

*Hoover, Roosevelt, and the New Deal in Genesee County, New York during
The Great Depression*

Michael J. Eula, Ph.D.
Genesee County Historian

Introduction

The great engineer, self-made man, and leader of the effort to feed starving people in a Europe torn apart by the First World War was inaugurated as the thirty-first President of the United States on March 4th, 1929. Herbert Clark Hoover was, not surprisingly, the front-page story of Batavia's *Daily News* on that date. The optimism felt by many throughout America – and in Genesee County – was embodied in the election to the Presidency of a man whose life captured the essence of the American Dream. Set amidst a moment in time featuring what appeared to be a surging economic prosperity, Hoover's words on Inauguration Day seemed perfectly reasonable and accurate. As *The Daily News* reminded its readers on that fateful March 4th, President Hoover looked forward to the next four years with confidence:

In the large view, we have reached a higher degree of comfort and security than ever existed before in the history of the world. Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before.

Accordingly, *The Daily News* readership was informed of the following words which were also spoken by the newly-inaugurated President. "Ours is a land," President Hoover said on that same front-page issue of March 4th, "rich in resources, stimulating in its glorious beauty . . . filled with millions of happy homes blessed with comfort and opportunity."

Yet the apparent serenity about the future expressed by the new President and *The Daily News* coverage of the inauguration is undermined by other stories during that same month of 1929. These accounts – among others – had a more

ominous note and serve to capture the seething economic cauldron bubbling just beneath what appeared to be a tranquil surface. On March 21st there was a short piece complete with a dramatic photograph. It was entitled “Strikers Denounce Wages of \$8.90 a week.” Underneath a photograph of striking workers on a picket line – carrying signs proclaiming that “\$8.90 a Week is Slavery;” “Fair Wages Or No Wages;” “United We Stand/Divided We Fall;” and “\$15.00 Or Bust,” we see this caption:

Strikers from the Glanzstoff rayon plant in Elizabethton, Tenn., parading through the streets protesting low wages are pictured above . . . Most of the marchers were girls and women.

Such displays by poorly paid factory workers stood in stark contrast to the hopeful optimism displayed by the newly elected President Hoover on Inauguration Day and the overall tone of the press coverage in *The Daily News*. So too did other stories appearing that same month in *The Daily News*, though their ominous nature was not as immediately recognizable at a moment in which the economy appeared to be “roaring.” Five days later, on March 26th, *The Daily News* featured a front-page article with this headline: “Stock Market Broke Wide Open – Sales Expected to exceed all Records – Call Money Jumping Up to 20 Per Cent.” The article goes on:

The stock market broke wide open again today when the call money rate was jacked up to 20 per cent, the highest level in nine years.

The writer then added this:

The money stringency was the tightest since July 1, 1920 and was attributed to a combination of circumstances. While loans called by banks only amounted to \$25,000,000 there was no new money coming into the market. Out-of-town withdrawals were heavy especially by Chicago interests to support the market there.

The very mention of “call money” indicates just how volatile the economic picture was beneath the deceptive calm. An overheated economy, one in which banks were lending money that was repayable upon demand in the absence of a fixed repayment schedule, was one in which an individual’s prosperity was often misleading. Juxtaposed next to the images of a boundlessly optimistic incoming presidential administration were wages that were stagnant or even in decline for many Americans. This translated into a recipe for collapse the likes of which had not been seen in American life since the deep economic depression of the early 1890s. Indeed, the economic collapse of October of 1929 produced an economic downturn that in a variety of ways was unprecedented.

While our focus here is how the *political* response to the Great Depression was perceived by many in Genesee County – in other words, how were Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the latter’s “New Deal” viewed – the stage must nonetheless be set. This was hard ball politics in a hard ball moment – one can argue that the stakes in the 1932 presidential election had never been higher at any time in the broad sweep of American history. In fact, one can assert that no election since then has seen the stakes as high as they were in 1932. The hard times in Genesee County in 1932 were a microcosm of the nation’s agony in that most pivotal of years.

