Chapter 7
The Family in Crisis and After

The roaring twenties ended with a thud late in 1929—with a dramatic stock-market crash followed by a deep and durable depression. Its full-throttled embrace of pleasure and freedom would not fully resurface for another three decades. But neither did it disappear.

Three distinct eras appeared between 1929 and the early 1960s: the Great Depression of the 1930s; World War II; and “the fifties,” a sort of short-hand term for a period of consensus and traditionalism that lasted from the end of World War II to some point in the early to mid-1960s. The Depression and the war at the very least slowed the movement toward individualism that had gathered so much momentum by the 1920s, and the memory of hardship and privation would very much color life after the war. Yet a commitment to leisure, women’s increased employment, and the growing role of the state persisted, and by the 1950s, many elements of the 1920s had returned: political conservatism, the pursuit of pleasure, and a growing sense of permissiveness. The three decades that separate the “roaring twenties” from the tumultuous sixties illustrate that economic and political crises could only temporarily and partially retard the forces of expressive individualism that had so brashly emerged earlier in the century.

* * *

The Great Depression hit families hard and for a long time. One out of five banks failed, and millions of families lost their life savings. Many also lost their homes or farms. Farm income in 1932 stood at one-third of what it had been in 1929. The average family’s income declined 40 percent from 1929 to 1933, to $1,500. The unemployment rate, which had stood at just 3.2 percent in 1929, skyrocketed to 23.6 percent in 1932. Men often took the Depression personally; it undercut the essential element of being a good husband and a good father. In the Dakotas, where businessmen and successful farmers had long asserted that only lazy men failed, many lost their livelihoods and their land, and young men left in droves. “Sometimes I feel like a
murderer,” said a New York man who had gone without a steady job for two years. “What’s wrong with me, that I can’t protect my children?” A Chicago investigator reported that some men were so humiliated at being unemployed that they put on their work clothes and stayed away from home all day. “The Polish family is based on authority, not on love,” noted a priest. “The prestige of the former wage earner is lowered by asking working children or women for spending money—for beer, for cigarettes, for carfare.” Of course not all unemployed men had the luxury of asking their children and wives for money. Many watched them go hungry. New York City recorded 110 deaths by starvation in 1934, and more children than not were malnourished in the poorest parts of the country. In Harlan County, Kentucky, people lived “on dandelions and blackberries,” and hungry children reportedly chewed on their hands to keep hunger at bay. “Momma wouldn’t eat, but watched us eat,” recalled a Southern daughter. Programs such as the Worker’s Progress Administration offered employment, but the wages were low, and some men simply could not bring themselves to do the work. Decades later, my aunt Helen Nelson recalled the sense of hopelessness that she felt when her husband arrived home after his first day on a public-works project to announce that he had quit. The foreman had told him to slow down to make sure that the job would last, and he was not about to work for an outfit that told a man to slack off.

Many families fragmented under such pressures. Marriage declined by 22 percent early in the Depression. The rate of divorce declined during the Depression because families could not afford them; the rate of separations increased. Not a few of the men riding the rails or inhabiting hobo camps were husbands and fathers, men who could not stand the shame of living with a family that they could not support. The fertility rate declined from 2.45 to 2.0. Many families resorted to sending their children to orphanages or other institutions for what they hoped would be temporary stays. The number of children living in such places increased by 50 percent during the Depression’s first two years. This sort of desperation blunted criticism of government’s growing role in families. The Depression discredited both big business and laissez-faire economics. President Franklin D. Roosevelt won a great deal of popularity for arguing that government should help ordinary people come to terms with joblessness and other aspects of economic hardship. In reality, however, much of his program actually benefited wealthier people. The Agricultural Adjust Act, for example, paid generous amounts of federal money to big farmers to keep their land out of production, a decision that drove thousands of tenant farmers from their homes and livelihoods. But the New Deal’s relief programs, particularly its work-relief programs, were very, very popular. The federal government also undertook an ambitious national retirement program (social security), a rural-electrification program, a federal home mortgage insurance that enabled many thousands of families to keep or secure a house, and unemployment and disability insurance. The number of clinics dispensing advice regarding birth control