

We'd Rather Not Be on the Rolls of Relief

Songs and Images of the Great Depression

A multi-media DVD Presentation

The 198 String Band

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1

NO DEPRESSION

For fear the hearts of men are failing
For these are latter days we know
The Great Depression now is spreading
God's word declared it would be so.

Chorus

I'm going where there's no depression
To a lovely land that's free from care
I'll leave this world of toil and trouble
My home's in heaven, I'm going there.

In that bright land there'll be no hunger
No orphan children crying for bread
No weeping widows, no toil or trouble
No shrouds, no coffins, and no dead.

Chorus

In this dark hour of midnight nearing
And tribulation time will come
The storm will hurl in midnight fear
And sweep lost millions to their doom.

Chorus

NO DEPRESSION describes the universal dream of people hit by hard times – that a better place awaits them. Sometimes that place was California, but in this song, it's heaven. It was recorded by the Carter Family, in June of 1936, in their second New York session. Original source unknown.

2

THE PANIC IS ON

What this country is coming to, I sure would like to know
If we don't do something by and by, the rich will live and the poor will die
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Can't get no work, can't draw no pay, unemployment getting worsen every day,
Nothing to eat, no place to sleep, all night long folks walking the street,
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Saw a man this morning walking down the street in his BVDs, no shoes on his feet,
You ought to see the women calling in the flats, I could hear 'em saying, "What kind of man is
that?"
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

All the landlords done raised the rent, folks that ain't broke is badly bent,
Where they gets the dough from goodness knows, but if they don't produce it in the street they
goes,
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Some play the numbers, some read your mind, they all got a racket of some kind,
Some trimming corns off of people's feet, they got to do something to make ends meet,
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Some women are selling apples, some selling pies, some selling gin and rye,
Some selling socks to support they man, in fact, some are selling everything they can,
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Pawned my watch and everything, pawned my jewelry, my watch and my ring,
Pawned my razor and my gun, so if luck don't change there'll be some stealing done,
Doggone, I mean the panic is on!

Old prohibition's ruined everything, That's why I'm forced to sing,
Here's one thing I want you all to hear: Till they bring back light wine, gin and beer,
Doggone, I mean the panic will be on!

Written by a songster named Hezekiah Jenkins, **THE PANIC IS ON** offers an urban perspective on the changes brought on by the Depression. Jenkins toured and played his jazz tunes all over the country with his guitar and rack harmonica, but seems to have recorded only a handful of tunes. This one was recorded in January of 1931.

3

THE DEATH OF THE BLUE EAGLE

The other day my papers come, I sat and scratched my head
While turning through the pages, here is what I read:
The Blue Eagle is ailing, that little old writer said
But before he finished writing, the eagle he was dead.

The eagle went down shouting, "Hooray for one and all!"
But most folks couldn't take it, they had to let him fall
They took him to the graveyard in the merry old month of May
Said who will solve our problems now, there is no NRA.

But there's a man in Washington, Roosevelt is his name
And how he mourning o'er the bird, it is an awful shame
He told Hugh S. Johnson, and Johnson said, "My God,
What will the miners ever do without their blue mascot?"

But we have an order boys, The UMW of A
And we must all stick to it until the Judgment Day
But if you're undecided boys, and you don't know what to do
Just think how much a day you got in 1932.

George Davis, also known as 'the singing miner' from eastern Kentucky, wrote and recorded **THE DEATH OF THE BLUE EAGLE**, about the National Recovery Administration (NRA). He worked to organize the "UMW of A," the United Mine Workers. The NRA was created in 1933 to establish a minimum wage and set limits on the hours to be worked in a week. It banned child labor and included collective bargaining rights for workers, along with the right to organize. The NRA was declared unconstitutional in 1935; its symbol was a blue eagle. Hugh S. Johnson was the head of the NRA.

4

CCC BLUES

There's a place for which I'm yearning, and my heart is made a burning
The thought of home sweet home is dear to me.
Well I thought my head was level, but I see I played the devil
When I touched the pen and signed my name in ink.

