

Life During the Depression

Guide to Reading

Connection

In the previous section, you learned about the causes of the Great Depression. In this section, you will discover how the Depression worsened and people sought escape from the hardships.

Main Idea

- As banks continued to fail and people lost jobs and homes, soup kitchens and shantytowns sprang up throughout the United States. Droughts during the 1930s made the Depression even worse for farmers. (p. 475)
- Movies and radio shows allowed people to forget temporarily the miseries of the Depression. (p. 477)

- Painters, photographers, and writers all captured the experiences of people during the Great Depression. (p. 479)

Content Vocabulary

bailiff, shantytown, Hooverville, hobo, Dust Bowl, soap opera

Academic Vocabulary

suspend, colleague, technique

People and Terms to Identify

Walt Disney, Grant Wood, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner

Reading Objectives

- **Describe** how the Great Depression affected American families.

- **Discuss** how artists portrayed the effects of the Depression.

Reading Strategy

Taking Notes As you read about life in the United States during the Great Depression, use the major headings of the section to create an outline similar to the one below.

Life During the Depression

- I. The Depression Worsens
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
- II.

Preview of Events



The following are the main History–Social Science Standards covered in this section.

11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.

11.6.3 Discuss the human toll of the Depression, natural disasters, and unwise agricultural practices and their effects on the depopulation of rural regions and on political movements of the left and right, with particular attention to the Dust Bowl refugees and their social and economic impacts in California.

The Big Idea

Societies change over time. As the Depression worsened, many people could not afford housing. They lived in makeshift villages and traveled from town to town in search of work. When the Dust Bowl hit in the Great Plains, many more found themselves without jobs or places to live. People found escape from their troubles in movies or radio programs, which allowed them brief visits into a more exciting and happier world. At the same time, Depression hardships inspired painters, photographers, and writers to depict their views of life under such difficult circumstances.

The Depression Worsens

Main Idea As banks continued to fail and people lost jobs and homes, soup kitchens and shantytowns sprang up throughout the United States. Droughts during the 1930s made the Depression worse for farmers.

Reading Connection Have you or someone you know ever helped serve in a local soup kitchen or food pantry? Read on to discover how people relied on private charities for their meals during the Great Depression.

In 1930, 1,352 banks **suspended** operations across the nation, more than twice the number of bank failures in 1929. As the Depression grew steadily worse during Hoover's administration, many people found themselves unable to afford housing.

★ An American Story ★

A young girl with the unusual name of Dynamite Garland was living with her family in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s when her father, a railroad worker, lost his job. Unable to afford rent, they gave up their home and moved into a two-car garage.

The hardest aspect of living in a garage was getting through the frigid winters. "We would sleep with rugs and blankets over the top of us," Garland later recalled. "In the morning we'd . . . get some snow and put it on the stove and melt it and wash 'round our faces." When Garland's father found a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant, the family "lived on those fried noodles."

On Sundays the family looked at houses for sale. "That was a recreation during the Depression," said Garland. "You'd go and see where you'd put this and where you could put that, and this is gonna be my room." In this way, the family tried to focus on better times. Movies and radio programs also provided a brief escape from their troubles, but the struggle to survive left little room for pleasure.

—adapted from *Hard Times*

By 1933 more than 9,000 banks had failed. In 1932 alone some 30,000 companies went out of business. By 1933 more than 12 million workers were unemployed—about one fourth of the workforce. Average family income dropped from \$2,300 in 1929 to \$1,600 a few years later.

Lining Up at Soup Kitchens People without jobs often went hungry. Whenever possible they joined bread lines to receive a free handout of food or lined up outside soup kitchens, which private charities set up to give poor people a meal.

Peggy Terry, a young girl in Oklahoma City during the Depression, later told an interviewer how each day after school, her mother sent her to the soup kitchen:

“If you happened to be one of the first ones in line, you didn’t get anything but water that was on top. So we’d ask the guy that was ladling out soup into the buckets—everybody had to bring their own bucket to get the soup—he’d dip the greasy, watery stuff off the top. So we’d ask him to please dip down to get some meat and potatoes from the bottom of the kettle. But he wouldn’t do it.”

