during the early 1930s. Russell settled in New Jersey with his mother and one of his sisters. Here are selections from student comments:

ORIGINS OF THE DEPRESSION

STUDENT COMMENT: The Great Depression of the 1930s is referred to as one of the darker times in US history. From the politics of Hoover to the life conditions, living through this time period was a struggle for all. The depression was primarily caused due to the crash of the stock market, which had its own effects on other businesses throughout the US...The impact of the Great Depression on American lives was very distinct, everyone was affected. Russell Baker was just a child at the time, but he was still affected. 15 months after the stock market collapse, his family moved to Newark. His mother sought employment during the tough times and they were struggling not to starve. Baker said, "Hoover never used the word "Recession" rather he would just call it a "Depression", stating that the good times and the economy are just around the corner. "(Baker, 88). This quote stuck out to me because even though Baker was not too old at the time, he remembered the poor actions of President Hoover. The depression would continue to have an impact on his life because of the issues it caused his family. They struggled to make an income and had already been on the verge of poverty.

STUDENT COMMENT: The Great Depression represents one of the most profound economic and social crises in United States history. Its vast complications affected every aspect of American life. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal would expand the scope of government control and welfare for American citizens. He provides new opportunities in rebuilding infrastructure to curb unemployment that "peaks at 25 percent in 1932," dragging Americans out of the ashes of the Depression (Yawp 23). It includes projects such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Providing thousands with employment in a "chronically depressed region" of the South, it provides residents with "training and general education classes to improve agricultural practices and exploit new job opportunities" (Yawp 23). The Great Depression is partly a result of oversaturation in the stock market. The Roaring 20's bring the "return of conservative politics," reinforcing "federal fiscal policies that exacerbated the divide: low corporate and personal taxes, easy credit, and depressed interest rates overwhelmingly favored wealthy investors" (Yawp 23). Corporations that once reaped the benefits of a laissez-faire free-market economy collapse, as "on October 29, Black Tuesday, the stock market began its long precipitous fall" (Yawp 23). In response, widespread panic from investors and everyday Americans drives "Shares of U.S. Steel dropped from \$262 to \$22," as "four-fifths of J. D. Rockefeller's fortune" had vanished (Yawp 32).

STUDENT COMMENT: While the cause of the Great Depression is most commonly associated with the massive stock market crash of 1929, it only exemplified the previously worsening

economic conditions facing the country. Between 1920 and 1929, according to American Yawp editor Mathew Downs, "Per capita income had risen 10 percent for all Americans, but 75 percent for the nation's wealthiest citizens"; in addition, international trade shrunk by a third due to tariffs becoming the norm as American exports fell by 78%"(II). The laissez-faire and business loving attitude of Republican policies acted as a catalyst for such unsustainable growth in the short run, but despair in the long run for the vast amount of Americans. Although Hebert Hoover and his cabinet members cannot be completely blamed for such catastrophic conditions, creating for example the fairly radical Reconstruction Finance Corporation which provided aid for private industry, chances of re-election were slim as his "campaign slogan – 'Prosperity is just around the corner' – had become a sardonic national joke (Baker, ch. 6). During the peak of unemployment at 25% in 1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected, who would expand the relief power of government never witnessed before. Through the establishing of social security, regulation of banks, creation of a national minimum wage, and the empowerment of unions amongst other actions, Roosevelt helped bring Americans out of the dark ages and in some instances "back to the land" from urban centers. Though the standards of living had risen on average as New Deal programs were implemented, this progress was by no means even across the population. Socially and politically, men were considered the primary breadwinners and thus women struggled for economic independence despite such revolutionary policy. As Russell Baker's mother Lucy seeks to find a way towards financial autonomy, he notes "I would become the living proof of the strength of her womanhood" (ch. 7). Although Lucy Baker fights to support Russell and Doris, she knows the prevailing circumstances will not make it feasible unless Russel assumes his societal duty as a male starting as a child. Circumstances were even bleaker for Black Americans, as domestic occupations and farm labor, primarily worked by them, were prevented from receiving social security and they also experienced unemployment at twice the rate of average Americans during their respective peaks (XII). Across America, citizens and non-citizens had gone from 'Well It will all come out OK, I hope so' to I am lost and going and not interested in anything anymore'(ch.6).