Thought I'd like to leave my mother, dear old dad and sister and brother
Spend six months away from home in the CCC
As for me it's been a lesson, but it's also been a blessing
For it proves just what a fool a boy can be.

Every morning, noon and night, it's a comical looking sight
Just to see the boys lined up like kids in school
And the reason you can tell, when they ring that dinner bell
Is that each one tries to act the biggest fool.

I like the boys and all the bosses, but I wish they'd get some horses
"Cause the truck driver drives like gasoline was free
When we're coming round the mountain, you can see them boys a bouncing
Boy, somehow this place don't appeal to me.

Six more months and I'll pack my suitcase, give the boys just one more footrace
To the depot down in Bowie can't you see?
As for me I like old Texas, where them lads are wild and reckless
That's the only place that seems like home to me.

I'll be glad when I get able to put my feet under ma's old table
Look around and watch my daddy smile at me
Than to be in the CCC with the cactus all around me
And the rocks and the stars and the mountains up above.

When you join the USA you have orders to obey
Even if they'd put you out for something less
When you desert the red white and blue, Uncle Sam is through with you
So I'd never hit the road before I'm through.

Boys make mistakes all through their life, and the biggest one is a wife
And the boy that don't make mistakes is one that's dead
When the morning sun rises slow, you can hear that bugle blow
So let's fall to the floor and make our beds.

CCC BLUES was originally recorded by Jimmie Collins at a Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp. Part of the Margaret Valiant collection at the Library of Congress, it has never been recorded commercially. Jimmie Collins was likely a worker at the camp; on the field recording he says that the song was taught to him by a boy friend of his from Texas. The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) was created by FDR in 1933. Young men between the ages of 18 and 24 were hired to work on conservation projects. They lived in camps administered by the military for six months, and received \$30.00 per month, \$25.00 which was sent directly to their families. Some of the young men were very homesick.

5

SYLVESTER AND HIS MULE

Sylvester went out across his lot, he looked at his mule,
And he decided to send the President some news

Sylvester walked out across his field, looking to pray and moan
He cried, "O Lord I believe I'm gonna lose my home."

He thought about the President, he got on the wire
Said, "If I lose my home I believe I'll die"

He called the President on the telephone,
Said, "I wanta talk to you, I'm about to lose my home"

First time he called, they gave him somebody else,
"I don't want to talk to that man, I want to speak with Mr. Roosevelt."

He said, "Sylvester, you can take your ease
Take that big old jackass and go back out in your field"
He said, "Sylvester, you can take your ease
Just take that big old jackass and go plant all your cotton and peas."

SYLVESTER AND HIS MULE: Memphis Minnie (Lizzie Douglas) recorded this song in January of 1935. It was probably written by her or her piano player, and tells the story of a man from Columbus, Mississippi named Sylvester Harris. On February 19, 1934, Harris made a desperate telephone call to the White House because he was about to lose his mules and his home. As the story goes, Missy LeHand had not yet arrived to answer the phones, so FDR picked up the call himself. He told Sylvester, "I will investigate and you will hear from me." Shortly thereafter, the local bank received a telegram requesting that an adjustment be made, and Harris was able to keep his home. The White House received a large turkey the following Thanksgiving from Sylvester.

6

THE DEMOCRATIC DONKEY

Well I been a good old donkey, but they turned me out to die
They had me on the commons where the grass don't grow so high
But now I'm in the clover, in the fields of golden grain
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

Well they had me up Salt River, till I kicked that stable down.
I knew that Mr. Roosevelt would ride me into town.
He mounted to the saddle and he grabbed the bridle reins
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

Hee-Haw Hallelujah, Hee-Haw Hallelujah,
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

He shouted on to Washington to the track to let us by
You never saw a donkey in your life jump so high
He rode me on to victory, I carried him to fame
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

The rooster and the eagle fought a duel in the sky
While I was kicking gravel in the big white elephant's eye
The rooster flung the eagle to prove that he was game
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

Hee-Haw Hallelujah, Hee-Haw Hallelujah,
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

Song Notes and Words

They had me on the racetrack for another stakes last fall
Mr. Roosevelt he rode me to the presidential hall
When he led me to the manger to feed my hungry frame
I was back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

And you'll see my handsome profile in the papers everywhere
And soon you'll hear them singing about me on the air
The world's a gonna miss me, now when I'm dead and gone
But when the angels find me I'll be sleeping in the White House barn.

