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Cutting Fish: *Two boys work alongside their father (Photograph by Lewis Hine, c. 1911).* Source: *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

Poverty in the Prosperous Years: The Working Poor of the 1920s and Today

Brian Payne

Perhaps the only thing predictable about modern American market capitalism is its radical boom-bust cycle of growth and decline. A whole history of the United States could be structured around it: expansion, recession, expansion again. Historically, our economy's recessions have been linked to financial crises known as "panics," which subsequently created periods of unemployment and poverty for great numbers of American workers. There were panics in 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, 1901 and 1907. There was a recession in 1920–21, a Great Depression throughout the 1930s, a recession in 1982 and, of course, the house market fallout of 2008. And this is just the short list. Historians spend a lot of time debating the differences among panics, recessions and depression, and why or when any one individual downturn existed.

In the end, all of these debates describe a dichotomy between good years and bad years that paper over or obfuscate what it was really like to live through such economic upheaval. Historians of American capitalism tend to focus on the most obvious swings of economic boom and bust: how good the good times got, and in the bad times, conversely, how far poverty and want reached into American society. In doing so, they see only segmented pictures of the long and complex history

Seasonal Cannery Workers' Company Housing (Photograph by Lewis Hine, c. 1911). Source: *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

of the working poor in America. Good years were often as difficult as bad years for the working poor. Take, for example, the supposed "roaring" decade of the 1920s, which historians now see as an awfully problematic decade that played a considerable part in shaping the tragedy of the 1930s. In that ostensibly prosperous decade, long periods of unemployment and underemployment combined with the increasing control of large corporations in shaping the nature of work left many working Americans totally unprepared for the 1930s. In modern American history, economic upswings have never even come close to eradicating poverty, though they have done much to hide it. A rising tide never floats *all* boats. So, what does poverty look like during the "good years"?

Imagining the Working Poor in History

Reliable unemployment figures are hard to come by for any period in American history before 1930. When we try to access the impacts that micro and macroeconomic trends had on people's real, lived experiences historians often turn to price indexes, consumption rates, or inflation figures. The resulting picture is seldom clear and historians are forced to make broad generalizations about individuals' lives from some rather sweeping and all-inclusive data. Nothing can turn a reader off like complex statistics, and data about anonymous masses often leaves us perplexed. Perhaps Harry Hopkins (1890-1946), the director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration during the first years of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, said it best. Statistics lose meaning, he said, when they run up against "the natural limits of personal imagination and sympathy. You can pity six men, but you can't keep stirred up over six million." This conundrum remains as problematic for historians of the 1920s and 1930s today as it was for Hopkins and the New Dealers. To capture the story of working poor, a historian has to weave a narrative that combines empathy for individuals into an understanding of the broader context in which they lived and worked. What follows is a picture of one such group, Maine canneries workers in the not-so-Roaring Twenties, an age when systemic poverty persisted amidst national prosperity. The processed food industry was one of the fastest-growing industries in

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the late-nineteenth century, and it was subsequently one of the biggest busts of the 1920s. By combining a close examination of individual families with the general economic data of those working in a food industry during the 1920s, with the general economic data of that industry, along with the larger sociopolitical context, a historian might be able to expose the links between the six and the six million.

The Tinkers' Tale

By July of 1922 the Maine sardine-packing season was well underway, and the Tinker family was hard at work. Three of its men, Edward, Henry, and Charles, all worked as general laborers in the Columbian Canning Company in the port town of Lubec. They worked an average of 53 hours a week for an average pay of $8.36 a week. Along with the men, there were six Tinker women working, either packing herring fish into sardine cans or sardine cans into shipping crates. The women earned an average of $3.68 a week. In total, the Tinker extended-family unit, a family unit of nine workers, averaged a weekly pay of $47.19 for the month of July 1922. Working in the sardine industry was a seasonal occupation. The busy months were from June to September. By law the fishing season did not even begin until April 15 and the plants had to close down by the end of October. Occasionally, local families like the Tinkers could get some extra cash during the off-season working in the coal yards, cutting and hauling wood, or storing extra cases of sardines in their own basements and charging rent to the company. A sample set of the weekly payrolls yielded an average of $32.37 per week for the Tinkers throughout the entire year of 1922, or about $3.60 per worker. We can roughly estimate that this extended-family unit earned about $1,686.88, or about $187.43 per person, working for the Columbian Canning Company in 1922.

