

Americans Face Hard Times

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Parts of the Great Plains came to be known as the Dust Bowl as severe drought destroyed farms there.
2. Families all over the United States faced hard times.
3. Depression-era culture helped lift people's spirits.
4. The New Deal had lasting effects on American society.

The Big Idea

All over the country, Americans struggled to survive the Great Depression.

Key Terms and People

Dust Bowl, p. 790

Mary McLeod Bethune, p. 792

John Steinbeck, p. 793

Woody Guthrie, p. 793

TAKING NOTES

As you read, take notes on people's lives during the Depression. In each circle of a diagram like the one below, fill in details about their challenges, struggles, and culture.

Life during the Depression

If YOU were there...

You own a wheat farm on the Great Plains, where you and your family live and work. Wheat prices have been low for years, and you have managed to get by only by borrowing thousands of dollars. Now the region is suffering through a terrible drought. Without water, you have been unable to grow any wheat at all. But if you do not start paying your debts, you will lose your farm.

Would you stay on your farm or leave and start a new life somewhere else?

BUILDING BACKGROUND The New Deal provided jobs and relieved suffering for many Americans, but it did not end the Great Depression. Unemployment fell to about 14 percent in 1937 but then rose again to about 17 percent in 1939. All over the country, people still struggled to survive.

The Dust Bowl

For American farmers, hard times began well before the start of the Great Depression. Despite the widespread prosperity of the 1920s, prices for farm products remained low. The Depression worsened this already bad situation. Conditions worsened again when a severe drought hit the Great Plains in the early 1930s and lasted most of the decade. From North Dakota to Texas, crops withered away. With no roots to hold it in place, topsoil began to blow away.

Massive dust storms swept the region, turning parts of the Great Plains into the Dust Bowl. "These storms were like rolling black smoke," recalled one Texas schoolboy. "We had to keep the lights on all day. We went to school with the headlights on, and with dust masks on." A woman from Kansas remembered dust storms "covering everything—including ourselves—in a thick, brownish gray blanket . . . Our faces were as dirty as if we had rolled in the dirt; our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth."

Unable to raise crops, farmers in the Dust Bowl region could not pay their mortgages. Many lost their farms. Several New Deal programs tried to assist farmers by offering loans and by working to stabilize prices for farm products. Scientists also began thinking of ways to prevent dust storms during future droughts. Soil conservation experts encouraged farmers to adopt new farming methods to protect the soil. Grass was planted to hold soil in place, and rows of trees were planted to help break the wind. These changes have helped prevent another Dust Bowl in the years since the Great Depression.

For many farmers in the 1930s, however, the new programs came too late. After losing their crops and livestock to dust storms, about 2.5 million people left the area. Many packed up whatever they could fit in the family car or truck and drove to California to look for any kind of work they could find. Once there, they often found that there were already more workers than available jobs.

READING CHECK Identifying Cause and Effect

How did the Dust Bowl affect farmers?

Hard Times

The Great Depression took a heavy toll on families all over the United States. Many families were forced to split up, as individual members roamed the country in search of work. To help their families buy food, children often had to drop out of school and take very low-paying jobs. Others left home

Primary Source

PERSONAL ACCOUNT

The Dust Bowl

Lawrence Svobida was a Kansas wheat farmer who saw his life's work destroyed in the 1930s.

“When I knew that my crop was irrevocably [forever] gone I experienced a deathly feeling which, I hope, can affect a man only once in a lifetime. My dreams and ambitions . . . and my shattered ideals seemed gone forever. The very desire to make a success of my life was gone, the spirit and urge to strive were dead within me. Fate had dealt me a cruel blow above which I felt utterly unable to rise.”