THE IMPORTANCE OF OLUF'S LETTERS

STUDENT COMMENT: In "Growing Up" by Russell Baker, he gives a first-hand account of Herbert Hoover's inability to address the severity of the situation, as "he refused to use the scare word "recession" when speaking about the slump. It was merely a depression" (Baker 88). As Baker's mom Elizabeth fails to find adequate work once they move to New Jersey, she reconsiders remarriage, meeting a Danish man named Oluf. In a series of letters back and forth, he writes to Elizabeth about potential opportunities that are few and far between. It is a rollercoaster, a cycle of optimism that rises, gets crushed, and rises again with the disillusion of new business opportunities. In one instance, Oluf's "Baltimore opportunity" to work at a bakery seems to vanish. Even with Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration on March 4, 1933, designed to "revive the national spirit," Oluf's downfall is clear (Baker 111). Oluf states on March 8, 1933, "Yes, I got a letter from Rice's Baking Co, saying no" (Baker 112). As Oluf begins to be "having trouble paying the taxes," his letters were "increasingly melancholy" (Baker 112). He wrote to Elizabeth for the last time on May 15, 1933. Incredibly down, he is "not interested in anything anymore," thanking Elizabeth for the letters and her love. As Baker puts it, Oluf would

"disappear into the Depression," never to be seen again (Baker 115). Oluf would come to symbolize the plight of thousands of American immigrants affected by the Depression, as much lost hope, seeing no other option than to take their own life.

STUDENT COMMENT: There are many experiences in the chapters of "Growing Up" by Russell Baker that reflect what was written in the YAWP chapter 23. The experiences Oluf had in America connect to what is in the Yawp chapter. Like many Americans in the depression Oluf could not get a job even though he had skilled profession as a baker. He was forced to pick up odd jobs and not make much money to live off of. The Yawp chapter speaks on how many poor people traveled the country looking for jobs. Also like many immigrants mentioned in the yawp chapter Oluf moved out of the United States because he could not get work. Another connection between the two readings is the struggles of families and the migration of people. In the yawp chapter it is stated that millions of men were on the road in 1932 looking for work. In "Growing Up" Russell's family moved to live in Newark after the death of his father. Russell and his family also moved to Baltimore to start a new life. Russel's family also often relied on his mom's family. His uncle Willy would send parts of his paycheck to the family. Also, when living in New Jersey they lived with his mom's brothers. The story of the woman from Humboldt County who feared that she couldn't take care of her baby, in the yawp chapter, has parallels to when Russell's mother gave her daughter to her brother-in-law because she feared she could not take care of her.

STUDENT COMMENT: In Russell Baker's book, *Growing Up*, there are many ties to be made between the Great Depression and Baker's writing. For example, at the end of chapter six, Lucy, Russell's mother, sends Oluf a Christmas present, but Oluf scolds her for sending it to him because of how bad the economy is. Then, Oluf hears of a job opportunity at Rice's bakery in Baltimore, but when Franklin Delano Roosevelt becomes president in 1933, the job soon evaporates. By the beginning of chapter 7, Lucy and Oluf are not writing anymore and Oluf has given up because he wanted to go back home to Denmark but can't because he is more than \$1,000 in debt. Moreover, Oluf is representative of the working class, and this shows how the Depression decimated workers and how they were "plunged into poverty." (YAWP, 23) Another tie to be made between Baker's book and the Great Depression is that it seems that Baker's family/extended family felt similarly strong about Hoover and his political decisions. Chapter seven begins with Lucy and Uncle Allen's families moving just outside of Belleville. When they get there, Aunt Pat is appalled when she sees a poster of Hoover on the door, and rants to Russell about how Hoover destroys people's lives. In the book, Baker even described how he became a "Roosevelt - democrat" from a very young age, even though he was far too young to understand what it all meant. Moreover, this is representative of real life hate and resentment that people had towards Hoover because of poor economic decisions he made at the beginning of the Great Depression, and how it affected the working class.

MIGRANT MOTHER

STUDENT COMMENT: Stoic stories of American families falling upon the difficulties of the Great Depression were ubiquitous in at the beginning of depression, Russell Baker's recollections of

the time are no different. Images like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* which depicts a poor, young mother, supporting three children. The image, like other depictions of the Great Depression, focuses on very human characters and stories. Stories like the *Grapes of Wrath* were popularized by a fascination with the impact the Depression had on Americans. Russell Baker writes about him and his mother's life during the Great Depression in such a way that highlights the economic struggles and the feelings of the time. Baker's mother was in the search for work and was forced to move in with her brother. Interestingly, the details of the Depression's effects on Baker's family are momentarily ignored to describe Uncle Allen. Allen is a symbol of hope in that he lives out the American dream to a t. Allen has worked his way up through the ranks of multiple careers through hard work and a willingness to do the work others will not. He started working at fourteen and slowly worked up enough money to support his family. With the addition of the Bakers, Allen takes on another job that he took as a replacement for salesmen laid off due to the Depression. Though Allen and his representation of the American dream protect Baker and his mother, the backdrop of the Great Depression is very much present.