The causes of the Great Depression can easily take us well beyond the scope of this talk. Suffice it to say that the stock market crash of October, 1929 – a month in which stock values on the New York Stock Exchange fell an average of thirty-seven percent – was the consequence of reckless speculation and an over-extension of credit throughout the 1920s. Speculation was seemingly everywhere – in Florida real estate and in stock purchases – all at a time in which wages for typical Americans revealed a downward trend. Those same Americans were nonetheless all too willing to overextend themselves in an effort to get rich quick – through the purchase of stocks “on margin.” In other words, they charged their stock purchases in the hope that the value of the stock would rise and they could sell for a profit. Simultaneously, there was a flagrant maldistribution of wealth – by 1929 economic historians conclude that approximately one-third of all

personal income in the United States had been accumulated by a mere five percent of the population.

Therefore, with a growing concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands – combined with stagnant wages and what President Hoover himself eventually called an “orgy of mad speculation” – artificially rising stock prices inevitably collapsed. With that breakdown a collapse in confidence also became discernible. People rushed to banks to withdraw monies in uninsured accounts; banks that had loaned money for speculative purposes that had by the end of 1929 revealed their deceptive prosperity. The economy began its steep and rapid descent, a contraction that left in its wake vast amounts of human suffering.

By the Presidential election of 1932 the country was in the midst of an acute crisis. Thirteen million Americans were unemployed in a nation of a little more than ninety-one million. By 1933, the national unemployment rate stood at twenty-five percent. Such figures are suggestive of the amount – and type – of suffering that was common in the United States in 1932. In states such as Kentucky and West Virginia, evicted coal miners and their families found themselves living in tents in the midst of winter. Many of their children lacked shoes. In Los Angeles, people whose electricity and gas was disconnected found themselves cooking over wood fires in back lots. A Philadelphia, Pennsylvania storekeeper revealed to a reporter that he was extending credit to a family of eleven. This family, he said, have children without shoes or pants. Their house did not even have chairs. Somewhere between one and two million people roamed the country in search of work. In Chicago, about fifty hungry men fought over a barrel of garbage set outside of a restaurant’s back door. The Commissioner of Charity in Salt Lake City reported that “scores” of people were slowly starving – while hundreds of children were kept out of schools because of a lack of clothing.

The national anguish I have only touched upon here was clearly evident in Genesee County. By February 12th, 1930, *The Daily News* reported that a “Grand Jury Indicted Bergen’s Ex-Banker.” In this instance, Charles E. Housel was “charged with feloniously receiving deposits in an insolvent bank . . .” On April 19th of 1930 *The Daily News* reported on the tragic consequences of financial

hardship in yet another of numerous articles along these lines. “Hume MacPherson, Bergen Native, Killed Wife With Ax, Then Himself, Money Troubles Probable Cause.” The article stressed the middle class character of the couple – “both college graduates,” the writer emphasized. The article went on:

Discouraged over financial issues, Hume MacPherson, 46, of Detroit, Michigan, a former Bergen resident, killed his 45-year old wife with an axe and then took his own life by carbon-monoxide poisoning in the garage in the rear of their Piedmont Avenue home in Detroit. Word of the murder and suicide, which took place Thursday, was received in this village today. Mr. MacPherson was a son of the late D.J. MacPherson, who was a correspondent for *The Daily News* for forty years.

Three months later *The Daily News* featured advertisements for the New York State Bankers Association. They had established a Bandit Reward Fund, which offered the following on July 17th of 1930:

REWARD
BANK BANDITS
DEAD OR ALIVE

By the end of the year, as economic conditions continued to worsen, news reports such as that shown below were appearing. On December 11th, 1930, readers saw this:

WYOMING MAN EARNS LIVING BY PEDDLING CANDY IN GOAT CART

Batavians were greeted with a novel plan of facing the unemployment situation several days ago. His only means of support for his family being his small cart, drawn by a sturdy “Billy” goat, and a supply of candy made with goat’s milk.

By the following year, as the economic conditions continued to deteriorate with seemingly no end in sight, advertisements such as that shown below were making their appearance. On December 7th, 1931, *The Daily News* published this:

400 Under-nourished Children Largely in Families
Whose Parents Are Too Proud to Ask for Aid Will
Receive Help from the Red Cross

Two weeks later, a man from Pavilion “who admitted stealing a sheep gave hunger as the reason for the act . . .” This *Daily News* article of December 21st, 1931, also reported that the court took into account the terrible economic conditions. He was therefore given a suspended sentence.

