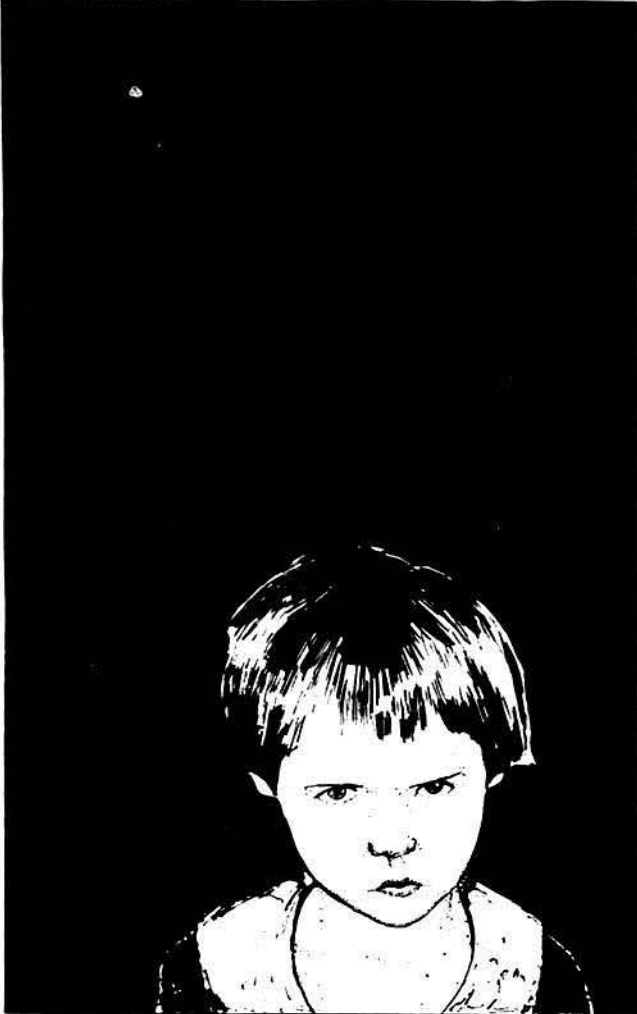


# thirtie something

## Roleplaying CoC in the 1930s

by Dave Barras

Dave Brown



The original *Call of Cthulhu*™ set in the 1920s has, since it's initial release, proven it's flexibility in transferring to different time periods and placing the player characters in daringly different role-playing environments. However, in expanding the plethora of timescapes for *Call of Cthulhu*, a period close to that of the original has been overlooked. The 1930s.

If you play or run a *Call of Cthulhu* campaign from the twenties base, then the thirties is an inevitable destination, even if it isn't as exciting as R'lyeh!

The following article contains information, both serious and fun, which can be integrated into a 1930s based *Cthulhu* campaign. Apologies to British investigators, this is American as invading inoffensive little countries. I hope the text provides a general mood and atmosphere for U.S. based play in a decade that started in depression and ended swinging.

## The Depression

At the end of the twenties the Wall Street Crash damaged the U.S. economy beyond swift repair. The rest of the world suffered much the same fate. By the time President Herbert Hoover left the White House in March 1933, the banking system of America had finally collapsed, after what can only be described as a disastrous term in office.

Statistically, output was less than half that in 1929, the unemployed numbered almost fifteen million, hourly wages had dropped 60% since the late twenties and the entire country hit a low the likes of which has not been seen since.

The land of opportunity had knocked itself out.

Statistics are harsh and unfeeling; they do not reflect the practical realities of what life was like at this time. Keepers should, however, take great glee in reducing characters incomes based on these statistics. The worse the job of the player character, the worse hit by depression they will be. It may be advantageous to put some of the players out of work at some point in order to force them to take crummy investigative jobs for little financial reward. Of course we all know where those crummy investigations lead to.

For those who found themselves out of work in the 1930's prospects were bleak. Jobs were few and lines waiting for interviews stretched monotonously around buildings, while here and there fights broke out amongst the desperate people. Bitterness over the depression was rife and for player characters in the big cities, the oppressive feeling was heightened. Being hassled and hustled for money all the time is not pleasant and any character openly displaying wealth would be hounded on the streets. If they refused to part with money, chances are they would be spat at, sworn at, and generally abused. Not everyone begged though, some sold basic commodities like fruit and vegetables but there were so many sellers that hardly any of them could make enough to live. Eating out at a fancy restaurant resulted in being stared at by desperate looking individuals, pitiful in their ragged street clothes. At the back of the restaurants fights broke out for scraps being thrown in the trash. Smart people should be getting the message by now!

