

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

Charity Begins at Home:

A Case Study of Rural Western Pennsylvania during the Great Depression

by

Jacob A. Battle, Christian E. Mumpower, & Colin J. Wood

July 11, 2024

Introduction

The collective experience of Pennsylvanians during the Great Depression, from the stock market crash of October 1929 to the economic rebound of the Roosevelt administration, continues to be dominated by accounts of those living in urban and industrial centers—such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—leaving a significant part of the story untold. Pennsylvanians living in small, rural communities that were not beholden to large economic institutions—as the majority of cities in Pennsylvania and their inhabitants were—weathered the Depression very differently.

Ideologically, these citizens tended towards communalism, localism, and felt largely independent from their federal and state governments. Such was the case with the small town of New Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Situated in the fertile Redbank Valley of Western Pennsylvania, New Bethlehem's inhabitants enjoyed an agrarian existence, relying on local resources for their commodities. The idyllic countryside surrounding New Bethlehem was entirely bereft of roads, restricting transportation to and from the little community to the riverway and railroad. Its citizens were thus far removed from cities like Philadelphia and even nearby Pittsburgh—epicenters of economic hardship—when the Stock Market crashed on October 24, 1929. This was evidenced by the local newspaper, the *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator*, in that no mention of the “Black Tuesday” crash or resulting Depression appeared until the following year. This study addresses a significant gap in the historiography of the Great Depression; how small-town America survived and even flourished amid a sea of economic disarray.

Background of New Bethlehem and the Redbank Valley

The Redbank Valley is a rural region that occupies the border area between the counties of Armstrong and Clarion in Western Pennsylvania. Settlements there were originally formed along the Redbank Creek, a tributary of the Allegheny River. The central urban point of the

Redbank Valley is the borough of New Bethlehem. Henry “Gum” Nolf, who built a saw and grist mill in the area in the early 19th century, went on to establish the town in 1853. It rapidly became an economic powerhouse within the valley, spearheaded by businessman Charles E. Andrews, whose family generationally used New Bethlehem as a commercial hub for a plethora of local, resource-driven industries such as coal, lumber, brick, tile, oil, banking, and others. By the time of the Depression, New Bethlehem had a population of over sixteen hundred inhabitants, with several hundred others residing in the neighboring settlements within the valley. They were “social, intelligent, and religious people, representing nearly all the interests that make a great city” and perceived themselves as citizens of one of the most prosperous small towns in America.¹ They were commercially independent and sold many local products across the East Coast and Mid-West. Several banks, hotels, churches, and mansions were found in the town, along with a proud community spirit shared by all its residents. As the effects of Black Thursday seeped into the Redbank Valley, the community members banded together to withstand and persevere through the economic blight which crippled many Pennsylvanian cities.

The first company to stake a sizeable claim in the region was the railroad, specifically the Alleghany Valley Company, whose shareholders sought to connect New Bethlehem with other large settlements in Western Pennsylvania. While early attempts to link the railroad’s “Low Grade” track to the Mahoning line—which terminated at the mouth of the Mahoning Creek—failed due to high costs, New Bethlehem ultimately received its rail connection with the “Red Bank line” in August of 1873.² Once it opened for business, trains could travel from Brookville in the west to Driftwood and the small village of Redbank in the east, passing through the developing town center of New Bethlehem along the way. This connection opened the proverbial floodgates of commerce to the otherwise isolated little town. Perhaps the most impactful effect

on the community, however, was the added benefit of employment with the railroad and the coal companies that followed in its wake.

While the most readily available and beneficial natural resource in the Redbank Valley was its mineral-rich soil, it was discovered concurrently with the establishment of the railroad through town that its hills were studded with heaps of bituminous coal. Identified as part of the “Lower Kittanning Bed,” the stretch of land on which New Bethlehem, the village of Redbank, and the eponymous town of Kittanning sat possessed a reserve of approximately 1.25 billion tons of recoverable coal.³ It was this resource that led J. Edgar Thompson, President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, to remark,

Its route abounds through its whole length with cheap fuel, consisting of varieties of bituminous coal in unusually thick beds, embracing the best coking coals for iron smelting, blacksmith, gas coals and cannel coal, the latter being the most accessible, of that variety, to the eastern markets...When completed, and its connections made with the west, it will be possible for freights to be carried (over this road) at cheaper rates than they can be conveyed by any of the proposed canals between the Mississippi Valley and the east.⁴

In this way, the Red Bank line was not only a lucrative venture but a self-sustaining one for the town of New Bethlehem and the railroad alike. Pennsylvanians far abreast of the small community took notice as well, attracting the interest of large firms such as the Fairmount Coal Company, which constructed “[l]arge store buildings...at immense cost” within the vicinity of the rich coal beds.⁵ New Bethlehemites turned out in droves to pursue employment with the new company presence in the town, taking advantage of the high demand for coking coal to make a living.

Coal mining in the late 19th and early 20th century was a painstaking process with few safety precautions in place to prevent horrendous injury or death on the job. Miners were required to descend into dark, often claustrophobic shafts dug into the hilly terrain around New Bethlehem, smiting chunks of coal out of the stone around them and hauling it to the surface in wheelbarrows.⁶ So physically intensive was the work that gunpowder was soon adopted to expedite the process of coal extraction. The use of dynamite charges in these narrow shafts, however, generally endangered miners more than it helped them, leading to cave-ins that claimed the lives of many who were unprepared—or unaware—of such a result.⁷ Miners were often seen as expendable by the coal companies they toiled for, leading to low pay and virtually no hazard pay in the case of disaster. Yet, coal mining was interwoven too deeply into the community of the Redbank Valley to be challenged as a top employer. Rather, the greatest challenge to the coal companies proved to be the fluctuating value of coal itself.

