

Life During the Great Depression Reading

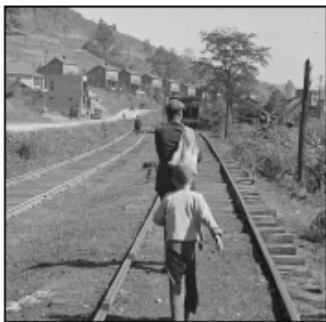
Life during the 1930s was vastly different from life during the 1920s. Once the stock market crashed, a series of events occurred that resulted in many Americans losing everything. Those who did not lose their life savings often lost their jobs or saw decreased wages, and the result was similar: no way of paying their bills or buying necessities. The Great Depression brought a high unemployment rate, homelessness, hunger, and depression to millions of Americans.



Shantytown in St. Louis

The Depression affected people living in both cities and rural areas. When people lost their jobs in the cities and they could no longer pay their mortgages or rent, they were **evicted** from their homes. With nowhere to live, some slept in parks and even sewer pipes, using whatever they could to stay warm. Many used newspapers as blankets. Others built makeshift shacks, also called shanties, out of scrap material they found. Orange crates, large boxes, and even rusted out cars were used. The shacks did not keep people warm in the winter, and they did not keep out the rain. Sanitation was poor because the shacks did not have bathrooms, and often people didn't have access to clean water. People got sick easily, and diseases spread quickly. These **shantytowns** popped up all over, with the largest ones in New York City, Seattle, and St. Louis.

People also could not afford food, so they began to beg or rummage through garbage cans, eating whatever they could find. People had to find ways to make the little food they had last longer. They made recipes like "Depression cake," which was cake made without ingredients that were hard to get or expensive, like butter and eggs. "Mock-apple pie" also became popular. They used crackers instead of apples. Charitable organizations and public



Even those who lived outside the city would walk to stand in breadlines (Virginia, 1935).

agencies began to offer free or low-cost food in **soup kitchens** and **breadlines**, and often the lines were very long. The typical food was soup because water could be added to it to make more.

Sometimes they would get bread. It was not uncommon for people to live on a diet of dried beans, potatoes, and powdered milk.



Breadline in New York City (1932)

The nativism that emerged during the 1920s remained, and racial tensions increased. Unemployed whites, African Americans, and Latinos competed for the same jobs, and violence sometimes erupted. In 1933, twenty-four African Americans were lynched. African Americans and Latinos struggled before the Great Depression began, but life became even harder for them in the 1930s. Their unemployment rates were higher. For example in 1932, the unemployment rate of Americans was almost 25 percent, but the unemployment rate for African Americans was over 50 percent. Those who did have jobs were paid lower wages than whites. In the southwestern US, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans became targets as whites demanded they be **deported**, regardless of if they had been born in the US. By the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people with Mexican descent had moved to Mexico. Some had left on their own will, while others had been deported by the US government.



Evicted families living in tents in Missouri (1939).

Like those who lived in the cities, many who lived in rural areas lost their homes. Farmers often lost their farms because the price of crops fell, and they could not pay their debts. About 400,000 farms were foreclosed between 1929 and 1932. Farmers who were able to keep their farms lived a little better than those who lived in the cities because they could grow their own food for their families. Farmers who lost their farms often turned to **sharecropping** and struggled to provide for their families. In 1933,

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the situation worsened for farmers. Throughout the early 1900s, farmers had plowed the grasslands of the Great Plains to create more farmland. Plowing removed the thick protective layer of grass from millions of acres, revealing rich soil that could grow wheat, corn, and other crops. During the 1920s, farmers increased crop production. However, the climate of the Great Plains is semi-arid, meaning it does not receive a great amount of rainfall per year. The ecosystem of the Great Plains needed the deep roots of the grasses to protect against erosion. When farmers increased crop production, the new farmland eventually became unsuitable for farming because the nutrients were depleted. The soil also became dry from a lack of consistent rainfall. The land was left barren with no grass and few trees.



The Great Plains stretches across the US; flat land with tall grasses and few trees



Once fertile earth became dry and unsuitable for farming (1938).

The worst drought in American history began in 1933. With no grass and few trees to hold the soil in place, it scattered when the winds picked up. Once the topsoil was gone, the sand and grit underneath it was picked up by the wind. The region that included parts of Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico became known as the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl was the hardest hit region by the drought of the 1930s. Frequent dust storms,



Erosion on a farm; all that is left is sand and grit

unsuitable farmland, and evictions forced many farmers and their families to leave the area. Over 2.5 million people left the Dust Bowl states, and by the end of the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of farm families had migrated to California and other west coast states. However, the Pacific coast states had their own economic problems and did not want "Okies" settling there. Billboards were put up along the highways leading west with "NO JOBS in California. If YOU are looking for work-KEEP OUT." The Okies who did make it to the west continued to face hardships. Many were unable to find decent paying jobs, and several had to live in shantytowns and tents.



