

Life During the Great Depression

Life in the City

○ Many lost their jobs → no longer pay mortgage or rent → evicted

○ Slept in parks and sewer pipes

○ Used newspapers as blankets

○ Built shanties (shacks) out of whatever they could find



Homeless man sleeping on a pier in New York (1935)



Shanty in Portland (1936)



Shanty in Ohio (1936)



Shantytown along the river in Portland, Oregon (1936)

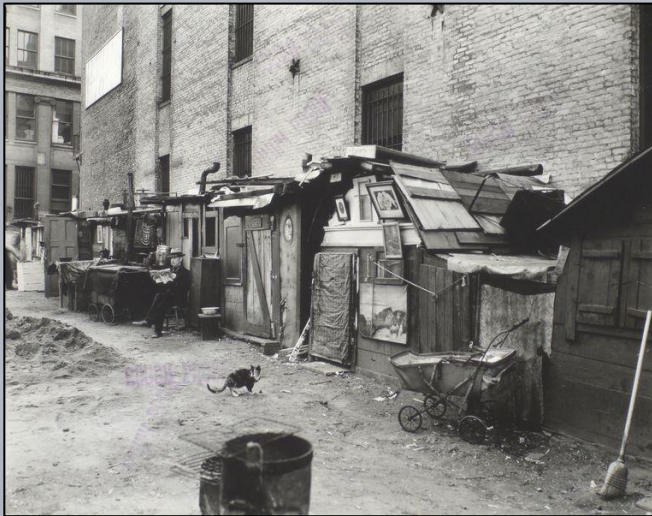


Life in the City

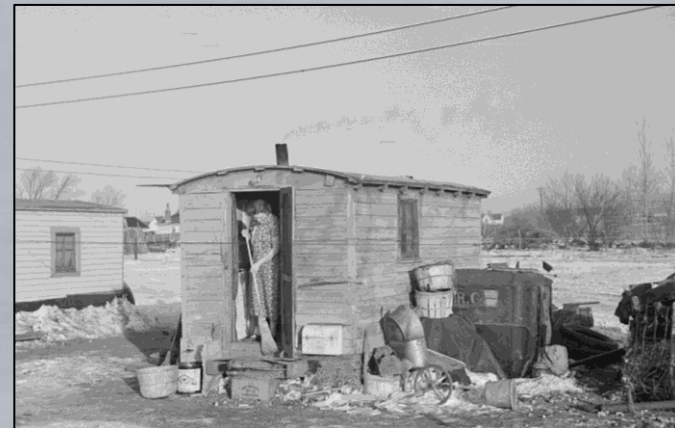
- Did not keep people warm or rain out
- Sanitation was poor
- Little access to clean water
- Diseases spread quickly
- Shantytowns popped up all over the country



Bathroom floating on river
in Portland (1936)



Shanties in New York
(1935)



Woman sweeping the front porch of
her shanty in Iowa (1936).

Life in the City



Men eating soup in Iowa (1936).



Cooperative groups were started, and its members shared supplies (1936).

- People could not afford food
- They begged or rummaged through garbage
- New recipes like “Depression cake” and “mock-apple pie”
- Charitable organizations and public agencies began soup kitchens and breadlines
- Served soup because it was cheap to add water to make more; sometimes had bread
- Typical diet was dried beans, potatoes, and powdered milk

During the Depression, food items were sold that were cheaper to make, but also meant they were low quality. Such as Peanut Spred that was mostly lard with few peanuts, and Bred-spred that had no strawberries, just artificial flavor, dye, and pectin. It also had hayseeds to give the texture of strawberry seeds.



