



Brown Brothers

**In the 1930s, an economic depression overcame many American families, and turned mere existence into a struggle to survive.**

“We shall soon . . . be within sight of the day when poverty will be banished from the nation.” So said Herbert Hoover when he accepted the Republican nomination for President in 1928. The U.S. economy had been booming since the end of World War I. Factories were making more and more goods. People were buying them. Life never seemed better.

Just below the surface, however, trouble was brewing. During this time, prices in the **stock market** had been rising steadily. (The stock market is where people buy and sell shares of ownership in companies.) Stockbrokers were paying high prices for shares in hopes of selling them for even more. Many brokers borrowed from banks to buy stocks.

On October 24, 1929, the stock market crashed. As panic spread, brokers tried to sell their stocks, and prices plummeted. Thirty billion dollars were lost that day.

The effects of the crash soon swept through the nation. Banks that had lent money to brokers failed. Businesses closed. Factories laid off workers. The Great Depression affected people of all income levels. Millions of people lost their jobs and their homes. In cities, people waited in lines for jobs. Often, there were none, so they waited in lines for bread and soup (*photo above*).

“It all came so suddenly,” recalled one man who grew up in southern California during the Depression. “One day you had a job, and the next you didn’t. The government didn’t help out at all.”

**SCENE 1**

**Narrator A:** December 1931, Detroit, Michigan. The Watkins kitchen. Frances Watkins is washing dishes. Lucy and Eddie are eating breakfast.

**Frances Watkins:** You two had better hurry up or you’ll be late for school. (*She looks out the window.*) Oh no! Your father is coming up the walk. Something must have happened.

**Tom Watkins (entering):** That’s it.

**Frances:** What happened?

**Tom:** The factory let 500 workers go today. They didn’t even give us a chance to clean out our lockers.

**Frances:** What about your paycheck?

**Tom (grimly):** We’ll get a **severance** [cutting off] check — half of what’s coming to us.

**Frances:** Half! That won’t cover this month’s bills and rent!

**Tom:** I know. Maybe some of the oth-



by Naomi Segal

# THE DESPERATE YEARS

## CAST

### Narrators A-E

Tom Watkins, factory worker  
Frances Watkins, his wife  
Eddie, 15, their son  
Lucy, 11, their daughter  
Jim Morton } unemployed  
George Simmons } workers  
Emma Jones } the Watkinses'  
Ralph Jones } neighbors  
Clerk at the employment office  
Franklin Delano Roosevelt, voice on  
the radio

to lay off workers. Three months later, Tom is still unable to find steady work. He has joined the hundreds of men and boys who brave icy March winds to stand in line at employment agencies, hoping to find work for the day.

**Jim Morton** (*stamping his feet*): Whoo! I can't feel my toes anymore.

**Tom**: There must be at least 300 people here.

**George Simmons**: More, even. How long you been out of work?

**Tom**: About three months now. The factory I was at closed down right before Christmas. Say, you look pretty young to support a family. How old are you?

**Jim**: Sixteen. It's just me and my ma, who's sick. There's nobody else to help out. The city's relief agency ran out of money a while back.

**Ralph**: President Hoover sure doesn't believe in giving a hand to folks who



During the 1930s, billboards advertising the American way of life (above) sharply contrasted with the realities of breadlines (left).

er factories are hiring. I'll try there.

**Eddie**: I could help, Pa. I could go to work after school.

**Frances**: We're going to need all the help we can get.

**Narrator A**: Eddie and Lucy take their books and leave for school.

**Lucy**: Eddie, I'm scared. What if Pa can't find a job? What's going to happen to us?

### SCENE 2

**Narrator B**: The situation worsens. Factories and businesses continue





**Fearful of losing their money, people lined up to close their bank accounts.**

need it. Well, I'm not asking for a handout. I just want my job back.

**Narrator B:** The crowd of men stirs as the entrance to the agency opens. Some of the men are let in. After a while, the door opens again. This time, a clerk steps out.

**Clerk:** Sorry, fellas. That's it for today. No more jobs.

### SCENE 3

**Narrator C:** April 1932. By now the family has moved into a smaller two-room apartment, with no heat or hot water. More and more often, when the family sits down to supper, they leave the table feeling hungrier than when they came.

**Eddie:** What's this? It looks like muddy water.

**Frances:** It's potato-peel soup. I would have put some carrots into it, but we just haven't got the money to spare. Besides, every time I go into the grocer's, Hiam reminds me of the bills we still owe him.

**Narrator C:** There is a knock at the door. Tom answers it. A neighbor, Emma Jones, is there.

**Emma Jones (gasping):** It's — the banks — there's a run on the banks!

**Frances:** What are you talking about? Sit down a minute.

**Emma (sits):** Ralph was downtown this afternoon. He said that the lines at the bank stretched all the way out the door. All of a sudden, the tellers started shutting their windows. Some people were in the middle of getting their money when it happened.

**Lucy:** Why would they close the banks, Ma?

**Frances:** They didn't have enough money on hand to give all the people who wanted it, Lucy.

**Lucy:** Did we have money in the bank?

**Frances:** No, honey. But even if we did, I doubt there would be much left to lose.

**Tom:** I don't know what this country is coming to.

### SCENE 4

**Narrator D:** Eddie begins to work after school and on weekends to help the family out.

**Lucy:** Hey, Eddie, where are you going? Haven't you got homework?

**Eddie:** A ton of it. But Mr. Miller at the grocery store said he could give

me some work this afternoon delivering orders. I've got to do something to help out. See you later.

**Narrator D:** Eddie finds odd jobs, moving boxes in warehouses, and running errands for stores. The pay is only 25 cents an hour. But the family needs everyone's help to survive.

### SCENE 5

**Narrator E:** Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat, is elected President in November 1932. He takes office in March 1933. The mood of the country is bleak. The Watkins family goes to their neighbors' house to hear his inaugural address on the radio.

**Emma:** Rumor has it that that man is going to close down the nation's banks.

**Ralph Jones:** Pure craziness, if you ask me.

**Tom:** Maybe it's time to do something drastic. We sure haven't had much action from Washington so far.

**Frances:** Shh — he's about to speak.

**Roosevelt (voice crackling over the radio):** First of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

**Emma:** I like the sound of it. There's something in that man's voice that makes you feel you can trust him.

**Lucy:** He sounds so confident.

**Eddie:** I sure hope he knows what he is doing.

**Tom:** Don't we all!

### AFTERWORD

The Depression did not end immediately after Roosevelt — known as FDR — became President. But people became more hopeful that the economy would improve. FDR began programs to create jobs for the unemployed, help the needy, and give aid to farmers. The economy did not fully recover from the Depression