While coal production experienced a sizeable increase from 1850-1900, the industry began to stagnate in the first two decades of the 20th century.⁸ Specifically, the mining of bituminous coal—the most abundant type of fuel found in the region—fell 86% from 1909 to 1974.⁹ The Great War saw an uptick in coal usage across the nation, spurring companies to increase their output for the war effort, both on the home front and abroad. During the interwar period, however, excess coal accumulated by the increased mining incentive led to a glut of the market that put many miners out of work and choked the industry. By 1926, production had exceeded more than double the demand, causing wages to fall precipitously and mines to close across the country.¹⁰ With the states of Kentucky and West Virginia moving ahead of Pennsylvania as sustainable producers of coal, the formerly bustling depots along the Redbank Valley were left with a surplus of coking coal and no business.¹¹

Aside from the railroad, settlements along the Redbank Valley—including New Bethlehem—possessed another means of transporting goods: the Redbank Creek. Historian A.J. Davis asserts that the “Redbank Creek has been the ‘Gift of the Nile’ to the settlers of New Bethlehem, not in the benefits derived from its inundations—for it has many—but from its transporting power.”¹² Lumber was floated down its stream as early as 1806, but the true capabilities of the waterway were not fully realized until the 1860s when retail proprietor Charles E. Andrews used a steam sawmill to construct flat-bottomed boats that would be “used for shipping coal from Pittsburgh to places along the Ohio River.”¹³ Enriched by his commercial transportation efforts with both coal and lumber, Andrews established the New Bethlehem Savings Bank—which later became the First National Bank—a “resplendent” building that aided the “rapid growth and expansion” of the town in the late 19th century.¹⁴ The Andrews family were among the wealthiest philanthropists in the township, funding the establishment of a theater, lumber company, and acting as stewards for several churches.

Farming Before and During The Depression

Due in large part to the fertile soil on which the town sits, the primary occupation for most New Bethlehemites was and remains farming. Though the rolling hills of the region were rich in both high-carbon and bituminous coal, the arability of the land was prized above all its other natural resources. The isolation of living in the Redbank Valley area forced local farmers to be self-sufficient, drawing together socially, and pooling their resources in times of hardship. These oporose farmers were self-sufficient and built tight-knit communities based on shared goals; the chief of these was survival. Patriarchal gender roles were standard within these conservative areas. The father led the farm and set the precedent that his wife and children followed. Rural labor was a synergetic affair; every family member, regardless of gender or age,

was expected to work. Whether in the kitchen, around the house, in the barn, or in the field, all hands were on deck to maintain the stability of the farm.

“Farm life was physically demanding,” wrote Bill McCauley, a local farmer who grew up during the Depression, “[w]ith the unpredictable forces of Mother Nature, there were plenty of times when it was a challenge to make a go of it.”¹⁵ From dawn to dusk, the farm needed attention. Among other jobs, livestock, gardening, and fielding crowded the day. Planting, harvesting, and canning dominated the summers and autumns, with the winters and springs consisting largely of livestock maintenance. Oat and barley harvests coincided with the cutting and gathering of hay, an ordeal in its own right.¹⁶ Hard labor was the “backbone of a successful farm,” as McCauley put it.¹⁷ The drudgery of farm life stoked fervent recollection from the young man. He particularly remembers plowing, which he despised doing.¹⁸

While food produced by the farms was primarily used for personal sustenance, farmers would sell their supplies to the local community. Butter and eggs were sold to local stores around the Redbank Valley; butchered pigs were sold to meat markets.¹⁹ Apart from grocers and butchers, some families bought straight from the source.²⁰ Fresh fruits and vegetables were readily available during the summer months for the citizens of New Bethlehem.²¹ The local farmers graciously extended their crops to their neighbors. This continued through the Depression as the regional farms supplied the small industrial center on the Redbank.

The reality was farming culture did not drastically change during the tumult of the Depression, rather, it remained largely the same. The economic dearth, which crippled cities and urban centers reliant on finance, went practically unnoticed by the Redbank farmer. Even before the Depression, during the Roaring 20s, money was “scarce” on the farms.²² One account claims the farmers “hardily [sic] knew any difference” from the two decades.²³ Without the impetus of

personal wealth, these groups lived outside the centralized economic constraints that weaved itself into the fabric of urban life. Therefore, rural society was built on individual sovereignty and localism, and when these binding factors collapsed in the cities, a different story played out on the farms of the Redbank. For the farmers, the financial woes brought forth by the Great Depression did not have the same weight as did the suffering in cities: “No one ate better than the farm family during the Depression.”²⁴

However, this did not mean life on the farm was easier than in the city. They experienced the same environmental hardships, which bludgeoned and exhausted their bodies. Farming communities bolstered communalism through weekly and seasonal events. Grain threshing was always a major event in the farms of the Redbank Valley. Twelve to fourteen locals banded together during the harvest to create an “informal co-op” that went farm to farm threshing wheat.²⁵ The noon dinner was the “highlight of the day:”

It was furnished by the lady of ladies of the host farm. Typically, it would consist of huge slabs of ham, beef, or chicken, baked beans, mounds of mashed potatoes and gravy, peas or corn, and gallons of coffee. To top it off, fresh fruit pie was served on was great.