—quoted in *Hard Times*

Living in Makeshift Villages Families or individuals who could not pay their rent or mortgage lost their homes. Some of them, paralyzed by fear and humiliation over their sudden misfortune, simply would not or could not move. Their landlord would then ask the court for an eviction notice. Court officers called **bailiffs** then ejected the nonpaying tenants, piling their belongings in the street.

Throughout the country, newly homeless people put up shacks on unused or public lands, forming communities called **shantytowns**. Blaming the president for their plight, people referred to such places as **Hoovervilles**.



An unemployed man advertising his skills



Student Web Activity

Visit the *American Vision: Modern Times* Web site at tav.mt.glencoe.com and click on **Student Web Activities—Chapter 9** for an activity on the Great Depression.

In search of work or a better life, many homeless and unemployed Americans began to wander around the country, walking, hitchhiking, or, most often, “riding the rails.” These wanderers, called **hobos**, would sneak past railroad police to slip into open boxcars on freight trains for a ride to somewhere else. They camped in “hobo jungles,” usually situated near rail yards. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly boys

and young men, wandered from place to place in this fashion, sleeping and eating where they could.

The Dust Bowl Farmers soon faced a new disaster. Since the beginnings of homesteading on the Great Plains, farmers had gambled with nature. Their plows had uprooted the wild grasses that held the

soil’s moisture. The new settlers then blanketed the region with wheat fields.

When crop prices dropped in the 1920s, however, Midwestern farmers left many of their fields uncultivated. Then, beginning in 1932, a terrible drought struck the Great Plains. With neither grass nor wheat to hold the scant rainfall, the soil dried to dust. From the Dakotas to Texas, America’s pastures and wheat fields became a vast **“Dust Bowl.”**

Winds whipped the arid earth, blowing it aloft and blackening the sky. When the dust settled, it buried crops and livestock and piled up against farmhouses like snow. No matter how carefully farm families sealed their homes, dust covered everything. As the drought persisted, the number of yearly dust storms grew, from 22 in 1934 to 72 in 1937.

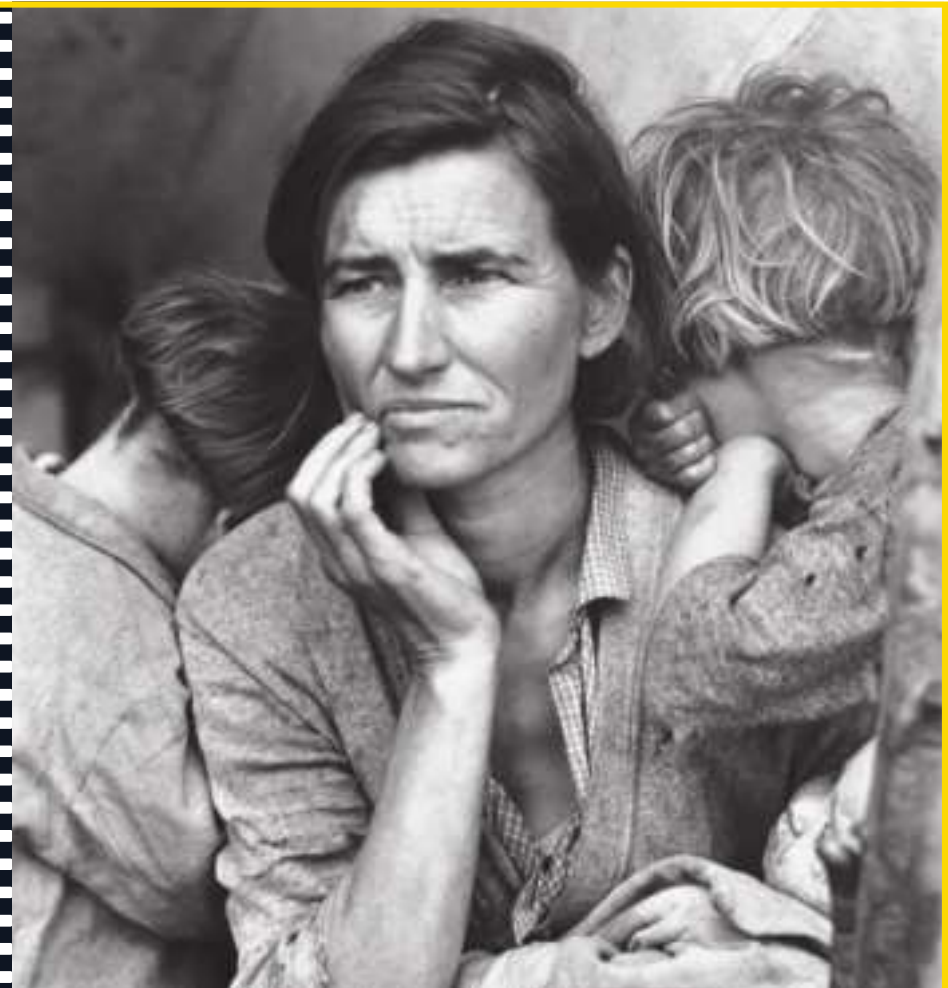
Only some Midwestern and Great Plains farmers managed to hold on to their land. If their withered fields were mortgaged, they had to turn them over to the banks. Then, nearly penniless, many families packed their belongings and headed west. Since many migrants were from Oklahoma, they became