At this point the division between rich and poor in the States was at its most visual. Whole districts had boards covering what used to be shop windows, begging on the streets, and the ubiquitous apple sellers. But perhaps the most visual expression of the depression were the shanty towns or Hoovervilles as they were christened; a blatant reminder to the President who created them. Their existence was due to the nomadic nature of a population in search of work. Almost one million people were living this lifestyle during the great depression.

## Investigators' Occupations

In the CoC rules most of the investigator occupations are well to do and generally high up in the structure of society. A brief run down of what characters can expect jobwise in the thirties is given below.

**Authors/Journalists** - These two have been grouped together for a good reason. In times of depression people tend to look for escapes from the hard times. These days it would probably be drugs, but in the 1930's it was more likely to be through popular culture. A magazine boom was in full flourish, dime store novels were selling well and radio began to fulfill all expectations for it. All of the above require writers of one sort or another so, to some extent, while authors and journalists were unlikely to be better off, they were unlikely to be out of work. A drop in wages hit almost all professions, however.

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**Professors/Historians/Parapsychologists** - Another grouping. Most likely to work for an institution; whether it be a University, a public or professional body. There's no pretending; every level of society was hit by the depression, no-one escaped unhurt. Normally, people working in positions such as these are seldom hurt by economic trends. Wage decreases, sure, but lay-offs rarely happened. Having said this, it is valid as a keeper to put any character out of work, while keeping in mind that the blue collars are hit first and hardest.

**Doctors/Lawyers** - Professional people. Sickness is no respecter of poverty, in fact it thrives in such circumstances. Doctors are likely to be very busy treating infections and viruses spread through the cities and shanty towns. Less money for more work. Malnutrition was also common and country doctors had it just as tough with farm lands turning to dust and dispossessed families moving across the land in search of work and food.

**Lawyers** are a strange bunch, that much is certain. Like ill health, crime also multiplies during hungry years and as such these people need defending in courts. But as crime rose, prosecutions fell due to lack of funds. A mixed bag for lawyers then. Do as you will, probably taking it case by case.

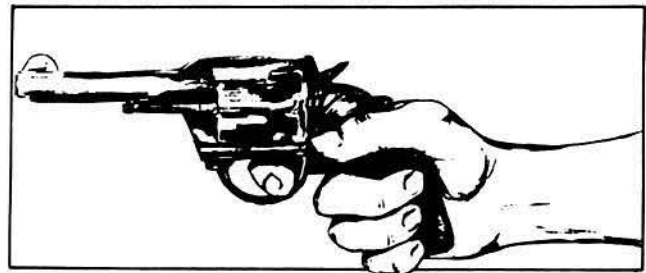
**Dilettantes** - Family money is likely to be safe, except in the case of bankruptcy. Reliance on rents is a poor source of income; no one can afford it, and homelessness is the option many have to take. Of course, no one leaves one's home easily, and a lot of cash can be lost by allowing people to stay when they're not paying. Evictions can also be very expensive.

**Private Investigators** - These guys and gals are hustlers. Smart mouthed and shabby suited heroes of the hour, in fiction anyway. Cases tend to drop off when the populace can ill afford food let alone anything else. The rich, however, are up to their ears in corruption and need a sleazy, gun toting dick to sort it out. Finances are likely to be up and down, with lean periods followed by a few weeks of the high life..

## Prices in the period 1930-34

Below is a very general price guide to inflict on poor player characters which deals with a few basic commodities.

Automobile	\$600.00
Bread (loaf)	\$0.05
Cigarettes	\$0.15
Chicken	\$0.22
Electric Shaver	\$15.00
Gas per gallon	\$0.18
Ham (per pound)	\$0.31
Leather Shoes	\$1.79
Milk (per qt.)	\$0.10
Oranges (dozen)	\$0.27
Overcoat	\$11.00
Raincoat	\$2.69
Shirt	\$0.47
Six room house	\$2,800.00
Suit	\$20.00
Steak	\$0.29
Stove	\$23.95
Sweater	\$1.69
Tuxedo	\$25.00
Vacuum	\$18.75



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## Crime and Violence

Desperate times induced desperate acts and in the thirties crime was on the up. Because of the despondency of many peoples' lives some law-breakers transgressed this status and became folk heroes. Despised by authorities and secretly supported by many of the public, these modern day outlaws led violent lives and met with violent deaths, but their presence in society may help to enrich the background to your campaign. Among the famed criminals of the time were John Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly, 'Pretty Boy' Floyd, Ma Barker and her boys; and the most famous double act before Sonny and Cher, Bonnie and Clyde. At the same time a hero on the side of the law was emerging in the shape of J. Edgar Hoover, head of the F.B.I..

