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Hope College and the Great Depression

By Grace Baty

Delving into the 1930s at Hope College, I found the impact of the Great Depression on students to be incredibly complex. While the Hope studentry and institution proudly joined the war effort during World War II, the Hope community didn't proclaim how the Great Depression impacted them in a clear way. Instead, they tended to push the effects of the Great Depression under the rug. However, the Great Depression impacted Hope students not only from a financial standpoint, but at a cultural level. The timeline of that era can reveal how a national crisis impacted students. By looking at student accounts and college publications, we can observe the Great Depression's effect on how students thought of and engaged in their education and social situations.



Hope College Class of 1930

Following the general timeline of the Great Depression and looking at how students in the *Anchor* spoke about the Great Depression, we can see some general trends that reflect when the worst years of the Depression occurred. First, the initial crash of the stock market sparked little conversation, at least within the *Anchor*. Students might not have been impacted right away by a stock market crash, as they most likely did not participate in the stock market. They likely only felt the lasting effects later as the U.S. spiraled into mass unemployment, inflation, and shortages.

The first direct mention of the economic conditions throughout the country in the *Anchor* appeared in the

January 14, 1931 issue. However, this didn't display the impact on students at Hope. Instead, the article documents plans for students to attend the state Y.M.C.A.'s Student Conference on Unemployment to learn more about unemployment throughout the state, which included visiting unemployment centers and unemployment relief agencies.^[1] This led us to believe that most Hope students themselves did not deal with financial issues early in the Depression. They learned about the issues around the country as if they impacted others, not them. At this point, any mention of financial conditions appeared to be indirect or made lightly. For example, the *Anchor* wrote on March 18, 1931 a call for class dues, basing their argument on the necessity of student loyalty to school activities and to their alma mater.^[2] On April 22 of the same year, the *Anchor* wrote that they would not have the ability to continue publishing newspapers because of lack of funds without mentioning the country-wide Depression to which these issues belonged.^[3] These financial needs may have stemmed from the dwindling economy but the *Anchor* discusses them as isolated issues at this time.

While the *Anchor* makes a rather indirect reference, its nod to the unemployment crisis displays the background knowledge Hope students had of the issue. The *Anchor* also includes a description of the Sibylline Sorority's "Depression Party" on September 30, 1931. Events within this evening included skits that made fun of specific low income positions, games, and dinner.^[4]

Again, these specific Hope students display that they had some understanding of the state of the country, but did not have a personal connection to the struggle. Many Hope students could have had difficulty during this time, but public social events and the *Anchor* seemed to ignore Hope's struggle until it completely impacted students campus wide. Financially struggling students or those who directly recognized the impact of the Great Depression may have been excluded from public display. There could have been a level of shame for those

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From the Collections Archivist



The past few months have been a busy season for the Joint Archives. In addition to research visits and student projects, our new office manager, Nicole Buday, joined the JAH in October. Please say hello the next time you visit or contact the archives!

This issue's article, written by Hope Alumna Grace Pettinger '22 Baty, tells part of the story of the Great Depression's impact on student life at Hope College. It emphasizes the value campus publications have in re-examining national and local history. We invite you to explore other pieces of history in Hope's newspaper, *The Anchor*, by visiting digitalcommons.hope.edu/anchor/.

Sarah Lundy

Hope College and the Great Depression (continued from page 2)

impacted more directly from the unemployment crisis as well, causing many to avoid addressing the Depression's impact on the Hope College student body as a whole.

Despite the *Anchor* and Sibylline event only making indirect references of the crisis, we did find evidence that students did struggle financially at this time. The scrapbook of Margaret Kole gives a glimpse of some of the impact of the Depression at Hope. Kole, who attended Hope from 1929-1933, saved letters from the Dean of Women, Winifred Durfee, and college president Edward Dimment that demonstrate that some students at Hope felt even the most immediate effects of the Great Depression. Writing to Kole after her first year at Hope, Durfee asks Kole who she will room with the following year, as the woman with whom she had originally planned to live would not be living on campus in order to work. One woman who Durfee suggested as a potential roommate had worked for two years after high school prior to enrolling at Hope, making her a few years older than others in her class. She closed the letter assuring Margaret that she was "very glad that you decided to continue and I feel that you will never regret it."^[5] Durfee's letter shows that women at Hope were juggling financial demands to work and to attend college.