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

MOMENT in HISTORY

IMAGE OF AN ERA

Lasting a decade, the Great Depression deprived many Americans of jobs, land, and livelihoods. Plummeting crop prices and farms withering under drought, and dust clouds forced many families to take to the road in search of work, often with little success. Dismayed by scenes of destitution and homelessness, photographer Dorothea Lange joined the Resettlement Administration in 1935. In 1936 in rural Nipomo, California, Lange photographed this “Migrant Mother,” a 32-year-old woman with seven children. She had just sold her car tires to buy food.





- State with population loss, 1930–1940
- Area with severe loss of topsoil
- Area with moderate loss of topsoil
- Movement of people
- Destination of Dust Bowl emigrants



Okies escaping the Dust Bowl

Geography Skills

- Interpreting Maps** Which states lost population in the 1930s?
- Applying Geography Skills** Why did most of the routes shown on the map lead to cities?

known as “Okies.” Many migrants believed they would find a better life in California, which was thought to have a perfect climate for agriculture and plenty of work available. California soon became overwhelmed with the number of migrant workers. Many migrants were met with hostility from those already living in California because of competition for jobs. Most remained homeless and impoverished.

Reading Check Explaining What chain of events turned the once-fertile Great Plains into the Dust Bowl?

Escaping the Depression

Main Idea Movies and radio shows allowed people to forget the miseries of the Depression.

Reading Connection How do movies and other forms of media help you get through difficult times? Read on to learn ways that people coped with the Great Depression.

Despite the devastatingly hard times, Americans could escape—if only for an hour or two—through entertainment. Most people could scrape together

the money to go to the movies, or they could sit with their families and listen to one of the many radio programs broadcast across the country. Entertainment provided an escape from the difficult times.

The Hollywood Fantasy Factory Ordinary citizens often went to the movies to see people who were rich, happy, and successful. The 60 to 90 million weekly viewers walked into a fantasy world of thrills and romance. Comical screenplays offered a welcome release from daily worries. Groucho Marx wisecracked while his brothers’ antics provoked hilarity in such films as *Animal Crackers*.

Many European actors, writers, and directors, fleeing economic hardship and the threat of dictatorships, went to Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s. Two European women emerged as superstars. Germany’s Marlene Dietrich portrayed a range of roles with subtlety in movies such as *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express*. Swedish actress Greta Garbo often played a doomed beauty, direct and unhesitating in her speech and actions, and was the highest paid female in the United States during the mid-1930s.

Moviegoers also loved cartoons. **Walt Disney** produced the first feature-length animated film, *Snow*