Although things got better when Roosevelt entered the Oval Office in 1933 the rest of the thirties was spent pulling America back on her feet again, just in time for World War Two.

Now for some lighter stuff.

## 48 **Something** **Popular Culture**

Now your campaign has hit the thirties. Is it all depression and overstated violence? NO.

Radio, cinema and magazines are the most popular forms of entertainment, and they went through a boom period in the depression. Desperate to escape the everyday practicalities of life people chose fantasy as an outlet.

For those keepers who enjoy basing their play on as realistic a background as possible in order to contrast the bizarre nightmares of the mythos with real life, here is what your players may partake of as entertainment.

On radio Little Orphan Annie, Tom Mix (a cowboy hero), Buck Rogers, Tarzan and Dick Tracy were all favourites.

Cinema responded to the depression by churning out gangster movies, horror films and comedies. Anything that shifted peoples focus away from the present. Jean Harlowe and Clark Gable were the big sex symbols of the time. Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, and Tarzan debuted. Screen personalities who made debuts at this time included Micky Rooney, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and making his directorial debut, was screen maestro Frank Capra.



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## Nightlife

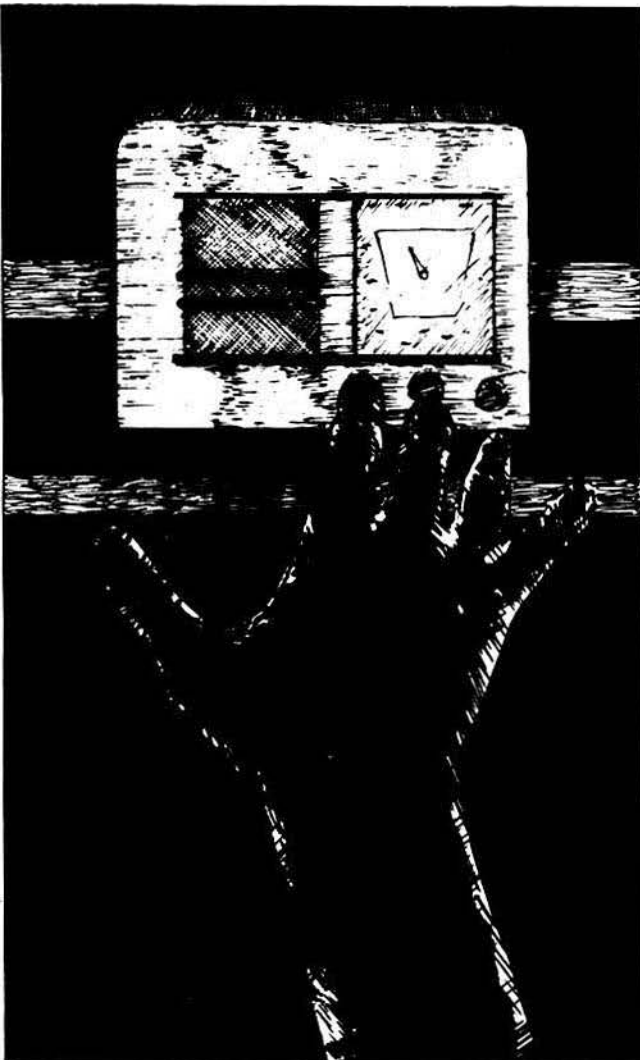
Now if serious background information is not your cup of slime and now and again you want to relax your players before sucking out all their bodily fluids, then this is the section tailored specifically to your needs.

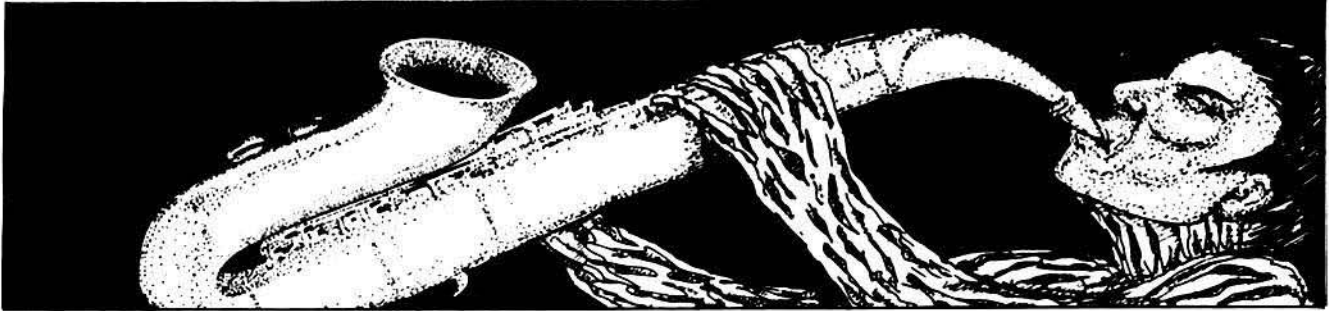
For those rich enough to join it, this was the age of "Cafe Society." Out of the ashes of the old high society came the transformed rich; movie stars, gossip columnists, hangers on and sycophants all joined in the publicity-seeking thirties equivalent of the brat pack. With the repeal of prohibition the speak-easies had become fashionable restaurants and New York resounded with forced laughter and false flattery.