Life in the City

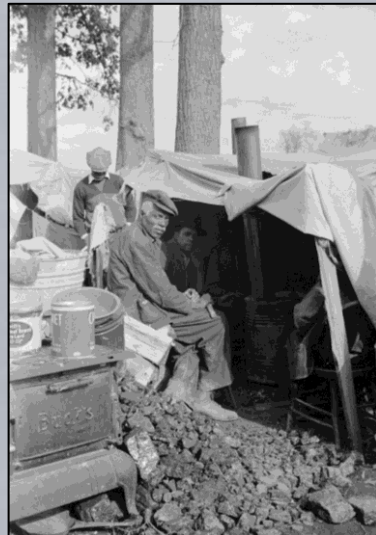
- Nativism remained and racial tensions increased
- Unemployed whites, African Americans, and Latinos competed for the same jobs
- Life for African Americans and Latinos became even harder during the Depression
 - African American unemployment rate was over 50% compared to almost 25% for all Americans
 - Paid lower wages than whites
 - In the southwestern US, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans became targets
- Some whites wanted them deported even if they were born in the US
- By late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people with Mexican descent moved to Mexico → some went on their own will, some were deported by the US government

Life in Rural Areas

- People lost their homes
- Farmers often lost farms because the price of crops fell, and they could not pay their debts
 - 400,000 farms were foreclosed 1929-1932
- Farmers who kept farms did a little better than those living in cities because they could grow their own food for their families



Evicted families in Missouri (1939)



Evicted sharecropper with her family's belongings in Missouri (1939)

Life in Rural Areas

- Some turned to sharecropping, but still struggled



An evicted family in Missouri (1939)



Shantytown in California (1936)



Daughter of an evicted farmer makes dinner in Missouri (1939).



Dust Bowl



- In the early 1900s, farmers plowed the Great Plains
- Removed protective layer of grass from millions of acres
 - Rich soil great for growing crops
- Farmers increased crop production → nutrients depleted
- Climate of the Great Plains = semi-arid → little rainfall per year
- Needed the deep roots of the grasses to protect against erosion
 - Farmland became unsuitable for farming

- Soil became dry from lack of rain → barren with no grass and few trees



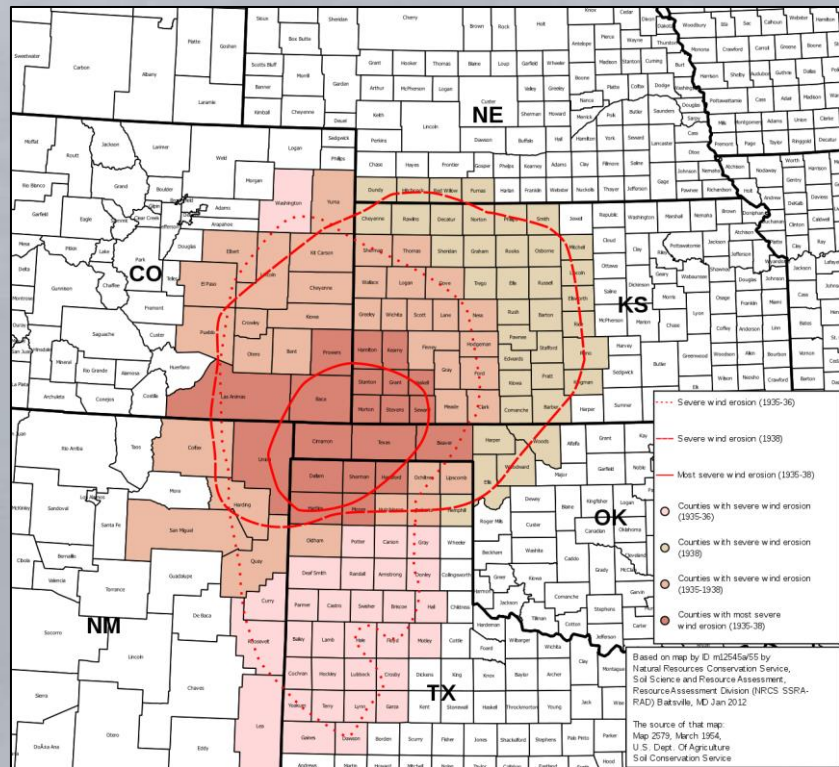
Abandoned home in Texas
(1936)



Homestead in South Dakota
built in 1900 (1936)

Dust Bowl

- Worst drought began in 1933
- No grass to hold soil in place, the wind scattered it
- Once topsoil was gone, the sand and grit were picked up
- Dust Bowl region = parts of Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado and New Mexico
- Hardest hit region by the drought