The deepening of the Great Depression through the early months of 1932 only brought a flood of unrelenting bad economic news. On January 25th, 1932, *The Daily News* reported that “Shirt Workers Went On Strike” at the factory of Joseph Horowitz and Sons on Liberty Street in Batavia as a result of a fifteen percent wage cut, reducing an already paltry compensation of \$1.50 per day even lower. Depressed wages, outright hunger, high unemployment, reports of bankruptcies, and family disarray linked to enormous economic pressures all characterized *Daily News* articles throughout 1932. By that summer and fall, as can be expected, a largely demoralized population wondered what – if any – political changes may take place so as to alter the dire economic situation. For example, while *The Daily News* published an article on July 8th, 1932, in which Reverend Elmer Harris of Bethany’s Baptist Church offered a sermon entitled “Why Do We Have Poverty?” that same newspaper – a mere four days before the election – reminded readers of just how volatile the political terrain had become, when it set forth the five presidential candidates appearing on the ballot in Genesee County:

Republican – Herbert Hoover
Democrat – Franklin D. Roosevelt
Socialist – Norman Thomas
Social Labor – Verne L. Reynolds
Communist – William Z. Foster

Therefore, it is not surprising that the demoralization seen in the public was suddenly set aside on Election Day, November 8th. In a front-page article in *The Daily News* entitled “Voting Rush in this City Near Record . . . More than 5,000 Votes Cast in Batavia by 1:30 This Afternoon,” there is a dramatic depiction of just how motivated voters had become as a consequence of the massive economic stakes and in spite of the previous summer’s demoralization. But even more stunning was the front-page *Daily News* stories of November 9th. At a moment in which Franklin Roosevelt won every state except for Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, and as the *Daily News* headlines proclaimed a “Tremendous Victory for the Democrats,” Genesee County favored Herbert Hoover by over 5,000 votes. In addition, the county voters elected every Republican candidate running for office in Genesee County by what *The Daily News* called “wide margins.” How can the exceptionalism of Genesee County be explained at the depths of the Great Depression by the close of 1932? In part, the answer to that question is found in what President Hoover embodied for many in the county despite the bleak economic conditions.

President Hoover and the Image of an Earlier Time

One of the more extraordinary occurrences in human history is the powerful effect of political imagery. Such political images more often than not are as decisive as the concrete economic realities that people face. Therefore, despite the dire economic conditions discussed at length in such county publications as *The Daily News*, President Hoover and the Republican Party enjoyed astounding political success in November of 1932 in Genesee County while the remainder of the country by and large rejected both him and the Republicans in the wake of the economic collapse. While a more thorough explanation of this seeming paradox would take us far beyond my purpose in this short presentation, suffice it to say that the key to comprehending Hoover’s continued popularity in Genesee County is that his life – and beliefs – embodied core values in Genesee County. Admiration for him and his party’s core beliefs were not seriously shaken by the economic hurricane of the Great Depression.

In the wake of Hoover's nomination as the Republican Party candidate in 1928 there was an enthusiastic outpouring of praise for this self-made man. Indeed, a day before the Party's convention in Kansas City, Missouri ended *The Daily News* featured a timeline of Hoover's life complete with photographs. Readers of the June 14th, 1928 issue learned the following about Hoover:

At 6, an Iowa Blacksmith's son.

At 12, an orphan, taken to Oregon by an Uncle.

At 21, Graduated from College – Worked His Way.

In 1900, Helped other Americans defend Tientsin during the Boxer Rebellion (in China).

By 1910, a World-Famous Mining Engineer.

In War (World War One), Directed World-Wide Relief Work.

On the day the convention ended *The Daily News* featured photographs of nominee Hoover's parents and their modest, rural home. "From this humble farm home at West Branch, Iowa," *The Daily News* told readers, "Herbert Hoover fought his way through life's obstacles to one of the most important positions in the national life of the country." The adulation continued unabated. On June 20th, 1928, this same newspaper featured photographs and extended captions concerning West Branch – "Herbert Hoover's Birthplace." The small-town, rural quality of such photographs drove home the obvious – that Hoover's life of modest beginnings, hard work, and persistence is the very essence of what is best in America – and in Genesee County.

