

Kyle Dymowski

Toni Nicholas

Contemporary World History

18 November 2013



Lunch Atop a Skyscraper

A picture is worth as thousand words, and Charles Ebbets' photograph *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper* has captured what the Great Depression had led people to do for work in the early thirties. Eleven men sat atop the incomplete RCA building (later named the GE building), eating lunch on an eye beam 800 feet above the streets of the soon to be Rockefeller Center (Gambin). The Great Depression had led to despair and hardships throughout the thirties. This iconic photograph shows what the people of this time had to endure. They were willing to risk their lives for a steady paycheck, while others were able to enjoy life as nothing had changed.

As I helped Charles Ebbets and his crew set up for this photograph, I could only think of what could lead people to be willing to take such risks to do work this dangerous. Looking at the men who volunteered to sit on this beam and take the picture, you can see the look of

determination, also with a small hint of despair. Work was almost impossible to find those days; the stock market crash in 1929 had left the economy in record-low conditions. The banks had invested a wholesome amount of money into the stock market, so when it crashed, the people and businesses couldn't afford to take risks, like buying fancy coats or new home appliances, or even keep the people they had employed (Rosenberg). On a more intense note, it also left men and women begging on the streets for employment, any kind of employment, because there was very little work.

The dust bowl and the new technology in agriculture made for dangerously low job opportunities, leaving few hopes for jobs in the one of the oldest and once largest professions, agriculture. The scarcity of food and the rising cost of everyday staples made the purchase of consumer goods something of the past, furthering the reduction of job opportunities. There was little chance of finding work on farms when it was available, because of the overwhelming amount of people looking for a day's pay in that field. People were tired of riding the rails and staying in Hoovervilles outside of the towns. These shanty-towns were built out of pure necessity of the overwhelming population of homeless people. It was not something that the larger cities could ignore, so they built many of these structures out of whatever materials were available (Carswell, 301-03). I remember seeing these "homes" with makeshift fences, some made from old car parts and wood that had been rotting for years. They were outside of most major cities, and when people saw the conditions that others were forced to live in, they turned to a place where steady work was available, high above the streets where danger was an everyday obstacle. With a secure paycheck on the line, there was so little reason not to.

Later on, I saw the photo in the *New York Herald Tribune*. Below it was a caption that led people to believe that the photo was taken as these men sat down to have lunch, but the photo was actually staged. There were a few people taking photos that day, and some of them were taken of the men napping and throwing a football. No one was given credit for the photo at the time, to make it look as if this photo was taken by some bystander working on the building along with the men. That day, there were at least two photographers, so they could capture the perfect picture. The cameras were slow and took a very long time to reload; this is why Ebbets had a few more camera men with him (Gambin).

I gazed around at this building in admiration, and at these men, knowing the forlorn conditions of the economy. I wondered how—in such bad times—a company had the money to make such a grandiose building. Then I remembered that I needed to look no further than the name of the complex: The *Rockefeller Center*. Times were bad, but not for everyone. The Rockefellers were made supremely wealthy from their involvement with Standard Oil and Chase Manhattan Bank, so while many in the world suffered, there was still an upper echelon of people and businesses that were not significantly affected by the depression (WGBH). The name given to the building was RCA, which stood for Radio Corporation of America. This company, who would be renting the majority of the massive Art Deco skyscraper, withstood the downfall of the economy because of the importance of their products to the war effort (RCA). They were taken over by the government, and worked closely with General Electric, because they were capable of transmitting radio waves over thousands of miles. There is no wonder a company with such fortunes was able to stand the test of the depression (Elon).

While the economy collapsed in the thirties, all the classes of people had to deal with it differently. Some were forced to risk it all and travel across the country for work while others, like the eleven men in the photo, chose to work in a more dangerous setting to receive a paycheck. The men in the photo were the average Americans at the time; they were forced to do something that only would be considered an option when things were as bad as they were in the thirties. In 1932 the unemployment rate was 23.6 percent (U.S Department of Labor); in no year after that was there an unemployment rate that astronomical. But one thing has not changed...there will always be the people and corporations that will not be as affected by the economy. There will be ups and downs, but just like the Rockefellers and G.E. in the '30s, there will always be someone building and continuing to grow through the good and the bad.

Bibliography

Carswell, Andrew T. *The Encyclopedia of Housing*. Los Angeles, Calif: SAGE, 2012. 301-03. Print.

Elon University School of Communications. "1890s - 1930s - Radio." *Imagining the Internet*.

N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.

Gambin, Megan. "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper Photograph: The Story Behind the Famous

Shot." *Smithsonian Magazine*. Smithsonian, 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 01 Nov. 2013

RCA (Radio Corporation of America). *GHN: IEEE Global History Network*. N.d. Web. 16 Nov.

2013.

Rosenberg, Jennifer. "The Great Depression." *About.com 20th Century History*. N.p., n.d. Web.

18 Nov. 2013.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. "United States Unemployment Rate."

Infoplease. 2000 - 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.

WGBH Educational Foundation. "Timeline The Rockefellers." *PBS*. 1996-2013. Web. 19 Nov.

2013.