Edward Dimment's letter to Kole in August of 1932 reflected similar notions but more directly addressed the enrollment drop in the beginning years of the Depression. He very clearly discussed the current financial issues throughout the country and asked Kole to

write to him if she considered leaving the college or "change your whole scheme of things," even though she would be entering her senior year of college. He also asked Kole to recommend Hope to her friends who had recently graduated from high school, noting the importance of college despite financial difficulties.^[6]

In *A Century of Hope*, Wichers argues that Hope did not lose many students during the Great Depression; however, based on enrollment research conducted by Maria Seidl during the summer of 2021, Hope lost 67 students from 1928 to 1929 dropping from 501 in 1928 to 434 in 1929. At the lowest point in this lull in enrollment in 1931, Hope had only 420 students enrolled.^[7] Wichers, who presided as president at Hope during both the Great Depression and World War Two, may have felt that this was only a small dip compared to the loss of almost all men at Hope during the war; however, at the time, it is likely that even this enrollment drop during the Depression seemed significant to the college and had financial impact.

By April 20, 1932, the *Anchor* more seriously named and discussed the Great Depression as it began to affect the entire student body. In the article "Depression Blues," the *Anchor* quotes a letter from a man to a New York banking house. The man writing the letter explained that he could not pay the bank collateral and explained his present situation and frustration with the lack of money he had compared to all of the taxes and fees the government required him to pay. He expressed desperation in his situation.^[8] This article contrasts the tone of previous articles that referenced the Depression. They quote the letter as if to appeal to the trials that other students and people in the Hope community felt during the time, rather than making light of the situation or talking about financial issues without connection to the greater problem across the country. This article has a sober, understanding tone. By quoting the letter, the *Anchor* writer reflects the student body's more direct and personal understanding of his desperation.

The most direct and obvious explanation of the difficulty students felt as a result of the Great Depression in the *Anchor* had to be "Men Wanted." Written for the March 8, 1933 issue of the *Anchor*, "Men Wanted" addresses men specifically but appeals to all citizens as if a battle cry. The author explains instead of brawn, the American people needed a warlike mindset that would allow them to rally together to beat their foe: The Great Depression.^[9]

This warlike approach to the Depression in a student newspaper demonstrates the impact the Depression had on students. No longer did students make fun of those suffering from the Depression or talk about financial struggles as a foreign trial impacting people of a different class. "Men Wanted" addresses the Great Depression as a countrywide issue that required the need of an army of "healthy, red-blooded, Christian, fair, honest men, who will fight the situation shoulder to shoulder."^[10]

Many individual students had different experiences while living within this national crisis. One student, Ethel Swets played organ for local churches during her time at Hope from 1930. However, because of the lack of circulating paper money and the banking crisis, the churches she played for paid her in money that resembled monopoly money, representing "I.O.U.s." She did not include in her scrapbook if the churches ever made true to their promise, but she did include one of the dollars they gave her.^[11]

Wicher's notes that the New Deal Programs that students so passionately debated helped save the college and



students impacted by financial difficulty. He explains that the Federal Emergency Relief Act allowed the college to employ students on multiple campus projects in return for tuition, room, and board. We can see evidence of this occurrence and help from the government in the *Anchor*. In the February 21, 1934 issue, the main headline reads, "Hope Students Receive Federal Aid." The authors proceed to detail the number of students Hope employed thanks to the aid, the requirements for workers, and the wages for student workers.^[12] On March 7, 1934, the *Anchor* noted that the Federal Emergency Relief plan allowed Hope to pay student workers an additional 15 dollars per month.^[13] The college relied heavily on funds from those programs in order to keep students enrolled and keep the college's doors open.