Accordingly, even the disruption of American life caused by the Great Depression could not radically alter what many in the county believed about themselves, their community, and the nation at large. Hoover and the Republican Party stood for free enterprise, opportunity, personal achievement, material

welfare, and a peace achieved through the energetic pursuit of business success devoid of governments that tended to impede progress and even generate war. Few forgot Hoover's work as a Food Administrator during and after World War One. Rather than participating in the killing of others he had directed efforts to feed people and to house those who found themselves homeless in war-ravaged Europe. Here was a successful and compassionate humanitarian whose motivation was to create a general social good that was inseparable from one's own self-interest. Hoover's altruism, based upon *voluntary* cooperation between people as opposed to government-compelled programs, struck a particularly receptive audience in Genesee County. This was part of his image as a person who could be trusted with the presidency – and would use it to advance both domestic progress and international peace. Not surprisingly, then, even the depths of the Great Depression could not weaken his hold on many in Genesee County. This included religious leaders. In 1932 the official journal of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church expressed its fervent support for President Hoover:

WE URGE that:

(2) . . . individual Churches send telegrams on the Sunday nearest Armistice Day to President Hoover, commending him for his fearless advocacy of disarmament, and assuring him of enthusiastic and lasting support . . .

The support of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Genesee County was inseparable from the wide support Hoover still enjoyed throughout the county despite the severity of the economic downturn. Four days before Election Day *The Daily News* eschewed any semblance of subtlety in an editorial entitled "Go to the Polls!" The implications of the opinion expressed in this piece are obvious. It is not President Hoover's lack of personal capacity that caused the Depression, it was argued, for Hoover possessed an aptitude for the Presidency that as a self-made man he had spent a lifetime developing. Unfortunately for him, the editorial writer reasoned, the America he had grown up in had essentially collapsed with

an unexpected suddenness during his first year in office. But that, *The Daily News* told his readers, was no reason to reject an entire way of life – limited government, self-reliance, and voluntary cooperation between people in contrast to government-mandated programs – through a rejection of the very man whose personal success was forged in that American system. Hence the editorial said, in part, that

There are about three times as many Republicans in Genesee County as there are Democrats, and if the Republicans will go to the polls next Tuesday and vote for the nominees of their party, all of whom merit their hearty support, Old Genesee will roll up a magnificent majority for Hoover and (Vice-President) Curtis and aid materially in the triumphant re-election of these stalwart standard bearers.

The editorial continued in a very straightforward manner:

It is just a question of getting out to vote – and voting right. This is not the time to experiment in government. President Hoover knows his job. It would be a tremendous mistake to take him from it.

Expressing political feelings that were deeply held in Genesee County – and which proved decisive on Election Day – *The Daily News* articulated what many felt. The Great Depression, for all of its horror, could prove to be the most damaging in the long run if it gave birth to the abandonment of a social philosophy about the proper role of government that for many had long served the people well. But national opinion was clearly moving in a different direction within the context of twenty-five percent unemployment. Ironically, it was the governor of the State of New York – Franklin Delano Roosevelt – who successfully urged that the seriousness of the economic crisis demanded the very thing explicitly rejected in the aforementioned editorial – governmental experimentation. Genesee County Republicans understood what that meant,

economic crisis or not – it meant a radical alteration in the relationship between the people and their government. While Republicans endorsing Hoover were reluctant to accept such a proposal, others in the country were not. For them, Hoover belonged to an earlier America which had run its course. Change was needed, such people argued, and it was needed immediately.

Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the Willingness to Experiment

As many historians and economists have long acknowledged, Franklin Roosevelt, though privately a moderate conservative, nonetheless viewed the economic crisis as one demanding immediate, innovative approaches. As he clearly put it:

The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.

Along with Roosevelt's insistence upon immediate action, he also viewed the American economic system – capitalism – as one that had matured. Hoover's continuous advocacy of individual initiative and unlimited opportunity was one that belonged to an earlier age, at least as Roosevelt saw it. For Roosevelt, the maturing of the American economic system meant large concentrations of wealth in a few hands – and those "economic royalists" could not be trusted to pursue policies that would benefit the country as a whole. As he put it in yet another speech:

The unfeeling statistics of the past three decades show that the independent businessman is running a losing race . . . Recently a careful study was made of the concentration of business in the United States. It showed that our economic life was dominated by some six hundred odd corporations who controlled two-thirds

of American industry . . .