Hee-Haw Hallelujah, Hee-Haw Hallelujah,
I'm back in old Columby, in the same old stall again.

THE DEMOCRATIC DONKEY was written by the great singer/songwriter William Jennings Cox from Charleston, West Virginia. Cox recorded it in the mid 1930's, at around the same time as *FDR Back Again*. Bill Cox wrote and performed much topical material about the 30's, and was well known for his biggest hit, *Filipino Baby*, recorded in 1937. After the war he gave up music and did odd jobs until he was able to collect Social Security.

7

ARIZONA

We were out in Arizona on the painted desert ground
We had no place to call our own, and work could not be found
Started to California but our money it didn't last long
I wanna be in Oklahoma, be back in my old home.

Away out on the desert where water is hard to find
It's a hundred miles to Tempe and the wind blows all the time
You will burn up in the daytime, yet you're cold when the sun goes down,
I want to be in Oklahoma, be back in my hometown.

You people in Oklahoma. If you ever come West
Have your pockets full of money and you'd better be well dressed
If you wind up on the desert, gonna wish that you were dead
You'll be longing for Oklahoma and your good old featherbed.

ARIZONA: Jack Bryant, an FSA camp resident in California, wrote and performed this homesick song about his travels from Oklahoma. Bryant wrote quite a few good songs which he performed for field recordings made by collectors and archivists Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin. The melody was borrowed from an old Jimmie Rodgers song, as is typical of the folk process.

8

WE'D RATHER NOT BE ON THE ROLLS OF RELIEF

We go around all dressed in rags, while the rest of the world goes neat
And we gotta be satisfied with half enough to eat
We have to live in lean to's or else we live in a tent
'Cause when we buy our bread and beans, there's nothing left for rent.

Refrain: I'd rather not be on the rolls of relief or work on the WPA
I'd rather work for the farmer, if the farmer could raise the pay
Then the farmer could plant more cotton and he'd have more money for spuds
Instead of wearin' patches, we'd dress up in new duds.

From the East, the West, the North and the South, like a swarm of bees we come
The migratory workers are worse off than the bum
We go to Mr. Farmer and we ask him what he pays
He says, "You gypsy workers can live on a buck a day."

Refrain

Now we're not asking for luxuries, nor even a feather bed
But we're bound to raise the dickens while our families are underfed
Now the winter is on us and the cotton pickin' is done
What are we gonna live on while we wait for the spuds to come?

Refrain

Now if you will all excuse me, I'll bring my song to an end
I've got to go and chunk a crack where the howlin' wind comes in
But times are gonna better and I guess you'd like to know
I'll tell you all about it--I've joined the CIO!

Another song that may never have been commercially recorded, **WE'D RATHER NOT BE ON THE ROLLS OF RELIEF** was collected by Margaret Valiant at the Shafter FSA camp. The singer on the original recording was Lester Hunter, a resident laborer. He displays great understanding of the agricultural process and how its dynamics affect farm workers. The song also demonstrates another theme common in this music – the pride people took in earning their own way, as opposed to being “on relief.”

9

OKLAHOMA

Oh the mistletoe grows in the treetops
And the birds sing that sweet melody
Oklahoma's the state of them Indians
And I'll praise it wherever I go.

As I travel them beautiful highways
Just around over here and there
Oklahoma's the state of my childhood
And I'll praise it wherever I go.

I declare we love it, we're crazy about it
Oklahoma we love you, you know
And I'll never forget your good people
And I'll praise it wherever I go.

OKLAHOMA: Bob Wills wrote this song for the movie, *"Take Me Back to Oklahoma"* starring Wills, his Texas Playboys band, and Tex Ritter. In the movie, the song is an up-tempo Texas swing tune, but the field version we found in the Library of Congress is quite slow, with a feeling of longing. It was recorded by a man named Merle Lovelle in an FSA camp in 1941. This version demonstrates that not only can folk songs become commercial, but the process can work the other way around, too.