The Tinker extended-family unit, a family unit of nine workers, averaged a weekly pay of $47.19 for the month of July 1922.

The year 1922 was at the end of a recession, but as bad as that was things actually got worse for the Tinker family (see Figure 1). In 1924, a sample set of one week's pay per month yielded an average of $43.57 and an average per worker weekly pay of $9.92. The year 1924 proved to be the best year for the Tinker family. In 1926, right in the midst of the great boom of the 1920s, the sample set of one week's pay per month yielded an average of just $29.33, or $5.68 per worker. Although the extended family's weekly income appeared to have risen again in 1928 to an average of $45.67, a closer look actually discloses real trouble for the Tinkers. In order to address the decline in total family income in 1926–1927, the Tinkers put more family members to work. Although their total extended-family income rose between 1926 and 1928 from $29.33 to $45.67, the average weekly pay per worker remained nearly constant; $5.68 per week in 1926 and $5.78 in 1928.

Placing the Tinker family working unit within the larger context of labor at the Columbian Canning Company is essential to determine if they represent a norm or an exception. By analyzing the data from the company's pay ledger a historian can roughly estimate an individual's weekly pay. To make the analysis manageable, averages were taken for one week per month for every other year between 1922 and 1930.
In 1922, at the very end of the recession, male general laborers earned on average $12.08 per week during the season, or about $10.07 a week averaged out over the entire year. Female laborers in the packinghouses earned on average $1.09 a week during the season, or about $0.18 averaged out over the entire year. By 1926, in the midst of this purported boom era, the average male general laborer saw his average weekly pay drop to $9.02 per week during the season. Female laborers, on the other hand, saw a general increase in seasonal pay by 1926, up to $7.86 per week.
In 1928, well into an era of economic growth, male general laborers saw their weekly wages increase beyond the 1922 level to an average of $14.11. Yet, once again, it was the female packing laborers who saw the largest growth

Figure 1: The Tinker Extended-Family Working Unit

Year	Average Weekly Pay For Family Unit	Average Weekly Pay Per Worker
1922	$32.37	$7.36
1924	$43.57	$9.92
1926	$29.33	$5.68
1928	$45.67	$5.78
1930	$10.23	$3.09

Source: Lubec Sardine Industry Record Books. Ledger 61: Columbian Canning Company Payroll, 1922-30. University of Maine Special Collections, MS 1338.

Figure 2: Seasonal Weekly Wages by Sex		
Year	Male	Female
1922	$12.08	$1.09
1924	$13.38	$5.40
1926	$9.02	$7.86
1928	$14.11	$8.07
1930	$5.89	$5.47

Source: Lubec Sardine Industry Record Books. Ledger 61: Columbian Canning Company Payroll, 1922-30. University of Maine Special Collections, MS 1338.

since the 1922 recession level, to $8.07. This trend towards an equalization of wages between the sexes continued as the company increased its reliance on cheaper, less skilled, (and therefore often female) labor (see Figure 2). By 1930, men earned on average $5.89 a week in season while women earned $5.47.

If one were to average the male and female wage rates over time, a picture consistent with the reality of the Tinker family is revealed. In 1922, the average weekly wage during the season for all workers was $4.75. In 1924 it rose to $7.33, and by 1928 it topped out at $12.72 (see Figure 3). Yet, at the same time, that season was getting shorter. If the weekly wages are averaged out across a 12-month period, the average wages increased much more slowly; from $3.48 in 1922 to only $4.84 in 1928; much closer to the averages that the Tinkers saw—$3.60 in 1922 and $5.78 in 1928. This reflects the general decline in work opportunity. The average weekly man-hours for male general labor dropped from 1488.1 in 1922 to 927.38 in 1924. The general downward slide continued in 1926 to 413.22 and in 1928 to 474.97 (see Figure 4). By the first full year of the Great Depression average weekly man-hours dropped to 153.74.

