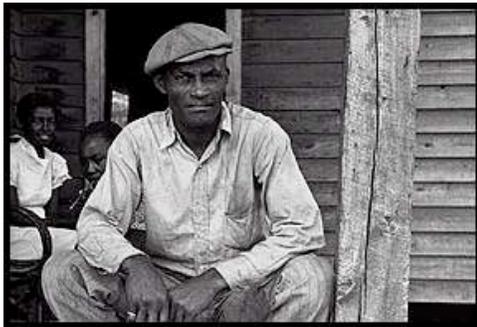


Life During the Great Depression



You have seen many of the effects of the Depression on the general public, and also a little bit about the approach of the Hoover administration. What about specific groups of the population that were affected in various ways? Remember, the Depression only directly affected one-third of the population - but those that were hit really suffered! Consult the “Life During the Depression” reading and take some bulleted notes that everyone should know about the plight of some specific groups during the thirties – no more than FIVE (5) bulleted points for each group!. **There is an example** from African Americans during the Depression below - use that as a guide. Try to spend no more than five minutes or so on each - and you can work with a partner if you like!

Life During the Great Depression

Hobos "Riding the Rails"



Hundreds of thousands who could not support themselves locally took to the road to find work. These mostly single men drifted from town to town and state-to-state, performing whatever odd jobs they could trade for food and a few coins. They became a familiar sight, hitchhiking along highways and hopping open railroad boxcars. The Southern Pacific Railroad reported that throughout the Depression its guards had thrown 683,000 people off the companies' trains. There were so many transients that most railroad "bulls" (private police hired by the railroad) gave up trying to remove them. "Freight trains were amazing in those days," recalls garbage man Frank Czerwonka. "When a train would stop in a small town and the bums got off, the population tripled." Some wives encouraged their husbands to leave home for the sake of the family, and not only to save on the food bill. Once the husband was away, the wife and children

became "no-breadwinner families" who were then eligible for larger support payments from the government.

By 1932 there were estimated to be over a million people roaming the country. Many were Bonus Army veterans who had recently been chased out of Washington at bayonet point. Bonus Army members enjoyed prestige among other hoboes because they had shaken a fist at Washington, the perceived source of the country's misery. The fact that hoboes were unattached and continually moving made them targets for local police. In small towns especially, itinerants were rousted and jailed for vagrancy.

A quarter million wanderers were under the age of twenty-one. Most hobo minors were children who had dropped out of school to help support the family. But what few jobs were available to them in their hometowns paid very little and offered no security. They left to look for work in neighboring towns. And if they could not find anything, they moved to the next town on the next outbound freight train. The children of the road usually found the same bleak situation wherever they went, and some forgot why they left in the first place. Many continued to migrate aimlessly from city to city.

Poverty during the Depression splintered many families. The youngest children on the road often came from broken homes of divorce, and they would use their pathetic appearance to elicit sympathy when they panhandled. On the road they traveled in groups for mutual protection and company. A young hobo traveling alone was an easy target for criminals who either robbed them or used them to commit crimes.

Nishi, Dennis. Life During the Great Depression. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1998.



"The 1930s were tough years. There were no jobs to be had – even the farmers weren't hiring. Thousands of us rode boxcars from place to place in hopes of earning a few pennies. Sometimes, when there weren't any boxcars, we would ride on top of the trains, no matter what the weather was like.

Anyone who remembers those days can vouch for the "yard bulls" who worked in the railway terminals. We'd keep out of sight and wait for the "highball", which signaled the train was about to leave. That was the time to climb aboard. If the "bull" caught you, you were herded into the special housing area at the end of the rail yard and then put on a "work train" and sent out to repair the tracks. The railroad still owes me a few cents for some of the work I did!

On one occasion, about 300 of us climbed aboard an eastbound freight train in Laurel, Montana. Those riding with us through the dark night included a man and his wife and their young daughter, who was perhaps 10 years old. On that trip, I found a few days' work somewhere in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana, bleaching celery. (Yes, celery was bleached in those days!)

Riding inside a boxcar or on top of the train was a dangerous way to travel. All of us were looking for work, but some were more desperate than others. If you had any money, you had to be careful; there was always the chance that other hobos might team up and overpower you so they could take it. A hobo also had to guard against the theft of his "bindle", a bedroll consisting of a piece of canvas wrapped around some blankets.

When there was no work to be found, we had no money for food. We sometimes went to the back doors of cafes and restaurants (no one ever went to the front door for a handout) to watch for the floor-sweeper. Getting a word to him

could help us get a sandwich, which was usually just a bit of leftover meat and two thin slices of bread, but it was usually enough to tide us over for a few hours."