Dust storm in Texas (1935)



Families who did not own an automobile or could not pay for public transportation walked. This family is walking from Phoenix, Arizona, to San Diego, California (1936).



Migrant families seek shelter from the wind behind a billboard (California 1938).



Family who left Oklahoma for work in California (1936).

Farmers who stayed and tried to grow crops during this time period saw their crops die from lack of rain and livestock choked to death by the dust storms. Some winds were so strong, they would create huge clouds of dust that could be a mile high and would darken the sky, sometimes for days. These "black blizzards" were reported all the way in New York City and Washington, D. C. Often the dust drifted like snow, and people would have to use shovels to clear it away. Dust would get into homes through small cracks and coat food, furniture, and skin. The dust caused health problems, and many people developed "dust pneumonia" (also called the "brown plague"). Some people even died. By 1934, 35 million acres were useless, and another 125 million acres were quickly losing its topsoil.



Farm equipment buried in dust (South Dakota, 1936).

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The dust from the Great Plains affected Americans living thousands of miles away. One windstorm in 1934 carried millions of tons of dust all the way to the east coast. Dust coated the Statue of Liberty and the US Capitol building. Ships that were 500 miles off the coast reported dust, and airplanes that had landed in Boston even had dust on them! Between 1935 and 1937, the federal government tried to prevent soil erosion in Nebraska by planting 360,000 trees and building 62 dams, over 500 ponds, and 500 acres of terracing. The drought ended in 1939, but the economic effects would last into the 1950s.

The Great Depression was not only physically difficult for people, it was also mentally difficult. Those who were once able to take care of their families now had to depend on assistance from others. Many men struggled with not being able to support their families anymore, and the financial pressure was a great burden. Unlike today, the federal government did little to help the poor. Some cities and charities did offer **relief** to those who needed it, but it was often not enough. For example, in New York City, a family would receive a weekly payment of \$2.39. Even though items cost less during the 1930s, this bought very little.



Hoboes often hitched rides in railroad boxcars (1935).

At the beginning of the Depression, many men would wander the streets daily, looking for jobs. However, after months and even years of not finding employment and watching their family suffer, some men quit searching, and some even abandoned their families. Many of these men who left their families wandered across the country, hitching rides in railroad boxcars and sleeping under bridges. There were as many as 300,000 **hoboes** during the Depression, and most were men. It was difficult living life as a hobo, and they developed a code to help one another out. They would leave symbols on trees and buildings letting other hoboes know which homes would provide a meal, which homes would provide a place to sleep, and which homes to avoid. Some hoboes would occasionally end up at homeless shelters in large cities.



Men's homeless shelter in Iowa (1936)

Women also tried to provide for their families. Many canned food and sewed clothing. They did their best to make each penny stretch. Many worked outside the home, but they often received less wages than men. Working women, especially those who were married, faced anger from those who believed they were taking away jobs from unemployed men. Some businesses, and even schools, would refuse to hire married women during the Depression. Many Americans believed women were not suffering as much as men because few women were seen begging for food or standing in breadlines. In reality, some women were too ashamed to reveal their struggles and suffered quietly.

Children suffered as well during the Depression. Families did not have money for health care, and poor diets resulted in many serious health problems. Malnutrition and diet-related diseases among children rose. Rickets, a disease that causes defective bone growth, became common as families could not afford to buy milk for their children to drink. Rickets is caused by a lack of Vitamin D, which is found in milk.



Many children went hungry (Ohio, 1938).



A mother fanning her sick child to keep flies away (Oklahoma 1939).

Welfare programs for children were being cut due to cities and governments having less money, and the school year in many areas were shortened. Some schools even closed due to a lack of funds. Thousands of children went to work instead of going to school, and they often worked in horrible conditions.

Hundreds of thousands of teenagers, mostly boys, ran away from home. They rode in railroad boxcars across the country looking for work and to escape the poverty they lived in at home. Some felt that by leaving, their parents would have one less mouth to worry about feeding. These "Hoover tourists" came from every background. However, living on the roads was dangerous. Some were accidentally locked in ice cars for days, others were beaten or jailed by armed freight yard patrolmen, and some were murdered. From 1929 to 1939, almost 25,000 were killed and over 27,000 were injured.

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A family listens to the evening radio (Michigan 1939).

Even though the Great Depression was a trying time for Americans, people still found ways to enjoy themselves and have fun. Many families entertained themselves by staying at home and playing board games (such as Monopoly which was created during the Depression), or they listened to the radio. About 40 percent of families owned a radio, so many families would gather around the radio in the evening and listen to the news and shows like *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Lone Ranger*. When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected, he would have "fireside chats" to address Americans. Many watched sports. Baseball was the most popular sport during the 1930s, and the most famous professional team was the New York Yankees. The legendary Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Lou Gehrig played for the Yankees. College football also became popular, and new bowl games (including the Orange Bowl, Cotton Bowl, and Sugar Bowl) were started. In 1935, the first Heisman Trophy was awarded. Contests, like dancing to swing music, became popular because they were free.