For the less fortunate it was ballrooms, theatres and swing. Sometimes thousands of youngsters would cram onto dance floors unfit for hundreds and swing. Basically a jazz derivative, the frenetic dancing and pulsating rhythms had moralists calling for it to be banned - who says things change?

The New York Times quoted a psychologist who spoke of the "dangerously hypnotic influence of swing, cunningly devised to a faster tempo than seventy two bars a minute, faster than the human pulse."

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Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Harry James and Duke Ellington were prominent purveyors of swing and jive talkin' (see below) became the language of the craze. Big bands were the thing and gatherings became all important. The small jazz clubs still existed but large dance halls were the place to be, with strange dance crazes like the Black Bottom, Truckin', Shag, Stompin' and Posin'. Swing took the nation by storm and seeped into American culture. Those who didn't like it were branded strange names and listened to classical music and other boring tunes. Improvised, free music was in and the language that developed around it was probably the first well known youth speak. As we ourselves would say today "most excellent".

## Jive Talkin'

Alligator	A swing fan
Canary	A female singer
Cats	Swing musician
Corn	Bad music
Cuttin' the rug	Dancing
Mothbox	Piano
Ickie	Someone who doesn't understand swing
or	A rather disgusting remnant of someone's body
In the Groove	Knocked out by swing
Jam session	Swing musicians playing for personal pleasure
Jitterbug	A groovy kind of dance
Kicked Out	Being wild and crazy
Knocked Out	Aroused and engrossed by the music. More than in the groove
Long Hair	Square
One Nighter	A one-off performance for low wages
Paper Man	A musician who can't improvise
Platter	A recording
Scat Singer	A vocalist who sings nonsense lyrics
Skins	Drums
Swing	Unrestrained big band jazz, lots of improvisation

Examples of such phrases include:

"That skin beater sure is one hell of a hepcat." (The drummer is quite proficient.)

"What's that canary doing with an ickie like him?" (Why won't that girl go out with me?)

"This scat is knocking me out." (I feel quite jolly.)

"That platter is corn." (The record is rubbish.)

and that old favourite

"Shee, a one-nighter in Ryleh with Cthulhu is worse

than a month with a long hair." (I would rather listen to symphonic music than have my innards blasted by a gigantic relic of some forgotten race.)

## Conclusion

To conclude I would like to mention the Mythos itself. It is all very well providing information on the 1930s, but it's all got to fit into the Cthulhu milieu. In truth, not too much differs from the Twenties. Technology has taken a few more faltering steps forward and the world has become a smaller place thanks to the advancement in communications. In the Twenties decadence and an unfaltering belief in the American way kept the country going. A price had to be paid and that price was the recession. Upheaval and chaos followed, many people became homeless and this fluid population drifted from one place to another seeking work. Most of these people ended up in the big cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. A depression of the human soul was occurring, just the climate in which cultists can warp the sensibilities of those in need. Offers of work or a new start could be used to entice unwanted people to be sacrificed or join in the worship of an all-powerful deity. Chaos abounds and the Mythos thrives. Human behaviour becomes polarised in times of crisis; some sit back and let it happen while others stand up and fight for their lives and their rights. All these ingredients are there for a wily keeper to exploit and manipulate. Cities, shanty towns, dust bowls, the locations are endless for effective roleplaying. I would encourage keepers reading this to use the information provided as fuel for plots and stories set in the Thirties. The Mythos is whatever any individual keeper wants it to be. Combine your imagination with some basic plot and you have a scenario.

Add the film noir style of countless Thirties movies and stories and the atmospherics really begin to boil. Cold shafts of concrete and steel rear up about the characters in the city while the countryside is wide open and agoraphobic. Rain and darkness are other staples of noir, along with vampish women and threatening figures lurking in the background. It's always raining in noir to give that feeling that nature is beyond man's control. This fits into the sense of the Mythos nicely as it matches the feeling that mankind is a mere insect compared to the forces which lie dormant in unknown places.

The Thirties were a time of great change. Poverty and sadness started them and the war in Europe ended them. In between are just some of the elements mentioned above. I hope this has sparked some ideas out there.

Remember, "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing."