Before the meal, the workers gathered at a bench under a tree with lots of water and towels to remove as much of the grime as possible. The humor and joking that went on was great.²⁶

The weekly source of the community came from the local churches. In the case of Bill McCauley, it was the Leatherwood Presbyterian Church, which he described as “our social center as well as a great source of influence.”²⁷ Religion has always been a staple of farm life. The farmers and their families viewed their relationship with “the Lord of the Harvest” as a requirement, and by that impetus, the whole community gathered in worship and fellowship.

Hobos and the Redbank Valley

While the Great Depression impacted every American in some way, many were unfortunate enough to have lost everything they owned. With unemployment at record high rates, people had no choice but to travel the country in search of work and in many cases, simply a warm meal. These traveling workers—fellow Americans down on their luck—were often referred to as “Hobos,” men who had previously worked in cities but had been laid off due to the Depression. As hobos inherently had very little, they often traveled on freight trains with their futures being at the mercy of where the trains happened to stop.²⁸

Despite the widespread hardship across the country, people were still charitable and would rarely let anyone go hungry. This was fortunate for the hobos, who were often forced to rely on the generosity of strangers for food and hospitality during their travels. As many people’s diets consisted of vegetables directly out of their garden, this was no different for hobos. In the Redbank Valley, these traveling workers would offer their labor and services to rural communities in exchange for a meal or a place to stay. Out of utter desperation, they would often scrounge for fruit in trees and sometimes forage in New Bethlehemite’s gardens for vegetables.²⁹ In the Redbank Valley, hobos would gather in encampments colloquially called “Hobo jungles” or “Hooverilles,” which could be found under bridges and even in the abandoned coke ovens southwest of town.³⁰ Here, hobos would pool their limited resources gleaned from scrounging and cook them over an open fire. Despite the sorrowful situation that these former workers found themselves in, they were not bums by any means. “Bums” referred to those who were homeless but refused to work; hobos, on the other hand, actively searched for employment to better their livelihoods.

Understanding well the plight of the unemployed, the townsfolk remained charitable toward them. Clarion County citizen Keith Stahlman remembered that his mother would often cook a surplus of food for suppers and pass out the rest to hobos on their back porch.³¹ On other occasions, hobos would peregrinate through the farmlands surrounding New Bethlehem, going from door to door asking for work or food, often both. If it was during supper time, some families would invite the wanderers into their homes to enjoy a warm meal with them. New Bethlehemite Joann Gringer recalls just such an occasion, “[The hobos] came off the railroad tracks, and I was scared to death of them, mother fed them. I would hide in the outhouse, I was scared of them but she always fed them, she’d fry them an egg.”³² Unfortunately, there were also cases of small-town generosity being taken advantage of. In one instance, a writer recalls a well-dressed older man selling 50-cent annual subscriptions to the Saturday Evening Post. The man had been so pleasant to talk to, that the family paid for the subscription and invited him in for dinner and to stay for the evening. After a few months, the magazine never came. The family contacted the magazine company and found out that there was a reward out for their salesman, as he had been selling fake subscriptions for years.³³

Relief, Politics, and the New Deal in the Redbank Valley

Before the Depression impacted the Redbank Valley, state bureaucracies effectively implemented public work projects that employed many citizens to improve local infrastructure. As the economic bow wave of Black Thursday rolled into town, the state was already there working on improving and paving roads. In early 1930, the Pennsylvania Highway Department promised several streets within New Bethlehem would receive “necessary attention” and “promised to make the streets satisfactory.”³⁴ Additionally, in mid-May, the State Construction Company of New Kensington laid the last section of State Route 66 between New Bethlehem

and Clarion.³⁵ It was later completed in October and celebrated by over a thousand locals, touted as the “best road celebration ever held in Pennsylvania.”³⁶ As the Depression ravaged Pennsylvania, Governor Gifford Pinchot lobbied for federal aid to be used for road building; in 1931, the Fed granted 9 million dollars for that sole purpose.³⁷ After receiving the aid, Pinchot devised a plan to pave, improve, and extend thirteen different state roads in Clarion County.³⁸ All in all, during the summer of 1931, 1,300 miles of rural highways were manned by 1,500 employees statewide.³⁹ This continued through the Depression as road building was part of several relief and infrastructural projects that impacted the rural lives in the Redbank Valley.

Additionally, teachers in Pennsylvania were given tenure for as long as needed in 1930 to ensure education was secure within the Keystone State.⁴⁰ Locally, the Richey Transportation Company dropped bus fares from New Bethlehem to Kittanning from \$1.25 to \$1.⁴¹ Wealthy individuals within the Redbank Valley helped assist the local population to the best of their abilities. One of the town’s ‘first families,’ the Andrews, were foremost among the philanthropists who provided aid to the impoverished.

Governor Pinchot wanted to capitalize on his work within rural Pennsylvania. He arrived in Clarion County in early April of 1932 for a rally during his reelection campaign. He was greeted eagerly by the locals and delivered a speech imploring his constituents to extend their support to him and the Republican party within the state legislature—which was controlled by Democrats at the time. Pinchot claimed that the Democratic-led legislature was blocking him from administering the appropriate legislation for relief that would benefit the people of rural Pennsylvania. He reminded the attendees “that he had built more than seventy miles of road in Clarion county, and declared that he was a road builder, intending to get the farmer out of the

mud.”⁴² He later issued a letter for publication in the *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* resuming his attempts to win over the Redbank Valley:

Gentlemen, You and your readers will, I am sure be interested to know that from June 1, 1931 to May 31, 1932, in addition to funds spent for road maintenance, the sum of \$618,991.89 will have been spent by the Department of Highways for building roads in Clarion County. More men were employed building roads in Clarion County last winter than ever before. This was due to construction of roads with our own forces. And we took advantage of local material, such as field stone, gravel deposits and a large number of stone fences which were given to the State... On January 31, the number of men at work building and maintaining State roads in Clarion County was 111. But the road money by which men were kept at work last winter be spent twice. Additional funds from which allocations for construction can be made are not available. The special session of the Legislature failed to provide money to keep men at work, and after jobs now under way are completed no funds will be available for new work until after the 1933 license money starts coming in. The fiscal year started June 1, 1931. The Highway Department’s budget for the first year of the present Biennium was 76 million. Of that sum 28 million was set aside for maintenance of State highways for unpaid township reward, and for surveys, engineering, and similar purposes... Until the money is gone every possible man will be kept as work. Late last fall, 25,000 were on the State’s payroll doing construction and maintenance work. On January 16th, the number was more than 30,000. 25,000 engaged in building roads and 5,000 in maintaining them.... During the year beginning June 1, 1932, we shall spend about 20 million for rural highway

construction reconstruction and repairs of bridges etc. Had the special session provided the funds for which I asked we could go on all summer. I am deeply sorry that we cannot do so... Sincerely yours, Gifford Pinchot.⁴³

In September, the Pennsylvania government established a State Relief Board to directly assist those impacted by the Depression. An article in the *Leader-Vindicator* reported, “[t]he state board made clear that no money will be advanced to the county boards but that the money value of food orders properly issued, filled and approved, will be paid by the state treasurer upon authorization by the state board. Rent, light heat, clothing, and other relief supplies must be supplied locally.”⁴⁴ Pinchot named relief boards for each county, with R. L. Snyder being appointed as the board-member for Clarion County from New Bethlehem. In accordance with the state board, the payment would be in food, and the county board began establishing work projects for the following months.⁴⁵

After the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency, he brought his New Deal policies into the Redbank Valley. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was deemed the most successful relief project in Pennsylvania.⁴⁶ The CCC employed dozens of New Bethlehemites to camps across the state.⁴⁷ There were a few CCC camps throughout Clarion County, with one in the Redbank Valley, near Sligo. The workers based out of Sligo were tasked with forestry projects, which had a lasting impact on the area.⁴⁸ Another camp in northeast Clarion County worked to maintain the environmental integrity of Cook Forest, one of the few old-growth coniferous forests in this area of the country. FDR’s second New Deal organization, the Work Projects Administration (WPA), contributed to building infrastructure in more urban settings. In New Bethlehem, the WPA constructed sporting fields, playgrounds, and tennis courts.⁴⁹ The short-lived Civil Works Administration (CWA) employed over 2,100 men in

Clarion County in 1934.⁵⁰ While the independent resiliency helped many in the Redbank Valley survive during the Great Depression, relief and public work projects brought into the county by federal and state intervention provided notable assistance to them.

Recreation and Community in New Bethlehem

Despite hard times, citizens of the Redbank Valley remained dedicated to their tight-knit community through supporting festivals and get-togethers that amassed thousands of attendees and bolstered communal spirit. The first important token of communalism during the Depression came with the newly established sound movie theater in town. The prominent Andrews family installed sound equipment in their cinema, 'The Andrews Theater,' on March 13, 1930, with the first film played being Florenz Ziegfeld's *Rio Rita*.⁵¹ The theater became a staple of entertainment and community in the borough, being relatively inexpensive and attracting large amounts of people. At times, more than a thousand people would visit the theater on a single weekend.⁵²

There were community meetings for several clubs and organizations throughout town, such as the Golden Rule Association, which held monthly sales during the 1930s. Annual social gatherings also proved to bolster community spirit within the Redbank Valley. One example was the Walter W. Craig American Legion Post, which sponsored events throughout the year that attracted large crowds from across the region. An initiation meeting in early 1933 saw a sizeable turnout in support of the hundreds of veterans brought into the organization.⁵³ Hundreds flocked to other such events as banquets and picnics in the town.⁵⁴ The New Bethlehem Fire Company also sponsored annual summer festivals:

The carnival company set up for business in an empty field currently occupied by the Veteran of Foreign Wars facility and Redbank Chevrolet. The carnival week was kicked

off by a big parade led by the New Bethlehem Fire Department's marching band, in spiffy gold and blue uniforms, accompanied by bands and fire trucks from all around the area and entries from the carnival crew.⁵⁵

Furthermore, grand openings brought in large amounts of celebrators to bask in the adulation of friendly company and community success. Harkening back to the Route 66 opening festival that several thousand local residents attended; it was touted as the finest road opening party in Pennsylvania's history.⁵⁶ In 1930, the New Bethlehem First National Bank opened in a new building, which sparked a borough-wide celebration.⁵⁷ Also, community sporting events were incredibly promotive of communal intimacy. A tri-county basketball tournament attracted a large number of spectators to New Bethlehem.⁵⁸ Perhaps the largest community event, however, was a fall baseball exhibition game when the New Bethlehem All-Stars hosted the Pittsburgh Pirates MLB team. Between 2,500 to 3,000 spectators were in attendance. Though the All-Stars lost seven to three, it was an enjoyable evening for all who were there.⁵⁹

Religion and New Bethlehem

Many of the small communities in the Redbank Valley area possess a shared, staunch religiosity, and New Bethlehem is no different. *The History of Clarion Co. Pennsylvania* attests that “[a]mong the first settlers [of New Bethlehem] were zealous Christians, who sowed the seed of piety from the foundation of the town and have had the joyful satisfaction of reaping an abundant harvest.”⁶⁰ In the wake of a steady flow of migration, churches arose, bearing the trappings of several different denominations and drawing robust congregations of dedicated parishioners. Despite the relatively small size of the New Bethlehem community, it boasted four sizeable churches close to the town center alone; the First Presbyterian Church of New

Bethlehem; the New Bethlehem First Baptist Church; the New Bethlehem Methodist Church; and St. Charles Roman Catholic Church. Practically the whole of the town's population was divided between these houses of worship, and they continued to thrive well into the 20th century.