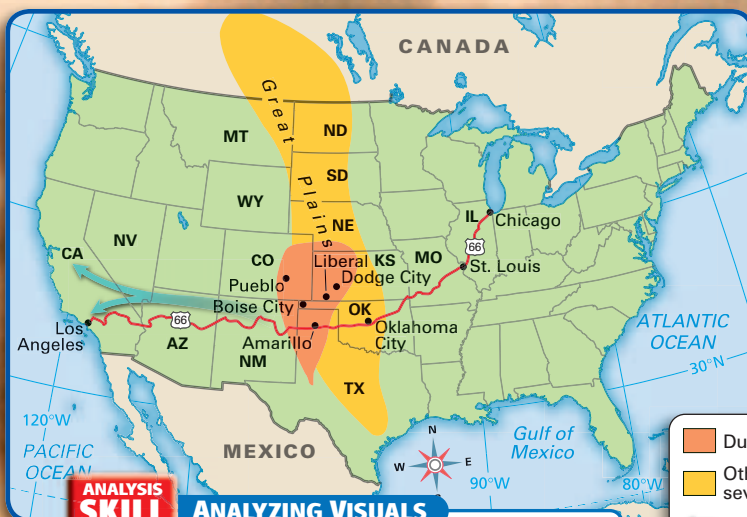
ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

How did Svobida feel after his crop was destroyed?

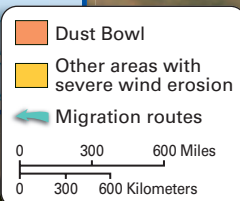
Interactive Map

The Dust Bowl

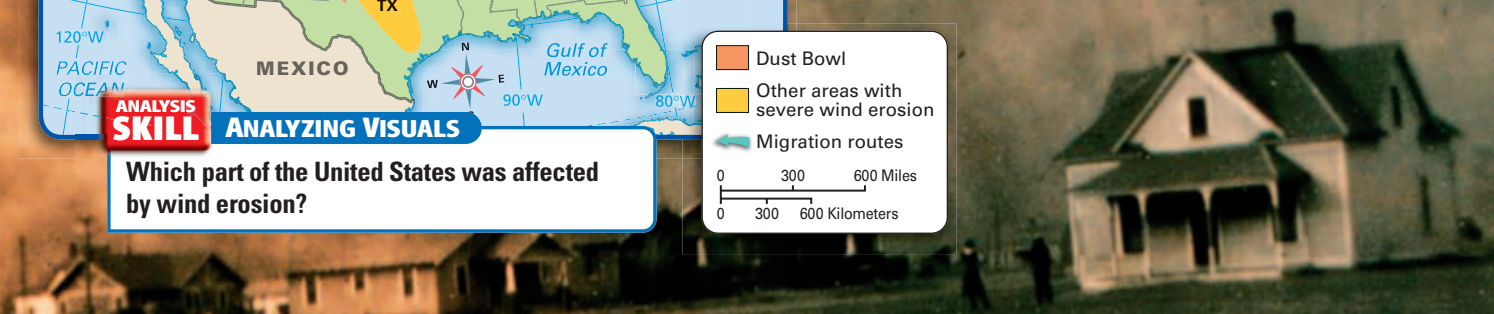


ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING VISUALS

Which part of the United States was affected by wind erosion?



Severe drought during the 1930s destroyed the livelihood of many Great Plains farmers. Here, a black cloud of dust rages toward the outbuildings of a farm.



to fend for themselves. One boy wrote this diary entry in 1932:

“Slept in paper box. Bummed swell breakfast three eggs and four pieces meat ... Rode freight [train] to Roessville. Small burg [town], but got dinner. Walked Bronson ... Couple a houses. Rode to Sidell ... Hit homes for meals and turned down. Had to buy supper 20 cents. Raining.”

—Anonymous, quoted in *The Great Depression*, by Thomas Minehan

The Great Depression was especially hard on minority groups. As white families moved west in search of jobs, Mexican Americans found it harder to get work. In California local leaders and unions convinced the government to deport many Mexican-born workers. Some of the workers' children were American-born, which made them U.S. citizens, but they were deported anyway.