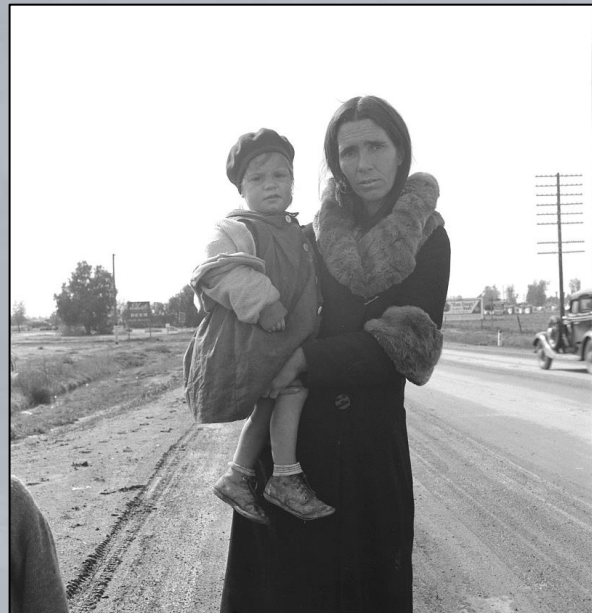
Devastated field in Kansas



Eroded fields in Colorado (1938)

Great Migration

- Frequent dust storms, unsuitable farmland, and evictions
 - Over 2.5 million people left the Dust Bowl
- Hundreds of thousands of farm families migrated to California and other Pacific coast states
 - Many living in the west did not want “Okies” settling there
- Billboards were put up along the highways heading west that said, “NO jobs in California. If YOU are looking for work-KEEP OUT.”



A homeless mother with one of her seven children. They are walking from Phoenix, Arizona, to San Diego, California, because the father “once lived there” (1939).



Dust storm in Kansas (1935)

Great Migration

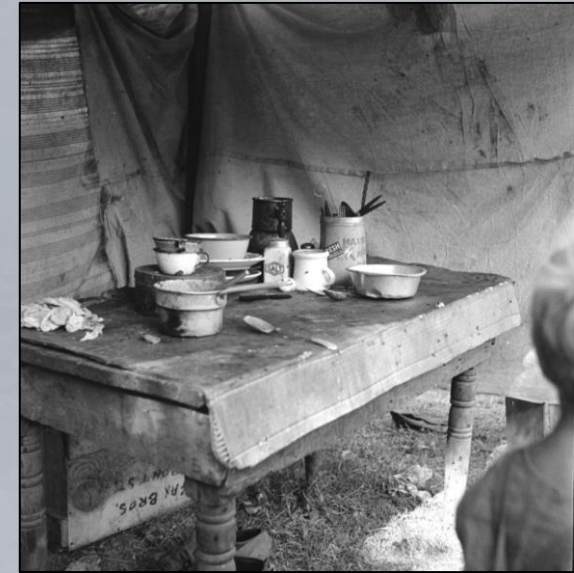
- Those who did migrate west often did not find decent paying jobs
- Most had to live in shantytowns and tents



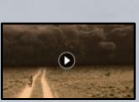
Inside of a migrant farmers tent in California (1939)



This migrant family was returned to Oklahoma by the Relief Administration. Their baby died from winter exposure. They had to sell their tent and car for food (California, 1937).



Migrant family's dinner table in California (1939)



Farmers Who Stayed



- Crops died from lack of rain and livestock choked to death by dust storms
- Some dust clouds were over a mile high and could darken out the sky, sometimes for days
- These “black blizzards” were reported all the way in New York City and Washington, D.C.



“Black blizzard” in Texas (1936)



©
1934
Rosebud Photo
©
GREGORY, S.D.