Church attendance swelled significantly due to a new wave of migration to the region at the turn of the century. Attracted by the promise of employment on the railroad or in the coal fields, Presbyterian Scots-Irish; Baptist and Episcopalian Anglo-Saxons; Lutheran Germans; and Catholic Poles, Germans, and Slovaks poured into the Redbank Valley. Perhaps the largest house of worship—in terms of attendance—was the New Bethlehem First Baptist Church, which counted among its faithful several members of the affluent Andrews family. This included Firman Andrews, and Charles E. Andrews Jr., the latter of whom acted as chairman of the “Budgett [sic] Committee” during the Depression.⁶¹ Under the guidance of Chairman Andrews and his fellow officers, church finances were handled well in the years following the crash. The First Baptist Church remained well afloat with donations from the faithful, including the significant patronage of the Andrews in attendance, who routinely donated hundreds of dollars to the continuance of its ministry.⁶² Furthermore, in an act that remained consistent with all houses of worship in New Bethlehem during the depression, the First Baptist Church maintained a robust missionary fund.⁶³

On the opposite end of the financial spectrum, the New Bethlehem Methodist Church was in dire straits for most of the Depression, though Sunday attendance was always high. With many of its faithful being blue-collar workers whose industries were especially impacted by the stock market crash of '29, it was not long before the church administration chose to step in on their behalf. A note in the financial records of the Methodist church dated November 12, 1930, states:

On account of the business depression and so many of our people out of work, Bro. Davis urged the necessity of urging the use of the envelope system. I was properly moved & seconded that the finance committee prepare a report of last years requirements an [sic] a statement of each member account as of Nov 30, 1930, same to be mailed out soon after Dec 1, 1930. Bro. Davis advanced the thought that we do not employ Evangelist or singer for this years meeting but would rather have a three or four weeks meeting preceding Easter, conducted by ourselves. Board approved the suggestion.⁶⁴

Following two successful fundraising ventures for church supplies—gowns for the choir and a telephone installation—matters worsened.⁶⁵ In September of the following year, the church's budget committee passed a motion that approved the negotiation of loans up to a value of \$500.⁶⁶ Regardless of the outcome of this venture—the financial records make no further mention of the loans or any efforts made to obtain them—New Bethlehem Methodist Church was soon unable to pay its bills, with the first mention of debt appearing in the November 9, 1932 report, at \$103.33.⁶⁷ As the amount owed by the church steadily increased, it sustained a 20-25% reduction in insurance rate and began lagging significantly behind in offerings that would have otherwise been used for renovation. Instead, members turned to paying maintenance workers in home-cooked meals.⁶⁸ In an attempt to combat the rising debt, the church's pastor, Reverend Davis, offered to take a 10% reduction in pay. However, in light of an estimated 106 church members not giving any money in 1934, Reverend Davis decided to pay the accumulated debt, roughly \$418.88, from his own pockets.⁶⁹ This appeared to right the church financially, and soon membership and giving began to steadily recuperate.

Congregants of the First Presbyterian Church of New Bethlehem worked feverishly to combat the financial woes of the depression as well, even if it meant shirking attendance. Church

records indicate that, during July of 1930, all evening services were omitted, and in August of the same year all regular services were omitted as well.⁷⁰ This was done to save on extra costs that may be accrued during the summer months and were harder to recuperate. Still, church membership remained steady, with 281 active congregants remaining at the close of 1930.⁷¹ In terms of outreach, records state that a session of elders met on November 30, 1930, to consider the “[n]ecessity of aiding the unemployed and poverty stricken of the community,” an effort supplemented by the money and influence of Mr. C.E. Andrews Jr., a member of the nearby Baptist Church.⁷² Subsequent sessions on December 7, 1930, and March 27, 1931, made mention of “Self Denial” offerings that were taken with the express purpose of “serving the community.”⁷³ While the result of these offering(s) are not included in the church administration minutes, further mentions of community incentives appear to indicate that they were successful, enabling the church to extend its reach into the most desperate zones.

A somewhat different experience can be found in the *Missionary Circle Notebook*, which details the meetings of a women’s bible class—known as the Berean class—that met in the First Presbyterian Church from 1934 to the late 1940s. As the depression began to abate following the early months of 1933, living conditions steadily improved and missionaries began to return their collective focus to foreign aid. During a meeting held at the home of Mrs. Hattie McNutt, a—leading member of the Berean class—on the evening of September 12, 1934, class president Mrs. Fraser praised the efforts of the church’s “young people...especially in India.”⁷⁴ While it is unclear whether or not these young emissaries of Christ were members of the Presbyterian Church or even members of the Berean class, the church was indeed supporting them financially. A subsequent meeting of the class on October 11, 1934, saw Mrs. Fraser turn the focus of the group inward, emphasizing that the goal of the missionaries was to first “get – then give. Enrich

our own lives first,” echoing depression-era concerns. The small class of less than 20 women subsisted largely off of membership dues, of which a decent \$52.60 was collected at the October 1934 meeting, and it appears that these funds went towards assisting missionaries in their work abroad. Despite no shortage of hardships at home, they remained fixated on what they could do to help those in pitiful situations around the globe, from Latin America, where the “great physical need” at the time was doctors, to the Far East, where they oversaw a “[r]ace between Communism and Christianity for the soul of China.”⁷⁵ Overall, it is clear that the missionary circle was very involved in everything from foreign to domestic aid with a special emphasis on reaching out to minority groups beyond the boundaries of the largely white New Bethlehem zone.⁷⁶

