WE, THE PEOPLE

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by

LEO HUBERMAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
THOMAS H. BENTON

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Preface to Revised Edition

Much of the original material for this book was first published in 1932 just prior to the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the thirty-second President of the United States. The fifteen years that have elapsed since that time mark the beginning of a new era in the history of our country.

The old era really ended not in 1932, but in 1929 when the crash came. From its earliest beginnings until 1929, America was the Promised Land, a land flowing with steel and oil as well as with milk and honey. It was a land of riches to which the poor of Europe came for wealth. It was a land of freedom to which the enslaved and oppressed fled.

I have tried to write the story of the extent to which the promise was—and was not—fulfilled.

The first part, Chapters I through XIV, covers the longer period from the earliest explorations through the boom of 1929. It is a stirring account of the building of a nation through the efforts of men, women, and children of stout heart in the face of great odds. It is the story of tremendous economic expansion under the dominance of the corporate form of business enterprise. It is the saga of Big Business in America, its most congenial home. It is a tale of the growing power of monopoly.

Not that this power went unchallenged. Opposition came from the farmers and from the industrial workers. The story of that opposition is included. So, too, is an account of the foreign adventures of American Big Business, by which at the end of the nineteenth century it became a world force.

The second part, Chapters XV through XX, is new material. It is a tale of bankruptcy, terror, woe, and helpless groping after

a light that failed. It begins with the crash of 1929 and deals largely with the attempts of the New Deal to repair the damage and to set the wheels in motion again. But because the inevitable crash of 1929 was a crisis not *in* but *of* the system, the New Deal was bound to fail. This is, however, precisely what makes a clear understanding of the New Deal and of its desperate efforts toward Relief, Recovery, and Reform so very important. For the New Deal helped educate millions in the workings and unworkabilities of the whole system. They began to learn that mere good will, as represented by the New Deal, was not enough; that what was wanted was not a new hand but a new deck of cards.

"America was promises." But the promises have been fulfilled, in recent years, only for the men at the top. It is of crucial importance at this time that fulfillment of the promises should come for all of us. The American dream *can* become a reality. That transformation is ours to make—soon—because history will not wait.

I wish to express my deep obligation and appreciation to the following: to Dr. N. B. Heller who first taught me the importance of the role played by economics in history; to Sybil May, Dr. Otto Nathan, Aleine Austin, and my wife Gertrude, for their constant encouragement and critical review of the manuscript; and to the Viking Press and Reynal and Hitchcock for permission to use material from some of my other books published by them.

LEO HUBERMAN

New York, January, 1947

Preface to New Printing

The revised edition of *We, the People* went out of print a few years after it was published in 1947. I had hoped I would find time to add a few chapters for a new edition which would bring the story up-to-date, but I have not succeeded. Meanwhile, I have examined the history books which are published each year hoping to find one which puts the emphasis where I think it belongs—on the workers, not the wars, on the common man, not the "leaders." None has appeared. It seemed, therefore, a good idea to wait no longer and reprint the edition of 1947. This, then, is the original book, as it was revised in 1947.

New York, March, 1964 L. H.

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Part I

CHAPTER I

Here They Come!

From its very beginnings America has been a magnet to the people of the earth. They have been drawn to its shores from anywhere and everywhere, from near and far, from hot places and cold places, from mountain and plain, from desert and fertile field. This magnet, three thousand miles wide and fifteen hundred miles long, has attracted every type and variety of human being alive. White people, black people, yellow people, brown people; Catholics, Protestants, Huguenots, Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Jews; Spaniards, Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Bohemians, Italians, Austrians, Slavs, Poles, Rumanians, Russians—and the list is only just begun; farmers, miners, adventurers, soldiers, sailors, rich men, poor men, beggarmen, thieves, shoemakers, tailors, actors, musicians, ministers, engineers, writers, singers, ditchdiggers, manufacturers, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers.

First came the Norsemen; then an Italian sailing in behalf of Spain; then another Italian sailing in behalf of England; then Spaniards, Portuguese, English, French; then an Englishman sailing for Holland. All of them discovered parts of America, explored a bit, then raised their country's flag and claimed the land. They

returned home and told stories (some of them true) of what they had seen. People listened—and believed and came. Millions came within three hundred years, sometimes at the rate of a million a year.

This unique immigration of peoples was not accomplished without difficulties and dangers. To cross the ocean in the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth*, steamships over nine hundred and seventy-five feet long weighing over eighty thousand tons, is one thing. But to cross the Atlantic in a sailboat perhaps ninety feet long and twenty-six feet wide, with a tonnage of only three hundred was quite another thing. (Ordinary ferryboats on the Hudson River average about seven hundred tons.) For over two hundred years the earlier immigrants poured into the United States in just such boats as these. Remember, too, that in those days there were no refrigerators—fish and meat had to be salted to be preserved, and very often the crossing took so long a time that all the food rotted.

Here is a portion of a letter written by Johannes Gohr and some friends, describing their trip from Rotterdam to America in February, 1732 (over one hundred years after the flood of immigrants began). "We were 24 weeks coming from Rotterdam to Martha's Vineyard. There were at first more than 150 persons—more than 100 perished.

"To keep from starving, we had to eat rats and mice. We paid from 8 pence to 2 shillings for a mouse, 4 pence for a quart of water."

