

Life During the Depression

MAIN IDEA

During the Depression, most Americans knew great hardship.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Because of this, a generation was scarred by suffering in ways that later generations were not.

TERMS & NAMES

Dust Bowl
Eleanor
Roosevelt

Congress of Industrial
Organizations (CIO)
sit-down strike

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

Born to freed slaves, Mary McLeod Bethune founded Bethune-Cookman College. In 1936, FDR named her director of the Division of Negro Affairs at the National Youth Administration. Because of her health, her doctor told her to stop working so hard.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

I promise to reform, but in an hour the promise is forgotten. . . . The drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth.

Mary McLeod Bethune, "Faith That Moved a Dump Heap"



Mary McLeod Bethune was the first African-American woman to head a federal agency.

Section 3 discusses the difficulty of living during the Depression—and the efforts of people like Bethune to make the hard times easier.

The Dust Bowl Destroys Lives

In the early 1930s, a drought hit the Great Plains and lasted for several years. Even before then, the overgrazing of livestock and the overplowing of fields had damaged the land by destroying the natural grasses whose roots anchored the soil. A journalist wrote, "You could hear the fields crack and dry, and the only movement in the down-driving heat was the dead withering of the dry blighted leaves on the twigs."

Winds picked up dirt from the dry, exposed fields. During dust storms, noon turned into night as walls of dust filled the air and hid the sun. Dust damaged farms across a 150,000-square-mile region called the **Dust Bowl**, which covered parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico. Dust storms ripped through the plains for years until rain and improved farming methods finally brought relief.

With their crops buried under layers of dirt, ruined farmers loaded their belongings onto trucks and set off with their families to find work.

Taking Notes

Use your chart to take notes about citizens' responses to the Great Depression.

GREAT DEPRESSION		
Hoover's Responses	FDR's Responses	Citizens' Responses
Effectiveness	Effectiveness	Effectiveness

Dust Bowl Migration, 1930–1940



This photograph demonstrates why the dust storms were often called “black blizzards.”

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Maps

- 1. Place** Which states suffered the most damage from the dust storms?
- 2. Movement** What were the main highways that people took to leave the Dust Bowl, and where did they lead?

Many drove west on Route 66, the main highway to California. They had heard that California’s farms needed workers.

But as the newcomers poured in, California farm towns quickly became overcrowded. Families lived in tiny shacks. By 1940, about 2.5 million people fleeing the Dust Bowl had made their way to California and other Pacific coast states. Because many had come from Oklahoma, they were sometimes called “Okies.”

Living Through Hard Times

Not just in the Dust Bowl, but all over the country, families suffered. Even after the recovery measures of the New Deal, unemployment remained high. In 1936, for example, 9 million people had no jobs.

Without work, families couldn’t afford to buy food. Bread lines offering food to the hungry appeared across the country. In January 1931, New York’s 82 bread lines served an average of 85,000 small meals a day: bread and soup or bread and stew. Men, women, and children waited in these lines for their daily food. Some fainted from hunger while they waited.

Many people also lost their homes. Thousands of homeless people sought shelter under bridges and overpasses. One woman remembered “people living in old, rusted out car bodies. . . . There were people living in shacks made of orange crates. One family with a whole lot of kids were living in a piano box.”

ReadingHistory

A. Reading a Map Look at the map above. Notice the three states that most Dust Bowl migrants went to.

Children had to grow up fast during the Depression. To add to their family's income, boys worked after school or even dropped out of school. Often girls had to stay home to look after younger children. Sometimes teenagers who failed to find jobs ran away from home to avoid burdening their families. By late 1932, perhaps a quarter million teens roamed the country. They sneaked onto freight trains, begged for food, and lived in squatter camps along the railroad tracks.

ReadingHistory

B. Summarizing

What were the various hardships suffered by families during the Depression?

Family life suffered as many unemployed men felt a loss of status. They sometimes became irritable and quarreled with their families. Working women came under pressure to give up their jobs to jobless men. In fact, some New Deal projects would hire a woman only if her husband had a job. Even so, poverty forced many women to work as servants or at other low-paying jobs that men didn't want.

Artists Portray the Struggle

Many books of the period described the hard times. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) by James Agee and Walker Evans reported on the harsh lives of tenant farmers. John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) told of Okies who had been evicted from their farms.

Vocabulary

evicted: forced to leave property

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do—to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut—anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land.

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

The African-American writer Richard Wright was one of many writers who were hired by the Works Progress Administration. Freed from his economic worries, he also wrote creatively in his spare time and produced the novel *Native Son* (1940). It depicts one African American's anger about society's racism.

▼ The Grapes of Wrath



▼ Gone with the Wind



daily life

HAVING FUN DURING HARD TIMES

To forget life's troubles, people went to the movies. At first, the Depression caused attendance to decline. But audiences soon grew as hard times made people eager for entertainment.

Viewers flocked to escapist movies such as *The Wizard of Oz*. People also saw realistic movies about the times, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, based on John Steinbeck's novel.

Reading comic books about superheroes also was a popular pastime. Comic books were first published in 1933. *Superman* was introduced in 1938.