Roosevelt point out that such a trend threatened American democracy:

. . . if the process goes on at the same rate, at the end of another century we shall have all American industry controlled by a dozen corporations, and run by perhaps a hundred men.

As a result, he then added:

. . . all this calls for a re-appraisal of values . . .the day of enlightened administration has come . . .

So the new president sought to both experiment *and* to design a system that rationally managed the American economy. It was an ironic combination of a radical approach to the economic dislocations of the Great Depression as well as a conservative acknowledgement that a concentration of economic power was here to stay. For Roosevelt, the challenge was to somehow find a way to manage the wealth already here so as to distribute it as evenly as possible throughout American society – while still retaining the essential features of the capitalist marketplace. This was a tall order in Republican Genesee County. The burning political question was how it would be received.

This brings us to the spring of 1933 and the arrival of the New Deal in Genesee County. In March of that year the new President moved quickly to halt the deepening of the economic downturn that had emerged in October of 1929. One of the first actions of the new administration was to stop the withdrawal of funds from banks. In this pre-FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) era many Americans had lost their life savings as a result of bank failures. On March 9th Roosevelt asked Congress to declare a four-day bank holiday so as to reduce the panic of depositors by precluding their ability to withdraw funds. Congress only took seven hours to pass the Emergency Banking Relief Act. Newspaper reports

about the public's reaction to the bank holiday were uniformly positive. By March 15th *The Daily News*, in an article entitled "Every Bank in County Opened for Business," spoke of "business (in the county) optimistic," and a sense that "every greeting today carried intimation that a better day had dawned."

Along with efforts to initiate a stabilization of the banking system that same month featured a new President striving to offer short-term relief to the unemployed. Given the number of unemployed in Genesee County work relief programs were very welcome. "State Highway Work Relief Plan (is) Welcome News to Genesee People," *The Daily News* reported on March 18th. Work relief was accompanied by food relief. Two days later that same newspaper told readers that "the last carload of flour allotted to Genesee County for relief in Genesee County this winter is being unloaded in this city (Batavia) today."

Another early New Deal effort to revitalize the economy and restore hope and confidence to badly shaken Americans was the effort to promote cooperative arrangements between management and employees. This too was seen by many in the county in a favorable light. An illustration of this is visible in a May 6th, 1933 *Daily News* article. "Three Hundred Family Men," the newspaper reported, "Will Work for State Next Week." Here we see a cooperative venture that included clear business and governmental collaboration:

On the days assigned to them to start work, the men are to report to receiving points for transportation to the job. The list of 300 is divided as follows: Attica State Prison farm 158; Western New York Egg Laying Plant at Stafford 25; Batavia-Bergen road 117.

This effort to foster cooperation extended to a wide variety of county residents from different walks of life – including county barbers. In an advertisement on August 23rd, 1933 in support of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) – a New Deal effort to stabilize the economy via uniform prices and wages – "The Barbers of Batavia" told the community that the

Master and Journeymen Barbers have accepted the movement of NRA and according to the code which has been accepted by 90 percent of all barbers. We wish to appeal to the people of Batavia to support us in this movement, as we have pledged our support to every movement of the act of the NRA in so doing to raise the standard of living which means in short all for one, one for all.

When combined with the Roosevelt initiatives to halt the further drop in farm prices through the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) – a reaction to a decline captured in a *Daily News* article of August 23rd, 1933 which “showed farms lost money in ‘32” – the growing popularity of the New Deal even in Republican Genesee County could not be denied. This of course is not to say that all in Genesee County supported the New Deal. For example, on October 29th, 1936, with the presidential election to take place on November 3rd, an advertisement appeared in *The Daily News*. It read as follows:

Big Republican Parade Monday Night, Nov. 2d

WANTED

500 Cars Filled With Republicans and Friends

To Make This the Biggest Demonstration of
Freedom and Democracy Ever Held in
Genesee County

\$50.00 in Prizes

Given for the Best Three Floats

Opposing the Policies of the New Deal – Enter Yours

By October 31st *The Daily News* had officially endorsed the Republican challenger for the presidency, Kansas Governor Alf Landon. As the editorial writer put it,

. . . the Republican ticket to be voted upon

Tuesday is one which deserves the support of everyone interested in the preservation of America for Americans by Americans.