Gottlieb Mittelberger was an organist who came to this country in 1750 in charge of an organ which was intended for Philadelphia. Here is a part of his story:

"Both in Rotterdam and Amsterdam the people are packed densely, like herrings, so to say, in the large sea vessels. . . .

When the ships have for the last time weighed their anchor at Cowes, the real misery begins, for from there the ships, unless they have good winds, must often sail 8, 9, 10 or 12 weeks before they reach Philadelphia. But with the best wind the voyage lasts 7 weeks . . . .

That most of the people get sick is not surprising, because in addition to all other trials and hardships, warm food is served only 3 times a week, the rations being very poor and very small. These meals can hardly be eaten on account of being so unclean. The water which is served out on the ships is often very black, thick and full of worms, so that one cannot drink it without loathing, even with the greatest thirst. O surely, one would often give much money at sea for a piece of good bread, or a drink of good water if only it could be had. I myself experienced that sufficiently, I am sorry to say. Toward the end we were compelled to eat the ship's biscuit which had been spoiled long ago; though in a whole biscuit there was

scarcely a piece the size of a dollar, that had not been full of red worms and spiders' nests. Great hunger and thirst force us to eat and drink everything, but many do so at the risk of their lives. . . .

When the ships have landed at Philadelphia after their long voyage no one is permitted to leave them except those who pay for their passage or can give good security; the others who cannot must remain on board the ships till they are purchased, and are released from the ships by the purchasers. The sick always fare the worst, for the healthy are naturally preferred and purchased first, and so the sick and wretched must often remain on board in front of the city for 2 and 3 weeks, and frequently die, whereas many a one if he could pay his debt and was permitted to leave the ship immediately, might recover. . . .

The sale of human beings in the market on board the ship is carried on thus: Everyday Englishmen, Dutchmen, and high German people come from the city of Philadelphia and other places, some from great distance, say 60, 90 and 120 miles away, and go on board the newly arrived ship that has brought and offers for sale passengers from Europe, and select among the healthy persons such as they deem suitable for their business, and bargain with them how long they will serve for their passage money, for which most of them are still in debt. When they have come to an agreement, it happens that adult persons bind themselves in writing to serve 3, 4, 5 or 6 years for the amount due by them varies according to their age and strength. But very young people, from 10 to 15 years must serve until they are 21 years old.

The last part of this letter is particularly valuable, because it introduces us to a system then very common. Many of the people who wanted to come to America didn't have the money to pay for their passage. They therefore agreed to sell themselves as servants for a period of years to whoever would pay their debt to the captain of the ship. Frequently the newspapers carried advertisements telling about the arrival of such groups. In the *American Weekly Mercury*, published in Philadelphia, on November 7, 1728, there appeared the following advertisement:

Just arrived from London, in the ship Borden, William Harbert, Commander, a parcel of young likely men-servants, consisting of Husbandmen, Joyners, Shoemakers, Weavers, Smiths, Brickmakers, Bricklayers, Sawyers, Taylers, Stay-Makers, Butchers, Chairmakers and several other trades, and are to be sold very reasonable either for ready money, wheat Bread, or Flour, by Edward Hoane in Philadelphia.

And in the *Pennsylvania Staatsbote* for January 18, 1774, this item appeared:

GERMAN PEOPLE

There are still 50 or 60 German persons newly arrived from Germany. They can be found with the widow Kriderin at the sign of the Golden

Swan. Among them are two schoolmasters, Mechanics, Farmers, also young children as well as boys and girls. They are desirous of serving for their passage money.

The contract which these unfortunates who were "desirous of serving for their passage money" had signed with the ship captain was called an indenture, and they were known as "indentured servants."

Isn't it amazing that in spite of shipwreck, rotten food, vermin, sickness, people continued to come by the thousands? Of course conditions did improve. By 1876 nearly all the immigrants came in large steamships which took only seven to twelve days to cross, instead of that number of weeks in a small sailing vessel, as heretofore. But even these furnished no pleasure cruise for steerage passengers. Edward A. Steiner tells the story of his voyage in the early 1900's.

There is neither breathing space below nor deck room above, and the 900 steerage passengers crowded into the hold . . . are positively packed like cattle, making a walk on deck when the weather is good, absolutely impossible, while to breathe clean air below in rough weather, when the hatches are down, is an equal impossibility. The stenches become unbearable, and many of the emigrants have to be driven down; for they prefer the bitterness and danger of the storm to the pestilential air below. . . .

The food, which is miserable, is dealt out of huge kettles into the dinner pails provided by the steamship company. When it is distributed, the stronger push and crowd, so that meals are anything but orderly procedures. On the whole, the steerage of the modern ship ought to be condemned as unfit for the transportation of human beings.

And a woman investigator for the United States Immigration Commission reported in 1911:

During these twelve days in the steerage I lived in a disorder and in surroundings that offended every sense. Only the fresh breeze from the sea overcame the sickening odors. . . . There was no sight before which the eye did not prefer to close. Everything was dirty, sticky, and disagreeable to the touch. Every impression was offensive.

Now obviously no human beings would go through the hardships described above unless they had very good reasons. The end of the journey would have to promise a great deal to make it worth the sorrow of parting from relatives and friends, from all the fun, comfort, and security of home. It's not easy to "pull up stakes," and most people are apt to think a very long time before they do so.