10

SUNNY CAL

You've all heard the story of sunny little Cal,
The place where it never rains; they say it don't know how,
You can sleep out on that ground at night, you can hear the people say,
And the moon is always shining almost as bright as day.

They'll say "Come on, you Okies, work is easy found,
Bring along your cotton sack, you can pick the whole year round.
Get your money every night and spread your blankets down,
It's always bright and warm; you can sleep out on the ground."

But listen to me, Okies, I came out here one day,
Spent all my money getting here, now I can't get away.
The night that I landed, it almost came a flood
I spread the tent out on the ground and laid down in the mud.

It rained here all night long, boys, I thought we all would drown.
We all got the flu from sleeping on the ground.
I finally found a cabin so I guess I'll have to stay,
'Cause I haven't got the money and I cannot get away.

Now listen to me Okies, I'll hand it to you straight,
I came out here a week ago and I haven't worked a day,
But now I'm on relief, boys, I guess I done my best.
If it wasn't for old Uncle Sam I guess we'd starve to death.

Jack Bryant wrote **SUNNY CAL**, too. It tells the story of the California dream from the perspective of a decidedly disenchanted 'Okie'. Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin recorded this at the Firebaugh FSA camp in California on August 17, 1940.

11

THE GOVERNMENT CAMP SONG

Over here in the government camp
That's where we get our government stamps
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the isolation
That's where we get our vaccination
Over in that little ragtime home.

Over in Unit One
That's where the people have their fun
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in Unit Two
That's where the people go without their shoes
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in Unit Three
That's where the people have a jamboree
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in Unit Four
People don't live their anymore
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in Unit Five
People don't act like they're alive
Over in that little rag house home.

Song Notes and Words

Over in Unit Six

That's where the people learn new tricks
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the garden home

That's where the people like to roam
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the recreation

That's where the people need a new creation
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the library

That's where the people ought to tarry
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the sewing room

It needs a woman and a broom
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the welfare

It sure gets in the peoples' hair
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the reservoir

It needs cleaned by men and boy
Over in that little rag house home.

Over in the center building

That's where they have a nurse for the children
Over in that little rag house home.

Song Notes and Words

Over in the boxing ring
That's where the people like shout and sing
Over in that little rag house home.

Over where we cook and can
We hope someday to get a man
Over in that little rag house home.

We are proud of our government camp
That's where we get our government stamps
Over in that little rag house home.

THE GOVERNMENT CAMP SONG was written by Mary Campbell, Betty Campbell and Margaret Treet, three little girls living in the FSA Shafter Government Camp in Southern California. Mary and Margaret performed it in 1940 for the field recording presented on this DVD. Their pride in the camp and their affection for it is evident. These camps were experiments in communal type living, with the members being responsible for maintaining the camp and doing the necessary chores. The song gives a tour of the camp and a good description of camp life.

12

LITTLE RAG HOUSES

I don't want your little rag houses, I don't want your navy beans
All I want is a greenback dollar for to buy some gasoline.

The scenery here is getting rusty, I'll go further down the line
Where the fields are green and pretty, it'll satisfy my mind.

We don't want to be a burden, on the people of this land.
We just want to earn our money, and you people know we can.

So goodbye, my friends and neighbors, we are on the tramp
Many thanks to all officials of this migratory camp.

We don't want your little rag houses, we don't want your navy beans
All we want is a greenback dollar for to buy some gasoline.

Although we have been unable to find a recording of this song, we did find the lyrics, which were written by Jack Bryant, who wrote and performed *Arizona* for the field recording. **LITTLE RAG HOUSES** is built on the well-known tune, "*Greenback Dollar*". The 'rag houses' referred to here are the tents in which camp residents lived. The singer, like the fictional Joad family in "*The Grapes of Wrath*," wants to move on and earn his own way, but he is grateful for the support of the FSA camp and the kindness shown by people there.