African Americans also faced discrimination. Many lost jobs to unemployed white workers. One man recalled traveling around Michigan in search of work. He went into a factory that was hiring workers:

“They didn't hire me because I didn't belong to the right kind of race. Another time I went into Saginaw, it was two white fellas and myself made three. The fella there hired the two men and didn't hire me. I was back out on the streets. That hurt me pretty bad, the race part.”

—Louis Banks, quoted in *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, by Studs Terkel

In spite of this type of discrimination, hundreds of thousands of African Americans were able to find work through relief programs such as the CCC and WPA. President Roosevelt also consulted with African American leaders, including educator **Mary McLeod Bethune**. Bethune was one of several African Americans who Roosevelt appointed to his administration. Other members included Walter White and William Henry Hastie. These advisers became known as the Black Cabinet. Their role was to advance the concerns of African Americans in the Roosevelt White House.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong supporter of equal rights. She encouraged the president to include African Americans in his recovery programs. In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to rent their auditorium to the African American singer Marian Anderson. In protest, Eleanor Roosevelt resigned her membership in the DAR. She then helped Anderson arrange a concert at the base of the Lincoln Memorial. Some 75,000 people attended.

READING CHECK Drawing Inferences What weakened families during the Depression?

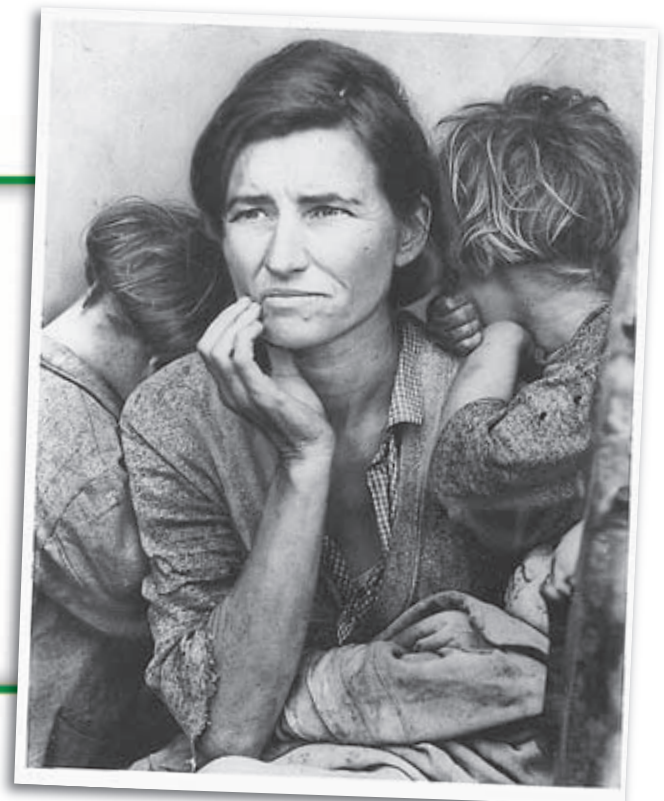
Primary Source

PHOTOGRAPH “Migrant Mother”

Photographer Dorothea Lange gained fame in the 1930s for documenting the conditions of the poor during the Depression. Lange took this famous photograph of a widowed migrant worker and two of her seven children. The woman worked in the pea fields of Nipomo, California. Her family survived by eating frozen peas and birds the children caught. The woman had just sold her car's tires for money to buy food.

ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

How would you describe the expression on the face of the woman in the photograph?



Depression-Era Culture

Starting in 1935, new Works Progress Administration projects began to put the country's painters, sculptors, writers, and actors to work. When he was criticized for hiring artists, WPA director Henry Hopkins said, "They've got to eat just like other people."

Some of the work done by WPA artists has become an important part of American culture. For example, WPA musicians went into the nation's rural areas to record cowboy ballads, folk songs, and African American spirituals. This music might have been lost without these recordings. Artists employed by the WPA made more than 2,500 murals and 17,000 pieces of sculpture for public spaces. WPA writers created a permanent record of American life by interviewing Americans of many different backgrounds about their lives and memories.