As the sole Catholic parish in the township—and for many miles besides—St. Charles Catholic Church acted as the cultural and religious center for the majority of immigrants to New Bethlehem. The church was thus a frequent target of the surprisingly endemic Ku Klux Klan presence in the Redbank Valley, who were vehemently opposed to immigrants of any kind.⁷⁷ Residents recall that the hill opposite the church was the chosen site of several cross-burnings by the Klan, intended to intimidate the parishioners.⁷⁸ The records of the Diocese of Erie reveal that St. Charles boasted a membership of 310 dedicated parishioners and administered communion to 1,720 faithful throughout 1929.⁷⁹ Attendance remained strong as the Depression deepened into 1931, increasing by nearly 30 members, though offertory collections precipitously decreased. With the understandable halt in revenue as the town settled into an economic slump, “cash on hand” fell to less than \$20 in 1932 following the calculation of disbursements.⁸⁰ Another observable indicator of the financial situation of the church and its parishioners was the building fund, which fluctuated from \$70,000 in 1931 to \$45,000 in 1933-34.

Ideology and Federalism

Rural living in Western Pennsylvania was chiefly hallmarked by camaraderie and self-sufficiency. Generations of environmental drudgery brought about by floods, droughts, weak harvests, frigid winters, and scalding summers instilled in these Americans a hardy constitution. Adaptability was first among the attributes needed for survival in such an environment, and the citizens of New Bethlehem demonstrated their persistence repeatedly. Life was consistently hard, and as a result, the people who lived in these areas developed an ideology built on independence, communalism, and perseverance. This is true with the farmers and the coal miners, manufacturers, clerks, mothers, and other occupations, which have sustained these compact areas since their settlement.

New Bethlehem was developed as a conjoint socioeconomic entity by gathering and manufacturing natural resources. The town, though small, carried substantial weight as an economic powerhouse within Pennsylvania townships. The unique sense of togetherness distilled through commercial competition established a “cooperative spirit,” which carried the borough through the Depression. In June 1930, the *Leader-Vindicator* published an editorial encouraging this long-standing tradition:

A friendly spirit among a community’s leader is essential town progress. When men play together they are able to work together, and it is only when they work together that they record achievements that classifies their city among the progressive communities of the country... Anyone who would wish to see his town prosper and grow should first seek to find ways and means of creating a friendly co-operative spirit among its business leaders and among all of its citizens in fact.⁸¹

The newspaper editors continued on their quest to embolden the community as the effects of Black Thursday were beginning to be felt in the Redbank Valley. The editors spurred citizens to plant sustainable gardens and grow food.⁸² New Bethlehemites followed suit, and backyard gardens became a staple of the town's society.

It can be stated with confidence that anyone with a small area of land in the backyard may have a small vegetable garden enough to supply his family with fresh vegetables throughout the summer. It pays to buy a good-quality seed and follow planting directions carefully. Among the vegetables that any family can grown in a small garden are beets, bush beans, carrots, lettuce, radishes, onions, parsley, peppers, peas, turnips, and tomatoes. Radishes can be kept coming until fall frosts if suitable varieties are planted at intervals. There are both parsley and tomatoes and both kinds will prolong the season. Turnips can be planted and those planted late will mature for winter storage. Amateur gardeners can raise corn, cabbage, and potatoes on a large scale if they have land enough for the purpose. Last year any persons who lacked employment or had meager income devoted time to gardens and were successful in raising vegetables for family use throughout the summer and fall. Where they had the space considerable attention was given to potatoes. The prospects are that similar activities for relief gardens will be carried on in the coming summer if the demand is sufficient and the plan of listing vacant lots suitable for garden purposes may be followed if necessary.⁸³

Chicken coops were common within borough limits, and men hunted for game during the season.⁸⁴ The volume of hunting increased drastically during the Depression; in the 1933-34 season alone, 20,480 deer were legally hunted, a massive jump from last season.⁸⁵ Local grocers

“extended credit freely to needy families even though some suffered from lack of timely payment.”⁸⁶

Regardless of the hardships, New Bethlehemites believed times would shortly get better. The editor’s comments regarding these incentives claimed in April of 1931 that the economy was improving.⁸⁷ Though this tantalizing statement proved untrue, it still granted citizens the notion of positivity. They viewed their situation as yet another obstacle they would inevitably overcome.

The localist ethos adopted by citizens of the Redbank Valley reinvigorated the need for self-sufficiency in the wake of the struggles. Furthermore, editors of the *Leader-Vindicator* held a great disdain for federal power, bureaucracy, and intervention. Such outside offers of relief were antithetical to their locality, as they lived outside the federal government's sphere of influence. Even the state government paid little attention to the plight of people living in this rural area. The townfolks' attempts to conservatively pool their resources and funds differed greatly from federal endeavors to quell the Depression through mass spending.