Ralph P. Magelky, Eugene Oregon

Mulvey, Deb, ed. We Had Everything But Money. New York: Crescent Books, 1992.

When Gene Wadsworth caught his first freight at age 17 on a winter's night in 1932, he'd never ridden on a train before. Orphaned at age 11, Gene was living at Burley, Idaho, with an uncle who had five children of his own. "Why do you hang around here, when you're not wanted?" one of his cousins asked him. That night, Gene stuffed his few belongings into a flour sack and hit the road.

"I was about as low as a kid could get, as I walked over the Snake River Bridge. I was thinking of suicide, looking down into that black water, but I kept walking. A freight train was just pulling out of a little town. I stopped to let it pass.

"I'll never know why I reached out and grabbed the rung of the boxcar ladder. I climbed to the catwalk. I lay on my stomach and hung on for dear life, as we rumbled off into the night. I was scared stiff."

Taking the advice of older hoboes, Gene headed south to warmer climes and transient camps established by the government, where he could get work at \$1 a week, plus food and shelter. Moving between camps in California and Arizona, he made friends with a young man in the same position.

"Jim was also blond, my age and size — six feet and 165 pounds. Everyone believed we were brothers. We thought a lot alike and hit it off very good. We teamed up and decided to make our fortune together.

"All went well with us, until one night when Jim and I were riding on the ladders between two boxcars.

"It was so cold my hands nearly froze. I slipped my arm over a rung of the ladder and put my hand in my jacket pocket. Being back to back, I couldn't see Jim.

"All of a sudden the train gave a jerk, as it took up slack in the draw bars.

"I heard Jim let out a muffled moan, as he fell. I whirled round and made a grab for him. He had on a knit cap. I got the cap and a handful of blond hair. Jim was gone. Disappeared under the wheels.

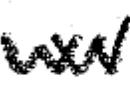
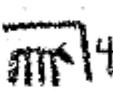
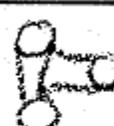
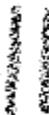
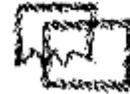
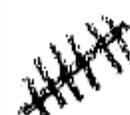
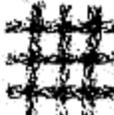
"No way could Jim survive. I got so sick I'd to climb up and lie on the catwalk.

"From then on, I was a loner. I never teamed up with anyone, but always traveled alone."

Luys, Errol. Riding the Rails. [online] Available at <http://www.erroluys.com/GeneWadsworth.htm>

Hobos use signs and symbols to communicate with others as they rode the rails.

<http://www.adh.bton.ac.uk/school/ofdesign/>

 KIND LADY LIVES HERE	 KIND WOMAN, tell pitiful story	 OR  FOOD HERE if you WORK	 RELIGIOUS TALK gets FREE MEAL		
 IF YOU ARE SICK, they'll care for you	 DOCTOR HERE, WON'T CHARGE	 FREE TELEPHONE	 ALCOHOL IN THIS TOWN	 OR  YOU CAN SLEEP in HAYLOFT	
 KEEP QUIET	 HOLD YOUR TONGUE	 BARKING DOG HERE	 VICIOUS DOG HERE	 BEWARE of FOUR DOGS	 EASY MARK, SUCKER
 THE SKY is the LIMIT	 TROLLEY STOP	 GOOD PLACE to CATCH a TRAIN	 THIS IS NOT A SAFE PLACE	 MAN with a GUN LIVES HERE	 BE PREPARED to DEFEND YOURSELF
 DISHONEST PERSON LIVES HERE	 COWARDS, will give, to get rid of you	 YOU'LL BE CURSED OUT	 A BEATING AWAITS YOU HERE	 POLICE HERE FROWN on HOBOS	 AUTHORITIES HERE ARE ALERT
 THERE ARE THIEVES ABOUT	 CRIME COMMITTED, not safe for strangers	 JUDGE LIVES HERE	 COURTHOUSE; PRECINCT STATION	 OFFICER of LAW LIVES HERE	 JAIL

Life During the Great Depression

Women

Women worked hard to help their families survive in the face of adversity during the Great depression. Many women canned food and sewed clothes. They also carefully managed household budgets. Jeane Westin, author of *Making Do: How Women Survived the 30's*, recalled, "Those days you did everything to save a penny... My next door neighbor and I used to shop together. You could get two pounds of hamburger for a quarter, so we'd buy two pounds and split it - then one week she'd pay the extra penny and the next week I'd pay."

