

The 1940 Census - Introduction

Narrator: The United States of America, youngest by far of the world's great nations, stands today the envy of the civilized world. Its more than 130 million free people; its 33 million homes; its seven million farms; its vast panorama of other resources; industry and commerce; machines and structures beyond the dreams even of our own fathers; and, above all the material blessings, government by consent of the governed; educators sensitive to a democracy's constant need for more education; citizens free to speak out and able to analyze their own problems: all these make up the United States of America of 1940, a nation of vast human and physical resources.

Official scorekeeper of American development for 150 years has been the busy but unspectacular United States Census. Created by Article One of the U.S. Constitution, its population figures since 1790 have determined the number of delegates from each state in the House of Representatives. Fifteen times – through wars, booms, and panics – the census has presented a steadily broadening picture of the nation in its ten-year inventory. Congress has repeatedly extended the scope of census questions to meet the growing complexity of American life. In April 1940, 120 thousand census takers are radiating in a carefully planned pattern across America to complete in a single month the greatest inventory of the world's greatest democracy.

Official census questions must be answered, but the census taker is sworn to strict confidence with heavy penalties for violation of his oath. Rushed to Washington by registered mail, the reports are transformed into a series of holes punched in coded cards. Thus these vast files become confidences between the citizen and the Census Bureau, specifically protected by law. Thousands of operators will sort and tabulate the millions of cards almost entirely with machines, mechanical marvels of accuracy and speed. And so will be written the official record of the 1940 America with careful measurement of its gains, its losses, and all its changes during the ten difficult years since the census of 1930. Unbiased facts to measure markets for business and the farmer, the plans of school and health officials, the needs of local governments; facts to guide the lawmakers; facts from which a free people can count its gains and chart its future, for, you cannot know your country unless your country knows you.