By 1936, more and more *Anchor* articles communicated a more positive outlook on the Depression. On February 19, 1936, the *Anchor* reported a large reduction in its own debt, from \$1900 to only \$600.^[14] On October 27, 1936, "Statistics Reveal Profit of \$102,000 For College Graduate -- 63% Per Year" from the *Anchor* wrote that college graduates profited much higher than those who only finished high school.^[15] While students continued to debate about New Deal Programs and struggled to make financial ends meet, we can see a slight improvement as the rhetoric of how students wrote about money had changed in some articles. Students wrote more positively about money and displayed a level of hope in their financial situation.

We must acknowledge that these events and campus responses to the Depression did not happen one after another. As these trends occurred, they overlapped with one another, roughly creating a timeline of the Great Depression at Hope College in the eyes of the students. While we only have pieces of students' experiences, we can see that Hope College was not immune to the effects

of the Great Depression. The community felt the impact of the financial crisis and had a range of responses throughout the decade of the 1930s.

About the author:

Grace Baty graduated from Hope in December 2021 with a bachelor's degree in History with a minor in Writing. She worked at the Joint Archives of Holland for three years as a student researcher. She also participated in summer research with fellow students Maria Seidl and Brooke Carbaugh, Professor Lauren Janes and the Joint Archives. Grace is currently pursuing a master's degree in Archival Management.



Endnotes:

^[1]"Students Confer on Unemployment,"

Hope College Anchor, 14 January, 1931.

^[2]"Obligations," *Hope College Anchor*, 18 March, 1931.

^[3]"The Anchor Slips," *Hope College Anchor*, 22 April 1931.

^[4]"Sibyllines and Guests Prosper on Depression," *Hope College Anchor*, 30 September, 1931.

^[5]Letter from Winifred Durfee to Margaret J. Kole in Memory Book, 1925-1933, Kole, Margaret J. (1909-1994). Papers, 1925-1933 (H95-1250), Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, MI.

^[6]Letter from Edward Dimment to Margaret J. Kole in Memory Book, 1925-1933, Kole, Margaret J. (1909-1994). Papers, 1925-1933 (H95-1250), Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, MI.

^[7]Wynand Wichers, *A Century of Hope* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 204.

^[8]"Depression Blues," *Hope College Anchor*, 20 April, 1932.

^[9]"Men Wanted," *Hope College Anchor*, 8 March, 1933.

^[10]"Men Wanted," *Hope College Anchor*, 8 March, 1933.

^[11]Scrapbook, 1929-1936, Swets, Ethel Leestma Papers, 1929-1936 (H18-1988), Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, MI.

^[12]"Hope Students Receive Federal Aid," *Hope College Anchor*, 21 February, 1934.

^[13]"Emergency Relief Fund Distributed," *Hope College Anchor*, 17 March, 1934.

^[14]"Huge Slice Made in Anchor Debt," *Hope College Anchor*, 19 February, 1936.

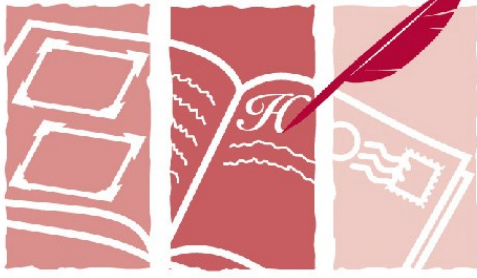
^[15]"Statistics Reveal Profit of \$102,000 For College Graduate - 63% Per Year," *Hope College Anchor*, 27 October 1936.

HAHS Update

The retirement of Geoffrey Reynolds necessitated a change in the longstanding relationship between the Joint Archives of Holland and the HAHS. The JAH will no longer be coordinating HAHS membership mailings, document production and dues processing.

The HAHS must also end any associate memberships received for free when supporting the JAH. Despite these changes, the HAHS welcomes you to become members. More information can be found on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/people/Holland-Area-Historical-Society or by emailing us at hollandahs@gmail.com.

The Joint Archives of Holland



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Hope College band, early 1930s