Many women also worked outside the home, though they usually received less money than men did. As the Depression wore on, however, working women became the targets of enormous resentment. Some people believed that women, especially married women, had no right to work when men were unemployed. In the early 1930s, some cities refused to hire married women as schoolteachers.

Danzer, Gerald. *The Americans*. Evanston, Illinois: McDougall Littell, 1998.



If jobs were scarce for men, they were even more difficult to obtain for women. Being married virtually eliminated a woman's chances of finding a job anywhere, since she was considered to have a source of income. Even school districts enforced policies of letting newly married female employees go. Thousands of unemployed women, unable to support themselves, joined the itinerant masses during the Depression. They cut their hair short, dressed in men's clothing to avoid being robbed or raped, and stowed away on the next freight train out of town. One of the most well-known woman hoboes, Boxcar Bertha Thompson, rode the rails all her adult life. In her autobiography, entitled *Sister of the Road*, she wrote about the hundreds of hobo women she met during her travels:

I've decided that the most frequent reason they leave is economic and that they usually come from broken or poverty-stricken homes. They want to escape from reality, to get away from misery, and unpleasant surroundings. Others are driven out by inability to find expression at home, or maybe because of

parental discipline. Some hobo their way about to far away relatives, or go to seek romance. The dullness of a small town or a farm, made worse by long spells of the same kind of weather may start them off. But others are just seized with wanderlust.

Working women faced special problems during the depression. If jobs were available, employers would hire men before they hired women. Even the federal government refused to hire a woman if her husband had a job. Some government work relief programs were not open to women at all.

Despite such obstacles, millions of women earned wages in order to support themselves and their families. During the 1930's, the number of married women in the workforce increased to 52 percent. Educated women took jobs as schoolteachers, secretaries, and social workers. Other women earned a living as maids, factory workers, and seamstresses.

Davidson, James West et. al. *The American Nation*. New York: Prentice Hall, 2000.

"The way I look at it you got to have money to live, and if you can get it without breaking your back, so much the better. Changing sheets and polishing mirrors isn't the best job in the world, but it's not the worst, either. I got this room, a little salary, and they throw in the meals, too. You can't be too fussy, it don't pay. I'm satisfied." Mari Tomasi



When there was no job for the father, the mother and children sought any work they could find. What few jobs were available for women and children paid very little. Children were forced to grow up faster and take on more responsibility earlier to help the entire family. The eldest sons held part-time jobs after school or worked instead of going to school. The eldest daughters took care of the younger brothers and sisters when the parents were working or looking for work. During the most difficult times, when there was no employment for anybody and the family was forced to accept relief, morale plummeted. The women who did find work faced many obstacles. The prejudice typical of the times became worse during the Depression, as women were perceived as taking jobs normally held by men. But most of the jobs were considered "women's jobs" and were not always interchangeable. Women during the 1930's typically held jobs as domestic workers, in social work, in clerical jobs, and in primary education. Married women were especially frowned upon, since supposedly their husbands were supporting them. But one income was not enough in most cases. Even so, the government seemed to sanction discrimination against women: female workers in the WPA received only \$3 a day, whereas men were paid \$5.

Nishi, Dennis. Life During the Great Depression. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1998.

Many Americans assumed that women had an easier time than men during the Depression because few were seen begging or starving in the bread lines. As a matter of fact, many women were starving to death in cold attics and rooming houses and struggled to find employment. As writer Meridel le Seuer pointed out, women were often too ashamed to reveal their hardship.

I am sitting in the city free employment bureau. It's the woman section. We have been sitting here now for four hours. We sit here every day, waiting for a job. There are no jobs. Most of us have had no breakfast. Some have had scant rations for over a year. Hunger makes a human being lapse into a state of lethargy, especially city hunger. Is there any place else in the world where a human being is supposed to go hungry amidst plenty without an outcry, without protest, where only the boldest steal or kill for bread, and the timid crawl the streets, hunger like the beak of a terrible bird at the vitals?

We sit looking at the floor. No one dares think of the coming winter. There are only a few more days of summer. Everyone is anxious to get work to lay up something for that long siege of bitter cold. But there is no work. Sitting in the room we all know it. That is why we don't talk much. We look at the floor dreading to see that knowledge in each other's eyes. There is a kind of humiliation in it. We look away from each other. We look at the floor. It's too terrible to see this animal terror in each other's eyes.

So we sit hour after hour, day after day, waiting for a job to come in. There are many women for a single job. A thin sharp woman sits inside the wire cage looking at the book. For four hours we have watched her looking at that book. She had a hard little eye. In the small bare room there are a half dozen women sitting on the benches waiting. Many come and go. Our faces are all familiar to each other, for we wait here everyday.