By parsing the numbers this way we come to a conclusion similar to that which we reached when we looked closely at the Tinker family. Wages only increased with an increase in working effort. While the Tinker family had to put more hands to work to reach the same family income, individual workers had to put in more hours during shorter periods of intensity to make up for longer periods without work at the Columbian Canning Company. Thus, for both the individual and the family working unit, work got more intensive as the 1920s wore on. Yet, as their work became more intensive, their rewards for that work became less.

The Working Poor Today

So, what does the story of the Tinkers, a family of working poor in a time of supposed prosperity tell us? How can we come to terms with endemic poverty during periods of economic recovery in America? Stepping back from the historical record and looking more broadly, more contemporarily, some interesting albeit uncomfortable comparisons emerge. Today, the United States is also in a recovery period. On September 15, 2013, five years after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the White House released a new report assessing the impact of the recovery plan in a general defense of

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Figure 3: Overall Weekly Wages		
Year	Seasonal	Annual
1922	$4.75	$3.48
1924	$7.33	$5.68
1926	$6.42	$0.97
1928	$12.72	$4.84
1930	$5.12	$1.88

Figure 4: Average Weekly Man-Hours	
Year	Hours
1922	1488.1
1924	927.38
1926	413.22
1928	474.97
1930	153.74

Source: Lubec Sardine Industry Record Books. Ledger 61: Columbian Canning Company Payroll, 1922-30. University of Maine Special Collections, MS 1338.

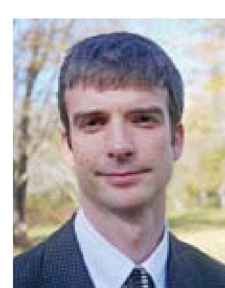
Today, in terms of the working poor and wealth inequality, the United States is basically back to where it stood in the 1920s

***Hamilton Family of Eastport:** All members, including 8-year-old Erna, worked in the canneries. (Photograph by Lewis Hine, c. 1911).* Source: *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

programs such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). Although the president's economic advisor, Gene Sperling, argued that the American taxpayers actually saw a net profit of $28 billion from TARP and that the whole of President Obama's economic recovery plan worked, it would be difficult to come to that conclusion if we were to focus on the working poor. Unemployment still stands at 7.3% and recent studies show that the top 1% of wealthy Americans owns 39% of the world's wealth, a high not reached since 1929. A recent University of California—Berkeley study shows that during the "recovery" since the 2008 recession, 95% of the income gains went to the top 1%. In fact, median household income has dropped by $4,000 since 2000, while average costs of basic goods such as milk and gasoline have increased. According to a Brookings Institute study, during the 1920s the top 1% also saw massive income gains—increases of about 75%—while the incomes of average laborers remained nearly constant. What is more, today's proposed solutions to ameliorate the plight of the working poor with minimum wage increases face doubtful success at both the federal and state levels. Recently, District of Columbia Mayor Vincent Gray vetoed the "living wage" bill fearing that Wal-Mart would respond by abandoning three of its six stores there. Wal-Mart spokesman Steven Restivo claimed that the wage increase would hinder job growth.

How hard is the working poor working? In September of 2005 the Urban Institute showed that 59% of low-income families had at least one member working at least full-time, with only 19% of low-income families having at least one member working less than half time. Only 11% of these families had no working members. In 2004, a study produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation showed that low-income families increasingly turned to family-based working units, just as the Tinkers did in the 1920s, with the majority of low-income families collectively working at least 2,500 hours a year, or 48 hours a week with no off weeks, but still failing to make a living family wage. In sum, the vast majority of low-income families, 70%, are classified as either engaged in "high-work" or "moderate-work" levels.

As we look back over the recession recovery from 2008 to 2012 it is difficult for a historian not to think about the recession recovery of 1923-1929. Similar patterns of concentrated wealth and intensive work habits emerged in both periods. Today, in terms of the working poor and wealth inequality, the United States is basically back to where it stood in the 1920s, which, as historians continue to show, wasn't all that "Roaring." The history of the Tinker family reminds us that the working poor did not experience booms and busts in the way that much of the history of capitalism suggests. When a family lives and works at or below subsistence levels, they are unable to hedge against looming disaster. The result is chronic, generational poverty, a sad measure of continuity in an age of dynamic progress.



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