ONE OF SOUTH DAKOTA'S "BLACK BLIZZARDS"
1934

Farmers Who Stayed

- Dust would drift like snow and people had to shovel it
- Dust would get into homes through small cracks and coat food, furniture, and skin



Dust drifts in Kansas

- Caused “dust pneumonia”; also called “brown plague”
- Some people died
- 1934 → 35 million acres were useless and another 125 million acres were quickly losing topsoil

Dust Bowl

- Dust reached the east coast, thousands of miles away
- One windstorm in 1934 carried millions of tons of dust and coated the Statue of Liberty and the US Capitol
 - 1935-1937 → federal government tried to prevent soil erosion in Nebraska by planting trees and building dams, ponds, and terraces
- The drought ended in 1939, but the economic effects lasted into the 1950s

Mentally Difficult

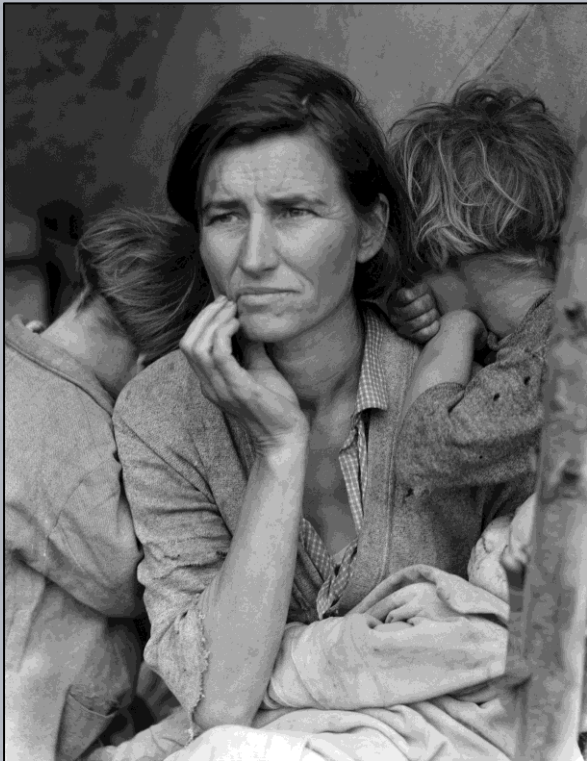
- Men struggled with not being able to take care of their families
 - Federal government did not offer help
- Some cities and charities did offer relief, but it was often not enough
 - Many men would wander the streets looking for work
 - Some men abandoned their families and became hoboes
- Rode in railroad boxcars and slept under bridges
- About 300,000 hoboes during the Depression and most were men



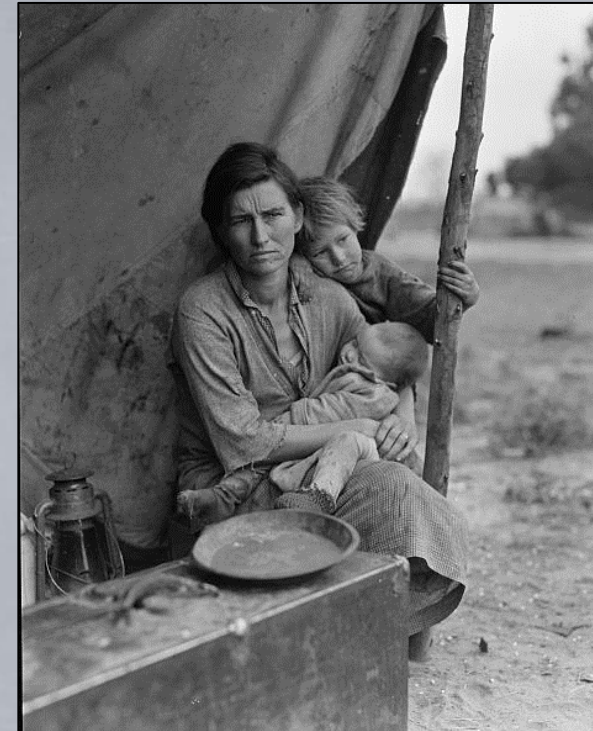
Dust drifts in a hobo "jungle" in Missouri.

Women Struggle

- Many canned food and sewed clothing
- Those who worked outside the home made less wages than men
- Women (and often married women) would face anger from those who thought they were taking away jobs from unemployed men
- Some businesses, and even schools, would not hire a married woman during the Depression



Women struggled to take care of their families during the Depression.