This is a domestic employment bureau. Most of the women who come here are middle aged., some have families, some raised their families and are now alone, some have men who are out of work. Hard times and the man leave to hunt for work. He doesn't find it. He drifts on. The woman probably doesn't hear from him for a long time. She expects it. She isn't surprised. She struggles alone to feed the many mouths. If she's clever she can get herself a good living from the charities, if she's naturally a lick spittle, naturally a little docile and cunning. If she's proud then she starves silently, leaving her children to find work, coming home after a day's searching to wrestle with her house, her children.

Some such story is written on the faces of all these women. These are young girls too, fresh from the country. Some are made brazen too soon by the city. There is a great exodus from the farms into the city now. Thousands of farms have been vacated completely in Minnesota. The girls are trying to get work. The prettier ones can get jobs in the stores when there are any, or waiting on tables but these jobs are only for the attractive and the adroit, the others, the real peasants have a more difficult time....

It's one of the great mysteries of the city where women go when they are out of work and hungry. There are not many women in the bread line. There are no flop houses for women as there are for men, where a bed can be had for a quarter or less. You don't see women lying on the floor at the mission in the free flops. They obviously don't sleep in the jungle or under newspapers in the park. There is no law I suppose against their being in these places but the fact is they rarely are.

Meridel LeSueur, "Women on the Breadlines." Originally published in *New Masses*, January 1932

Life During the Great Depression

Tenant Farmers



The economy and the weather seemed to conspire during the 1930s to make life difficult for farmers. That was especially true of the southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In the 1930s there were eight and a half million tenant farmers and sharecroppers living in the South, about half of whom were black. They rented the land that they farmed and repaid the landlord, or owner of the farmland, by giving him part of their crops. Tenant farmers were required to return 25 percent of their crops to the landlords; sharecroppers owed 50 percent of their crops. As part of the arrangement the tenants and sharecroppers had to purchase seeds and other farming materials, as well as their food, from a store owned by the landlord. At the end of the season, the landlord assessed the produce and subtracted what he was owed. The remainder was the

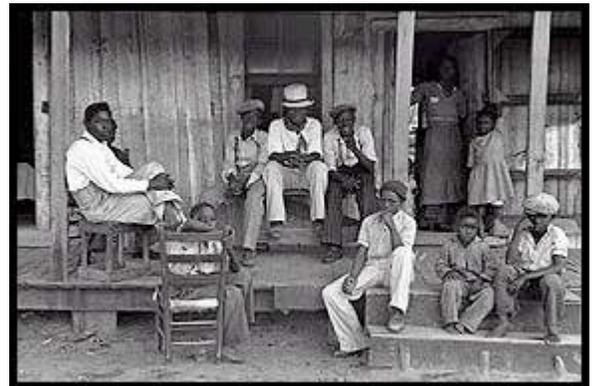
tenant's profit for a year's work. Most earned less than two hundred dollars a year. At the end of the season, it was possible for some to owe their entire crop to the landlord and make no profit on it at all. Or they might even be in debt to the landlord and be forced to stay on the land until the debt was paid.

It was a difficult and unprofitable life. One family of sharecroppers described their situation to members of the Federal Writers' Project:

money a week like some landlords. He's got a store, and we go there and get what we need. He don't complain about our account, but books [notes] it as we buy. We've done had our settlement with him this year; our account was \$375, which included our food and fertilizer and the labor for pickin' peas. We liked \$220 payin' out. So we've got to start out the new year with that debt starin' at us.... We own our own team, two mules, our wagon and plows; Mr. Makepeace pays the fertilizer bill, but the expenses of the peanut machine and labor has to come out of us, for our part and Mr. Makepeace's too.

After the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the tenant farmers' lives became even tougher. Landowners were paid to destroy a percentage of their cotton, wheat, and tobacco crops and to slaughter their hogs. Many accepted the payment and destroyed the crops of their tenant farmers, but they failed to share the payment with the farmers. As a result, two and a half million tenant farmers and sharecroppers were evicted from the land and pushed even deeper into poverty. Landowners freely admitted that the act worked in their favor. One explained:

"In '34 I had I reckon four renters and I didn't make anything. I bought tractors on the money the government give me and got shed [rid] o' my renters. You find it everywhere all over the country that way. I did everything the government said - except keep my renters. The renters have been having it this way ever since the government come in."