About 40 percent of Americans saw at least one movie per week, despite the cost. *Frankenstein*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *King Kong*, and *Gone with the Wind* were made during the Depression. Walt Disney released his first animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937, and the Mickey Mouse Club began. During the 1930s, movies that glorified crime, like *Scarface*, became popular. Many of the criminals from the 1920s became very famous during the Great Depression, especially bank robbers. Many people blamed the greedy banks for taking away their homes, losing their money, and causing the Great Depression. However, in 1934, new laws were passed that placed restrictions on movies, such as not making criminals look like heroes.

Not all ways to escape reality were positive, though. Some people were so demoralized, they lost their will to live. The suicide rate increased more than 30 percent between 1929 and 1932, and the number of people who were admitted into mental hospitals tripled. Alcoholism increased when prohibition was repealed in 1933 and people looked to escape the realities of life. Many young people put off marriage and starting a family, and some gave up on going to college. For many, once the Depression ended, they spent the rest of their lives trying to not be poor again. Financial security became important, and many refused to put their money in a bank for fear of losing it. The psychological effects of the Great Depression impacted Americans for years.

When the Great Depression began after the stock market crash in 1929, President Herbert Hoover encouraged Americans to remain optimistic. Even though he believed the government had a duty to help ease people's suffering, Hoover did not believe the federal government should offer welfare. He believed that offering welfare to those in need would weaken their self-respect. Instead, he believed that individuals, charities, and local organizations should offer relief. Many Americans were shocked at his unwillingness to allow the federal government offer assistance.

Soon after the stock market crash, Hoover held a meeting with leaders in business, banking, and labor to find solutions to the economic crisis. He wanted everyone to work together. For example, he asked businesses not to lay off workers or cut wages, and he asked labor unions not to strike or demand higher wages. However, a year after the stock market crashed, the economy continued to struggle, the unemployment rate rose, more businesses went bankrupt, and shantytowns increased. Many Americans grew frustrated with Hoover's lack of assistance, and Democrats took control of the House of Representatives in the 1930 election. Many Americans began to blame Hoover for their struggles. They began to call the shantytowns "Hoovervilles," and the newspapers homeless people wrapped themselves in were called "Hoover blankets." People would turn their empty pockets inside out and call them "Hoover flags." Despite the public outcry, Hoover would not change his policies. He would not allow direct relief or other federal welfare programs.



President Herbert Hoover

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As the Depression continued, Hoover did begin to soften his views, but he still did not believe the federal government should control relief efforts. Unfortunately, the creation of the Federal Farm Board and National Credit Cooperation did not turn the economy around. In late 1931, Hoover asked Congress to pass measures that would reform banking, provide mortgage relief, and invest more federal money in businesses. In 1932, the Federal Home Loan Bank Act was passed. It lowered mortgage rates for homeowners and allowed farmers to refinance their farm loans to avoid foreclosure. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) was also passed in 1932, and it authorized up to \$2 billion for emergency funding for banks, life insurance companies, railroads, and other large businesses. While many criticized this plan with only helping businesses and not the poor, Hoover believed the money would trickle down to the average American. He believed job growth and higher wages would follow if businesses improved. Despite over \$805 million being loaned to large businesses in the first five months, they were still failing, and the economy did not improve. It was too little, too late.



Bonus Army camped out in front of the US Capitol.

In the spring of 1932, Hoover faced more frustrated Americans. A group of almost 20,000 World War I veterans arrived in Washington, D.C., with their families. They called themselves the **Bonus Army**, and they wanted Congress to honor the Patman Bill. The Patman Bill had been passed by Congress in 1924, and WWI veterans were supposed to receive an average of \$500-\$1000 per soldier for their service. This bonus, along with a life insurance policy, was to be paid by 1945, but because of the hardships caused by the Depression, the Bonus Army wanted the money immediately.

Even though Hoover did not agree with the Bonus Army and called them "communists" and "criminals," he did believe in the right of peaceful assembly. He even provided them with food and supplies so they could build a shantytown near the US Capitol. However, on June 17, the Senate refused to give in to their demands, and Hoover ordered them to leave. About 2,000 remained, and Hoover was worried they would become violent. On June 28, Hoover sent about 1,000 soldiers to force the veterans to leave. Unfortunately, many were injured, and two people were shot. Over 1,000 people were gassed, including an 11-month old baby who died and an 8-year old boy who was partially blinded. The American public was outraged at the government, and Hoover's reputation continued to suffer. In the fall of 1932, Hoover lost the presidential election to Roosevelt, who promised "a new deal for the American people."



Bonus Army encamped in Washington.



Collection boxes were set up to collect food and other supplies for the Bonus Army.



Washington police tries to remove the Bonus Army on July 28, 1932.