The Republican ticket features

candidates who believe this country can be successfully run by following the precepts of law and order rather than the dreams of theory and recklessness.

The intensity displayed by the eve of Election Day played itself out in that same October 31st issue. A few pages further into the issue an enormous advertisement promoting the New Deal rested next to a Republican rejection of the Roosevelt policies. "Keep Going with ROOSEVELT" featured "Facts to Remember!" These included a reduction of unemployment by 27%, an increase in steel production by 338%, a rise in net farm income by 141%, and a rise in bank deposits by 38%.

By the time the votes were counted President Roosevelt had received a national mandate on the New Deal. He won every state except for Vermont and Maine. But in Genesee County he lost. 13,131 county residents going to the polls voted for Landon, while 6,076 cast their ballots for Roosevelt. Despite the victory for Republicans in Genesee County, *The Daily News* editorialized on November 5th, a day after the election, that given the national landslide in favor of President Roosevelt one must acknowledge that "the people of America . . . believe in the type of leadership which is willing to try almost anything once." With the storm clouds of war already appearing in Europe and in Asia, that willingness to experiment would place the New Deal in yet a different light by the end of the decade. With this altered perception there would emerge a different sense of the New Deal's meaning, even among staunch Republican opponent of Roosevelt's domestic policies.

The New Deal as a Moderate Response in a Decade of Political Extremes

The New Deal of the Roosevelt administration emerged in a decade characterized by political extremes. It should be remembered that the Great

Depression in the United States was part of a global economic crisis in the 1930s. In other nations the political responses to the depression were marked by political policies which had, as their starting point, a rejection of a democratic system seemingly to blame for the human misery produced by the virtual collapse of capitalism. Free markets, representative legislatures, civil rights, and individual political freedoms came under assault in one country after another. Germany and Italy come to mind, but there were of course many others to one degree or another. On the opposite side of the political spectrum there stood the Soviet Union. In their case the rejection of representative legislatures and free markets – not to mention individual political freedoms – had all been jettisoned when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917.

In the United States, despite the New Deal, such political extremes were also discernible. In Detroit a group calling itself the Black Legion saw thirteen of its members receive life sentences for the murder of their perceived enemies. This included the killing of Charles A. Poole, a New Deal official who was kidnapped from his home and murdered. Their other enemies included Roman Catholics, African-Americans, and Jews. At a fascist camp in Narrowsburg, New York, Christian Fronters undertook rifle practice using a likeness of President Roosevelt's head as a target. In February of 1939, 22,000 American Nazis held a rally in New York City's Madison Square Garden, denouncing the New Deal as a "Jew Deal." Great economic stress intensified political fanaticism, as some sought simple answers in response to complex economic problems.

Political militancy that became violent in some instances was therefore as much a national problem in the United States as it was abroad. However, in Genesee County, the challenges expressed towards the New Deal did not produce the kind of militant violence seen in Detroit or even in other areas of New York, such as Narrowsburg in southern New York's Sullivan County. In fact, as the decade developed the New Deal, if anything, came to be seen as part of an American consensus about the worth of democracy. To put this in another way, even Republican opponents of Roosevelt's policies applauded an administration that captured the essence of a humanitarian and compassionate centrism that avoided the radicalism of fascism on the far right and authoritarian communism

on the far left. For Genesee County residents Republicans and Democrats disagreed about how to *organize* freedom – but individual liberty was always the ultimate goal. Such an objective was especially dramatic, and compelling, in a decade featuring a growth of state power that routinely crushed the individual in places such as Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union – to name but a few nations.

It is not surprising, then, that many editorials in *The Daily News* – despite its consistent support of Republican candidates who generally opposed the New Deal response to the Great Depression – articulated a celebration of why American democracy was so vastly superior to many political systems seen abroad. Editorials throughout the 1930s celebrated the freedoms enjoyed by Americans in general and Genesee County residents in particular. On October 6th, 1938, one such editorial was entitled “Two Systems of Rule.” Alluding to the partitioning of Czechoslovakia, the reader was told that

Perhaps one of the most beneficial results of the events which have just taken place in Europe is the demonstration which has given us of the difference between how the ruler of a democracy and a dictator approaches his people after an important event.

The editorial goes on.