Children Suffered

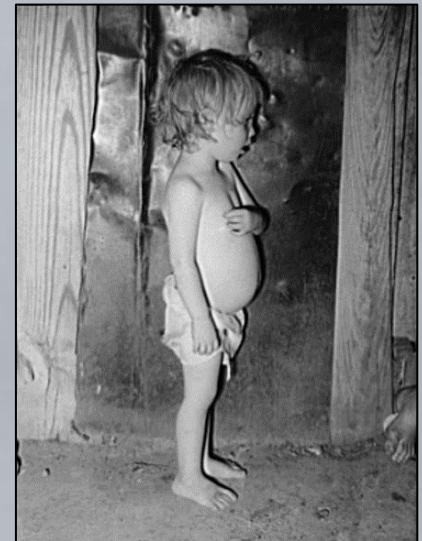


- Families did not have money for health care
 - Poor diets caused health problems
 - Malnutrition and diet-related disease rose
- Rickets became common (lack of Vitamin D) because of little milk
 - Welfare programs for children were cut
 - Some schools were closed
- Some children worked in horrible conditions



This girl has a bone disease. Her family has no food, no shelter, no money, and almost no gasoline (California 1935).

This child has a distended stomach caused by malnutrition and eating too many starchy foods. This was common among the children of farmers in Oklahoma (1939).



Children Suffered



- Some teenagers (mostly boys) ran away from home
- Rode in railroad boxcars across the country looking for work
 - Wanted to escape poverty
 - “Hoover tourists”
- Dangerous life → could be locked in ice cars, beaten or jailed, or murdered
 - 1929-1939 → almost 25,000 killed and over 27,000 injured



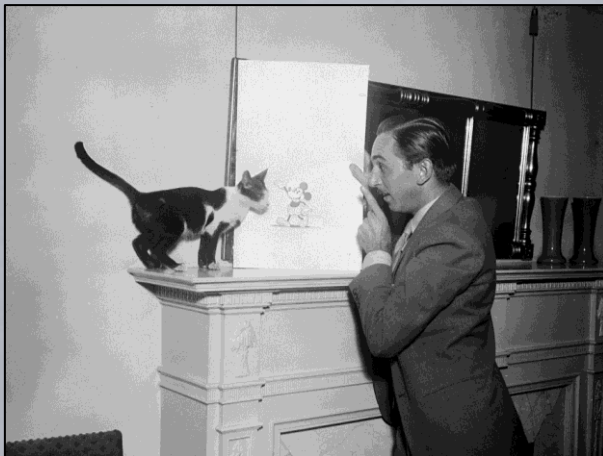
A farmer's son in Kansas (1936)

Boys work
in a potato
field in
Minnesota
(1937).



Entertainment

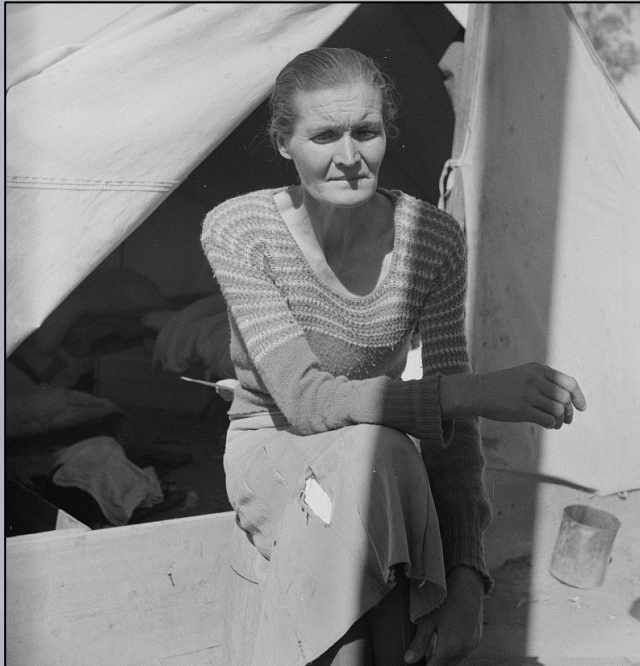
- Many families played board games or listened to the radio
 - About 40% of Americans owned a radio
 - *Amos 'n' Andy, Sherlock Holmes, The Lone Ranger*
 - Sports → New York Yankees & college football
 - Contests like dancing
 - 40% of Americans watched at least 1 movie per week
- *Frankenstein, The Wizard of Oz, King Kong, Gone with the Wind*
 - *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Scarface*



Walt Disney with Mickey Mouse drawing (1931)

Psychological Effects

- People were demoralized → lost will to live
 - Suicide rate increased 30% 1929-1932
- Number of people admitted to mental hospitals tripled
 - Alcoholism increased (prohibition ended 1933)
- People put off marriage and children or going to college
 - Many worried about becoming poor later in life
- Stopped trusting banks



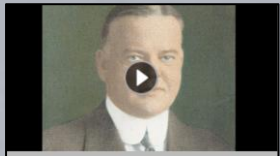
Dust Bowl refugee from Oklahoma in California (1937).