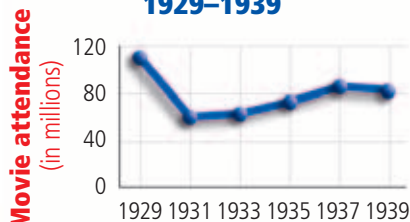
Like many people at the time, author **John Steinbeck** was deeply affected by the Great Depression. Depression life became a main theme of Steinbeck's most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel tells the story of the Joads, a family of farmers that is forced to move to California for work.

Some of the music of the day expressed themes similar to Steinbeck's. Oklahoma-born folk singer **Woody Guthrie** crisscrossed the country singing his songs of loss and struggle. One contained the line, "All along your green valley I'll work till I die"—a grim reality for some Americans.

Swing music, meanwhile, became popular for a different reason. Instead of focusing on the sadness of the Depression, swing helped people forget their troubles. Big-band leaders such as Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and Count Basie helped make swing wildly popular in the 1930s. People tuned into swing music shows on inexpensive radios and danced to the fast-paced rhythms. Radios provided people with other forms of entertainment as well. Every week millions of Americans put aside their

Escape to the Movies

Weekly Movie Attendance, 1929–1939



ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING INFORMATION

What percentage of Americans attended movies in 1930?

worries to listen to radio shows such as *Little Orphan Annie* and *The Lone Ranger*.

Movies offered Americans another welcome escape from reality. One boy remembered how he and his friends would save their pennies for movie tickets. "[It] was two for a nickel," he said. "You'd come to the movie in the summer like 8:30 in the mornin' and you'd see about 200 kids." For 25 cents or less, adults, too, could forget their troubles as they watched historical dramas, gangster films, comedies, and musicals.

READING CHECK **Evaluating** How was the work of writers and musicians affected by the Great Depression?

THE IMPACT TODAY

Today many of the thousands of interviews conducted by WPA writers are available on the Internet. You can read the stories of former slaves, pioneers, Native American leaders, and others in their own words.

Causes and Effects of the New Deal

QUICK FACTS

Causes

- Stock market crash
- Banking crisis
- Soaring unemployment
- Farmers' troubles
- Widespread poverty



Effects

- Expanded role of federal government
- Created major programs such as Social Security and the FDIC
- Provided hope and relief to many Americans but did not end the Great Depression

Effects of the New Deal

People are still debating the effects of the New Deal today. New Deal critics point out that Roosevelt's programs did not end the Great Depression. Full recovery occurred in the early 1940s, after the United States entered World War II. Roosevelt's supporters, however, believe

that the New Deal gave Americans help and hope in a time of severe economic crisis.

People today do agree that the New Deal greatly expanded the role of the federal government. Some of the programs and agencies created as part of the New Deal, such as Social Security and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), remain part of our lives. Social Security still provides economic relief to the elderly, children, and those with disabilities. The FDIC protects the savings of bank customers.

READING CHECK **Finding the Main Idea** What are some current government programs that began during the New Deal?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The New Deal helped Americans but did not end the Great Depression. The Depression finally ended after the United States entered World War II, which you will learn about in the next chapter.

Section 3 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Identify** What was the **Dust Bowl**?

b. Explain What factors contributed to farmers' difficulties in the 1920s and 1930s?
- a. Recall** What were some of the problems people faced during the Depression?

b. Compare How was the experience of African Americans and Mexican Americans in the Depression similar?

c. Evaluate Do you think President Roosevelt did enough to help African Americans? Explain your answer.
- a. Draw Conclusions** Why do you think swing music, radio shows, and movies were popular during the Great Depression?

b. Identify How did the WPA help the arts?
- a. Recall** What are the different viewpoints on the success of the New Deal?

b. Elaborate How are Social Security and the FDIC still important today?