Every day in the year our federal deficit increases more than 7 million dollars. That is a considerable loss. It is due to reckless extravagance, and faulty management. If an individual spent twice as much money as he received he would soon end up in the poor house. If a private business did the same it would soon be in bankruptcy. Our Government cannot be different from the individual or private business concern. It may fool itself. It may milk the taxpayers for a while, but in time even that source of revenue will be exhausted. That is inevitable.⁸⁸

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s rise to the White House drew attention from citizens of the Redbank Valley. The 1932 Presidential election saw Clarion County shift twenty points to the

left and turn blue. The *Leader-Vindicator*, however, showed a cautious yet prayerful hope about his presidency.⁸⁹ “We do not want to grow too enthusiastic about our new president because we realize his precarious position reaching heights of popularity that have elements of danger.”⁹⁰

New Bethlehemites were concerned with Roosevelt's elevation to a position of power and influence on national politics. They did not want an authoritarian figure to establish a regime that would strip away their sovereignty as locals. The centralized nature of the New Deal government placed a choke hold on the simple, homestyle ideology that bound the Redbank Valley together. In the 1936 election, the county shifted back five points to the right and voted for Republican presidential candidate Alf Landon.

Editors of the *Leader-Vindicator* believed the federal government's response to the Depression was fallacious, citing several misconceptions about economic practicality facilitated within the Redbank Valley's fiscal culture. Their solutions favored free market capitalism, arguing that, at its essence, increasing wages and working hours would stimulate the economy.

If we seek by monetary measures to artificially increase prices, we are not solving the problem of price relationships but only bringing about additional erratic changes to disturb them further. Sustained recovery can only be achieved through increased buying activity with a resulting increase in our national wealth: and to accomplish that end, there must be confidence in the dollar.⁹¹

To the editors, Washington was out of touch with rural Americans, not understanding their way of life, especially their poverty and frugality. They believed that the federal government's role was insufficient and their means of attaining their lofty goals only hurt the people they were trying to help. “What a dumb bunch of legislators we must have had in the old days! They never

thought of taxing horse feed! Why, our bright legislators and Congressmen of the present day have discovered a gold mine where they saw only a dusty road!”⁹²

Isolation brought misunderstanding from outside entities who viewed rural Pennsylvanians as wealthy enough to be taxed for their resources, not moneyless farmers and coal miners who had experienced generational poverty. “Taxes will be a nightmare to the American people for thirty years, and even that stretch of time may not see the national debt paid.”⁹³ Because of these federal and bureaucratic issues, the *Leader-Vindicator* blamed the increasing economic blights on Washington.⁹⁴ Instead of taxation and widespread bureaucratic efforts to centralize America under the guild of New Deal institutions, New Bethlehemites had other ideas for economic resurgence. Their “road to prosperity” was built on the same values which had supported them to this point. The figure that New Bethlehemites sought to emanate was Henry Ford, who proposed raising wages as the avenue to reclaim America’s wealth.⁹⁵ “The average American’s wants are endless, and [if] he has the money, he will more than keep up with even super-production possibilities.”⁹⁶ The editors did acknowledge the unique ability of the Ford Company—a large and highly successful firm—to raise wages and that other companies may not be able to. However, they insisted that if all businesses worked in tandem and kept pushing forward by increasing salaries, “improvement is certain to come.”⁹⁷

Rural Pennsylvanians found their identity in the land they resided in. Their pride for their land, borough, and region rings audibly through praise for small towns and communities. With this haughty perspective on their identity as communal, localist, shirt-off-ones-back citizens, the many who called the Redbank Valley home during the Great Depression took an independently illustrious stance on their place within the tumult. The citizens of the Redbank Valley view their community and way of life as the ultimate form of Americanism and liberty.

Small town life helps people become democratic. The people are usually about on a level. If there are differences in wealth and success, the people who have money do not look down on those who do not have it. Everybody speaks to everybody else, and if anyone is sick or in trouble, the neighbors are quick to offer substantial help. If that is small town stuff, it is very much needed in larger places. The United States must cherish its small towns. More people should live in them rather than fewer. The small towns of Pennsylvania are good healthy places in which to live and grow up. We need some plan by which small industries can flourish in them. The country will not prosper if the population concentrated in large cities.⁹⁸

¹ Davis, A. J. 1968. *History of Clarion County Pennsylvania*. Rimersburg; Record Press, 562.

² Shilling, Donald R. 2014. *History of the Low Grade Railroad: Red Bank to Driftwood*. New Bethlehem: Redbank Valley Historical Society, 1.

³ Miller, E. Willard. "The Industrial Development of the Allegheny Valley of Western Pennsylvania." *Economic Geography* 19, no. 4 (1943): 388–404. <https://doi.org/10.2307/141252>, 396.

⁴ Shilling, *History of the Low Grade Railroad*, 2.

⁵ Davis, *History of Clarion County Pennsylvania*, 554.

⁶ Hoffman, John N. “Pennsylvania’s Bituminous Coal Industry: An Industry Review.”

Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies 45, no. 4 (1978): 351–63.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27772555>, 356.

⁷ Ibid, 357.

⁸ Ibid, 358.

⁹ Ibid, 358-359.

¹⁰ Coode, Thomas H. and John F. Bauman. 1981. *People, Poverty, and Politics: Pennsylvanians During the Great Depression*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 23.

¹¹ Hoffman, “Pennsylvania’s Bituminous Coal Industry: An Industry Review,” 359.

¹² Davis, *History of Clarion County Pennsylvania*, 554.

¹³ Ibid, 554.