The dictators of Italy and Germany went home and told their subjects what they did and, except for the expected ritualistic acclaims, that was all there was to it . . .

On the other hand, the French premier went home to a hectic situation with his parliament. He had to explain what happened. . . The Premier of Great Britain had even more difficulties. He was and still is being subjected

to a severe heckling.

The conclusion in this editorial was that a democracy is disorderly and contentious – but is, nonetheless, a just vehicle for expressing the many opinions of its people. New Deal or not, the editorial reminded its readership that “there can be no hesitation by Americans in choosing between the two systems and in deciding to do all that each and all of us can to preserve the democratic form for this country.”

On the following day, October 7th, 1938, that same *Daily News* stated in yet another editorial that

The welfare of the nation demands that differences be settled and that the energies of all American institutions and their leaders be turned toward the one vital problem of promoting welfare for all Americans regardless of the lesser interests of any particular organization or personalities.

Editorials by a clearly Republican-leaning newspaper not consistently sympathetic to the Roosevelt administration nevertheless accepted the contentiousness that New Deal policies produced. This was viewed as an acceptable price to pay for the maintenance of a democratic system clearly rejecting the political fanaticism visible in the 1930s. For example, look at the October 19th, 1938 editorial entitled “Let’s be Americans.” In part, the editorial offered this understanding of a decade characterized by extreme political polarization:

We are beset on all sides with troubling events and bombardments against American traditions. We are confronted with a world-wide struggle between the forces of democracy and those of totalitarianism.

It is therefore not surprising that this newspaper featured stories regarding the threat to democracy by both the far right and the far left at a time of great international economic distress. On October 11th, 1938, a front-page article

appeared regarding an American Nazi rally that produced a riot in New Milford, New Jersey. Three days later, in a story entitled “Kiwanis Speaker Hits Communism,” an article appeared about a talk warning of the dangers of communism – especially at a moment in which people could be tempted to try it because of the failures of capitalism. “Communism,” D.J. Leary of the Buffalo Kiwanis said, “would be purchased at the price of freedom.” While the New Deal was not perfect, it was seen as steering a safe, middle of the road course in a decade featuring a negation of individual freedom. There was a degree of urgency to this defense of American democracy. After all, the Genesee County ballots in the off-year elections of November, 1938, featured seven political parties. Among them was the Communist Party.

The essential compassion and decency inherent in American democratic institutions capable of producing such reforms as the New Deal stood in stark contrast to the evil produced by the negation of individual freedoms as practiced in authoritarian regimes. As the trampling of individual rights intensified in Nazi Germany, *The Daily News* accelerated its editorials and stories about what this meant in human terms – and how utterly different such policies were when compared to American beliefs – with all of its shortcomings. For instance, in the wake of the *Kristallnacht* in Germany from November 9th through November 10th (the “Night of Broken Glass”) in which hundreds of German and Austrian Jews were murdered, while another 30,000 Jewish men were placed in concentration camps while about one thousand synagogues were burned along with the destruction of over seven thousand Jewish businesses and untold numbers of schools, hospitals, and homes, *The Daily News* featured editorials and stories about how this contrasted with American civilization. On the 14th of November, 1938, an editorial castigating the “unbelievable ferocity and barbarity” of *Kristallnacht* concluded that it was the unchecked totalitarianism of Adolf Hitler’s regime that produced “a policy that shames the nation in the eyes of the world.” Two days before Christmas in 1938 another editorial in *The Daily News* stressed that communism and fascism both fed upon “the prevalence of poverty” that “gives the agitator his first chance.” This brings us back to the New Deal. The remedy for totalitarianism was perceived to be a reform of capitalism; one

fashioned to distribute as much opportunity as possible. In the process, more individual freedom, coupled with just the right amount of government involvement, was seen as holding the potential for the emergence of a more just and stable society. In that December 23rd editorial, the newspaper commentators therefore urged that

those now in a position to do so bend their efforts toward preserving our liberties, keeping us informed and giving all who are able the chance to earn a decent living.

This, then, raises the obvious question. Was the New Deal, as a moderate reform effort in a very tough 1930s, successful? Asking that question with regard to Genesee County means that we are thinking about an implied question. In other words, was the New Deal a success for the country as a whole? Just as importantly, was it *seen* as a success, both in Genesee County and in the nation in general?