◀ The Wizard of Oz

AMERICA'S HISTORY MAKERS



ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

1884–1962

Eleanor Roosevelt had an unhappy childhood. Her parents died when she was young, and the grandmother who raised her criticized Eleanor frequently.

In 1905, she married her distant cousin Franklin. When FDR entered politics, she was shy and disliked attending public events.

During World War I, Eleanor did volunteer work and discovered the joy of helping others. This gave her confidence. By the time FDR became governor of New York, Eleanor was actively working for social reform. She continued to do so as first lady.

How did Eleanor Roosevelt change from an insecure person to a leader for social reform?

Photographers also captured Depression-era suffering. Dorothea Lange was one of several photographers whom the government hired to document the times. Her pictures show the hard lives of poor people during the Depression. (See pages 745 and 751.)

Women in the New Deal

The first lady, **Eleanor Roosevelt**, worked to help poor Americans. Because her husband had a disability, Mrs. Roosevelt acted as his “eyes and ears.” She toured the country, visiting coal mines, work camps, and hospitals to find out how programs were working. Then she told the president what she learned and made suggestions.

In March 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt began to hold regular press conferences for women reporters. At these, the first lady introduced the women who ran New Deal programs. During Roosevelt’s presidency, more women held positions with the government than ever before.

In 1933, the president named Frances Perkins secretary of labor, which made her the first female cabinet officer. Years earlier, Perkins had assisted Jane Addams at Chicago’s Hull House. As secretary of labor, she supported laws granting a minimum wage, a limit on child employment, and unemployment compensation.

Minorities and the Depression

Mary McLeod Bethune was one of several African Americans who played a role in the government. They were called FDR’s “Black Cabinet.” This group included William Hastie and Robert C. Weaver. Hastie was a brilliant young lawyer who worked in the

Department of the Interior. Weaver, an economist who had graduated from Harvard, became the president’s adviser on racial issues.

Though he included more African Americans in government, FDR failed to back civil rights laws. For example, he did not support an anti-lynching bill. FDR opposed lynching but feared upsetting Southern white congressmen. Roosevelt said, “If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, [the Southerners] will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing.” In spite of this, African Americans remained loyal to the president because of his efforts to help the poor.

The Depression also greatly affected Mexican Americans. Many lived in rural areas, especially in the Southwest. Increasingly, migrants from other areas competed with them for jobs. Mexican Americans living in cities also had difficulty finding scarce jobs. While many Mexican Americans did benefit from New Deal programs, in general they received less aid than other groups.

ReadingHistory

C. Making Inferences Why do you think Eleanor Roosevelt publicized the women who worked in government?

ReadingHistory

D. Contrasting How did African Americans and Mexican Americans benefit differently from the New Deal?

During the 1930s, immigration from Mexico declined. In addition, many immigrants returned to Mexico. Some left on their own; the federal government deported others. Some of those who were forced to leave were U.S. citizens whose rights were ignored. Because they feared deportation, many Mexican Americans stopped applying for aid.

Life improved somewhat for Native Americans. In 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, which restored some reservation lands to Indian ownership. It also created the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to promote native arts.



In early 1939, a women's group refused to rent a hall for opera star Marian Anderson's performance because of her race. So Mrs. Roosevelt asked her to sing at the Lincoln Memorial.

Unions Gain Strength

Some minorities joined a new labor organization. The country's largest labor organization was the American Federation of Labor (AFL). It was open only to skilled workers, such as plumbers and electricians. Labor leader John L. Lewis wanted industrywide unions that included both skilled and unskilled workers. He and other leaders founded the **Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)**, which broke from the AFL in 1938. It was more open to women and minorities than the AFL.

In the 1930s, the labor movement used an effective bargaining tactic called the **sit-down strike**. Instead of walking off their jobs, striking workers remained idle inside the plant. As a result, factory owners could not hire strikebreakers to do the work.

The Wagner Act, passed in 1935, gave unions the ability to negotiate better working conditions. Union membership jumped from 2.7 million in 1933 to 7.0 million in 1937. The growing strength of labor unions was just one legacy of the New Deal. Section 4 discusses other legacies of the Great Depression and the New Deal.

Background

John L. Lewis had been president of the United Mine Workers of America since 1920.

Section 3 Assessment

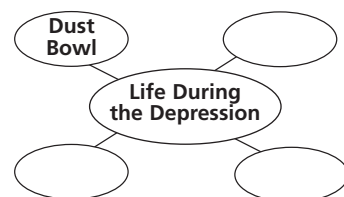
1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- Dust Bowl
- Eleanor Roosevelt
- Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)
- sit-down strike

2. Using Graphics

Use a cluster diagram like the one below to record details about life during the Depression.



3. Main Ideas

- How did storms in the Dust Bowl contribute to economic problems?
- What effect did the Depression have on families?
- How did Eleanor Roosevelt help her husband, the president?

4. Critical Thinking

Recognizing Effects What were some positive and negative results of the government's policies toward minorities during the Depression?

THINK ABOUT

- African Americans
- Mexican Americans
- Native Americans

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

SPEECH ART

You have been asked to teach young children about life during the Depression. Write and perform a **monologue** or create a **comic strip** about it.