Government Involvement


- President Herbert Hoover encouraged Americans to remain optimistic
 - Believed the government should help ease suffering but not offer welfare
 - Would weaken their self-respect
 - Believed individuals, charities, and local organizations should offer relief
 - Many people were shocked at his unwillingness to help
 - Held meeting with leaders in business, banking, and labor to find solutions to the economic crisis
- Wanted everyone to work together → don't lay off workers or lower wages; don't strike or demand higher wages
 - Did not work! → Americans grew increasingly frustrated
- Many blamed Hoover and Democrats took control of the House of Representatives in 1930

“Hoovervilles”

- Began to call shantytowns “Hoovervilles”
 - Newspapers → “Hooverblankets”
- Empty pockets turned inside out → “Hooverflags”
 - Hoover would not change his policies
- Would not allow direct relief or other federal welfare programs



Government Involvement

- Hoover softened his view as the Depression continued 
- Late 1931 → Hoover asked Congress to pass measures that would reform banking, provide mortgage relief, and invest more federal money in businesses
- 1932 → Federal Home Loan Bank Act was passed → lowered mortgage rates for homeowners and allowed farmers to refinance their farm loans to avoid foreclosure
- Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) passed in 1932
- Authorized up to \$2 billion for emergency funding for banks, life insurance companies, railroads, and other large businesses
 - Many criticized it only helped businesses and not the poor
- Hoover believed it would trickle down and create jobs and higher wages
 - Did not work = too little, too late





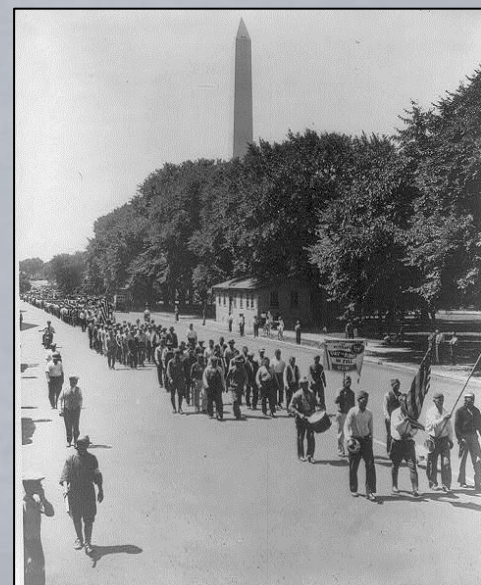
Bonus Army



- Spring 1932 → group of almost 20,000 WW1 veterans arrived in Washington, D.C., with their families
 - Wanted Congress to honor the Patman Bill
- Passed in 1924 and gave WW1 veterans \$500-\$1000 and a life insurance policy for their service
 - Government had until 1945 to do this
- Bonus Army wanted it immediately because of the hardships



Bonus Army veterans traveling to Washington, D.C.



Bonus Army veterans marching to the US Capitol.



Bonus Army's shantytown

Bonus Army

- Hoover did not agree with them and called them “communists” and “criminals”
- He did give them food and supplies to build a shantytown near the Capitol → he believed in the right of peaceful assembly
 - June 17 → Congress denies their request
- Hoover demands them to leave → worried about violence
 - 2,000 remained



Bonus Army's
shantytown



Bonus Army

- June 28 → Hoover sends 1,000 soldiers to force the veterans to leave
- Over 1,000 people were gassed (including an 11-month old baby that died and an 8-year old boy who was partially blinded)
 - Many were injured and 2 people were shot
 - Americans were outraged
- In the fall of 1932, Hoover lost the presidential election to Franklin Delano Roosevelt



Bonus Army shantytown
burns