¹⁴ Tom T. Andrews, Jr. 2017. *Business Center Recollections*. New Bethlehem: Redbank Valley Historical Society, 10.

¹⁵ McCauley, Bill. "Depression Days on a Farm." From the Archives of Clarion County Historical Society.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stahlman, Keith. 2011. *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good: A Characterization of Life in the New Bethlehem Community during the 1930s and 1940s (And How We Survived)*. From the Archives of Clarion County Historical Society, 18.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 8.

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ *Farm Life in the 1920's*. From the Archives of Clarion County Historical Society.

²⁵ McCauley, “Depression Days on a Farm.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. Coke ovens were generally large brick furnaces used to heat coal, thus burning off excess material to create a purer form of carbon.

³¹ Ibid, 9.

³² Gringer, Joann. Interview with Jacob Battle, July 10, 2024.

³³ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 19.

³⁴ “Improvements To Be Made On Streets,” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 17, 1930, 1.

³⁵ “Last Section Route 66 Was Let Friday.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], May 22, 1930, 1.

³⁶ “Thousands Here To Attend Opening Of Route 66 At Alcola.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], October 23, 1930, 1.

³⁷ “Federal Aid Gives Penn’A Record Sum For Road Building.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], January 15, 1931, 1.

³⁸ “Pinchot Road Program For This County.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], February 19, 1931, 1. These roads were Route 92, 380, 409, 64, 552, 237, 553, 66, 214, 311, 511, 217, and 65. Later in September, Pinchot would add Routes 554, 214, and 311.

³⁹ “Administration To Rush Building Of Rural Highways.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], July 16, 1931, 1.

⁴⁰ “New Provisions State School Code Now Effective.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 30, 1930, 1.

⁴¹ “Bus Rate Reduced September 1 to \$1.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], August 28, 1930, 1.

⁴² “Large Crowd Out To Greet Pinchot Party At Clarion.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 13, 1932, 1.

⁴³ Letter from Gifford Pinchot to Editors. *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 13, 1932, 1.

⁴⁴ “State Relief Board To Furnish Food Will Give No Cash.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], September 1, 1932, 1.

⁴⁵ “Governor Names Relief Boards In Counties Of States.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], September 8, 1932, 1.

⁴⁶ Bauman and Coode, *People, Poverty, and Politics*, 226.

⁴⁷ “42 Conservation Employees Leave County for Camp.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], June 8, 1932, 1. The first few from New Bethlehem in 1932 alone were Gerald Benninger, William Dean Shankle, George Raymond Emahizer, Loyne Clifton Blose, Leo Bowser, Alvin Frederick Long, Clarence B. Chilcott, Bud Raymond Anthony, and Forest Shick.

⁴⁸ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁰ “More Civil Works Jobs Approved In County.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], January 18, 1934, 1.

⁵¹ “New Bethlehem To Have Modern Sound Picture Theater.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], March 6, 1930, 1.

⁵² “Over Thousand People See Local Movies Monday.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 9, 1931, 1.

⁵³ “Large Attendance At Meeting Legion Posts Clarion Co.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], March 9, 1933, 1.

⁵⁴ “American Legion Banquet Proved Big Social Event.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], December 4, 1930, 1. and “Harvest Home Has Big Crown Opening Day of 3-Day Picnic.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], August 23, 1934, 1.

⁵⁵ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 9.

⁵⁶ “Thousands Here To Attend Opening Of Route 66 At Alcola.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], October 23, 1930, 1.

⁵⁷ “Fine New Building of First National Bank Opened to Public Saturday.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], October 16, 1930, 1.

⁵⁸ “Tri-County Basket Ball Tourney Was Dazzling Success.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], March 30, 1933, 1.

⁵⁹ “Pittsburgh Team Enjoys Visit To New Bethlehem.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], October 13, 1933, 1.

⁶⁰ Davis, *History of Clarion Co. Pennsylvania*, 557.

⁶¹ *First Baptist Church Financial Records*. Archives of New Bethlehem First Baptist Church, 71.

⁶² *Ibid*, 83.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 90.

⁶⁴ *Methodist Church Financial Records, 1923-1943*. Archives of New Bethlehem Methodist Church.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Presbyterian Church Minutes of Session*. Archives of New Bethlehem First Presbyterian Church, 109.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 122.

⁷³ Ibid, 127.

⁷⁴ *Missionary Circle Notebook*. Archives of New Bethlehem First Presbyterian Church, 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁷ Andrews, *Business Center Recollections*, 109.

⁷⁸ Shuster, Jim. Interview with Colin Wood, July 11, 2024.

⁷⁹ *Financial Records of St. Charles Roman Catholic Church, 1929-1937*. Archives of Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “Editorial Comments: A Friendly Spirit.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], June 26, 1930, 4.

⁸² “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], July 17, 1930, 4.

⁸³ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], May 3, 1934, 4.

⁸⁴ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 8.

⁸⁵ “20,480 Legal Deer Killed Last Season.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], February 1, 1934, 1.

⁸⁶ Stahlman, *Life Was Simple, Life Was Good*, 8.

⁸⁷ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], April 9, 1931, 4.

⁸⁸ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], June 30, 1932, 4.

⁸⁹ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], July 13, 1933, 4.

⁹⁰ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], July 27, 1933, 4.

⁹¹ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], January 18, 1934, 4.

⁹² “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], February 29, 1934, 4.

⁹³ “Editorial Comments.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm], October 31, 1934, 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Editorial Comments: Road To Prosperity” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm],
March 8, 1934, 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ “Editorial Comments: Small Town Folks.” *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator* [Microfilm],
March 8, 1934, 6.