*Did the People of Genesee County See the New Deal as Successful?
Some Final Thoughts*

On the eve of the 1940 Presidential election Republican candidate Wendell L. Willkie visited Batavia. He received an enormously enthusiastic reception on October 16th. An estimated crowd of 10,000 welcomed this stalwart opponent of the New Deal with chants of “we want Willkie.” The essential thrust of Willkie’s opposition to the New Deal was one that resonated with many in Genesee County. In a front-page *Daily News* article appearing three days later, the campaign theme of Willkie was an articulation of what many in Genesee County feared, Great Depression or not. In a word, the New Deal was viewed as the negation of a cherished American notion, one which Herbert Hoover had devoted an entire book to in 1922 – *American Individualism*. “Willkie,” the *Daily News* told its readers on October 19th, “Fears U.S. Socialism in F.D.R. Trend.” In the minds of many, a rejection of individualism was a leap to political extremism. While the middle course of the New Deal may have been tolerable given the alternatives of fascism or communism as a reaction to the crash of 1929, it was hardly a

permanent solution – and in and of itself held the potential for ushering in the very totalitarianism so characterizing the 1930s.

What was meant by “individualism?” Be it President Hoover, candidate Willkie, or the typical Republican in Genesee County in 1940, the term refers more than anything else to a person’s freedom of choice – to his or her liberty. It conceived of a person who was routinely self-reliant. It meant a person who worked hard for two basic reasons – the fear of poverty and the promise of opportunity. An individualist rejected the proposition that he or she was owed a living. Along these lines, the support of those in need is the result of a voluntary choice – not governmental coercion. The individualist believed that one’s life looked as it looked because of one’s own efforts. Therefore, a person must in the end accept the consequences of his or her own behavior.

While the New Deal’s extensive use of governmental intervention may have been necessary by 1932 in order to avoid the possibility of extreme political reactions, many in the county had always rejected the idea that governmental intervention should be a permanent feature of American life. To make a variety of New Deal programs permanent, it was believed by many in the county, would be to institutionalize a radically new relationship between individuals and the government. In the process, one would then run the risk of destroying the basic reasons for hard work – fear and opportunity. The social consequences would then be obvious – American society would stagnate because the incentive to work and innovate had been removed.

Therefore, the New Deal would be seen as successful in Genesee County if – and only if – it remained a *temporary* expedient for pulling the county out of the Great Depression. Herein lays the significance of Roosevelt’s policy. The New Deal, rather than being viewed as a radical and permanent departure from the earlier understanding of limited governmental involvement in the lives of Americans, should instead be comprehended as a brief interruption in the continuous stress placed upon individualism – and limited government. The Great Depression was a crisis that produced a political abnormality – the New Deal. But

this did not mean that many in Genesee County accepted it as a permanent political realignment. The New Deal was never normal.

Because it was not an ordinary part of the county political culture the underlying value of individualism never disappeared, even with the onslaught of the great economic downturn of the 1930s. This, then, produced the obvious. Liberals – those in the tradition of the New Deal – never fully understood that what they yearned for – a return to what they saw as the “normalcy” of the New Deal after World War Two – was a yearning doomed to failure. The foundation of that failure was the continued existence of a belief in individualism and its public policy expression of limited government. The idea of limited government had of course changed as a result of the New Deal – few would question the desirability of monthly Social Security checks or federally-insured bank accounts. But the essentially conservative nature of Genesee County politics remained unchanged by the Great Depression and the New Deal. There is a line of continuity between Herbert Hoover and Ronald Reagan and beyond, a continuum that takes us beyond the scope of this presentation.

Therefore, was the New Deal successful? Yes, in that it provided a moderate and humane political response to an economic catastrophe. Yes, in that it preserved a free enterprise system that was necessarily modified to remove its harshest and most unworkable features. And yes, in that it preserved a hallmark of American liberty – individualism. America, and Genesee County, retained its essential Americanism in what has proven to be a markedly healthier form. In the wake of the New Deal American democracy expanded – but it was always an expansion contained within the tradition of the value of individualism. That was especially so in Genesee County. What remains to be seen, as we move deeper into the twenty-first century, is whether the county will retain the exceptionalism that I have stressed throughout this talk – or whether over time it will move in a very different direction, as some parts of the country – and New York State – already have.