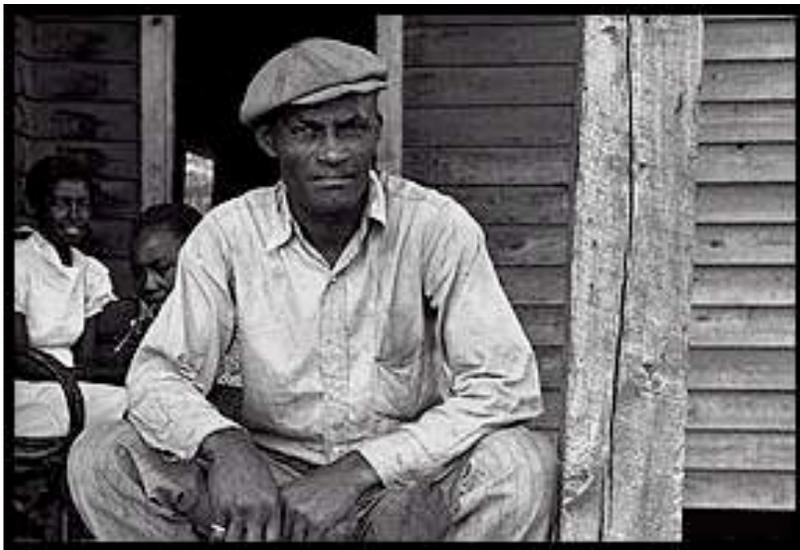


In response to this action Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party tried to organize both black and white sharecroppers to fight for their rights. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union was formed in Arkansas in the fall of 1934. Landowners reacted by evicting all those suspected of union activities. The leaders of the union met with the secretary of agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, to ask for his help in getting a fair deal for the tenants and sharecroppers. Wallace, however, took the side of the landowners. Cynics said that the administration's action was based on the fact that landowners voted but sharecroppers did not because they could not afford to pay the required poll tax. As a result, the tenants became more aggressive and militant, adding to the fear of worker unrest throughout the country.

In 1930 over half of all Southern farmers were tenant farmers who did not own the land they worked on. Tenancy was an outdated economic institution that evolved out of the Southern plantation system. It allowed landless farmers to either rent a portion of land or work on parts of it in exchange for a share of the crop. The land the tenant worked was usually poor, and as a rule the plots were too small to yield a decent living. Even by Depression standards, tenants suffered more than other classes of people in the US. Tenant farmer Donald Griffen recalls how the hard times affected his livelihood:

"In 1931, like many other tenant farmers, I was heavily in debt, with my mules and most of my farm implements mortgaged. That year I made a "short" crop and was unable to "pay out". My creditors showed me no mercy, and foreclosed, taking the mules and most of my tools. All I had left, in the way of work animals, was two head of one year old steers."

Tenancy existed all around the country, but was most prolific in the South and in cotton areas around the Mississippi Delta. In Arkansas, six out of every ten farms were tenant operated, and in the Delta region tenants made up 80 percent of all farmers. Tenants fell into three categories: the cash tenant, the share tenant, and the sharecropper. Cash tenants owned their own animals and tools and rented the land they farmed on. These farmers were economically in the best position to save enough money to buy their own farms. The share tenant owned some tools but relied on the landowner to supply the rest. The share tenant paid a small portion of corn and cotton crops in rent: the rest was paid in cash. The sharecropper owned no equipment or animals and could offer only labor.



Sharecropping was the lowliest form of tenancy, and evolved directly out of slavery. The sharecropper depended on the landowner to supply animals, tools, food, clothing, and housing. In return, sharecroppers worked "halves" meaning they gave half their crop to the landowner as rent. Dishonest landowners were known to divide proceeds unequally, so that most sharecroppers never made more than \$100 a year. Black tenant farmers overall took in less than white tenant farmers.

The housing provided to tenants was very poor. Unites were typically unpainted one or two room shacks made of logs or corrugated metal strips of wood which let the wind and rain through. Mud was used in an attempt to plug the gaps between the slats, and newspapers lined the inside walls. Because these hovels offered little protection from cold weather and malaria-bearing mosquitoes, the death rate was high for infants and children of tenant families. Tenant house also lacked modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing. Water was hauled in from nearby streams and ponds, which were also a source of food. The landowners ran stores where tenants and their families could buy food, clothes, and other necessities. Prices were marked up so heavily and landowners imposed credit terms so unfavorable that many tenants never received any wages at all: everything they earned went to pay for high priced food and credit. A third of all tenants moved every year in hopes of finding a more humane landowner.

Life During the Great Depression

City Workers

During the Depression, life was very difficult for farmers, but it wasn't much better in the cities, where fourteen million people lived in crowded, unheated, unsanitary tenements. In a letter to Harry Hopkins, the director of the Civil Works Administration, Martha Gellhorn described the unemployed workers and their families:



“This picture is so grim that whatever words I use will seem hysterical and exaggerated. And I find them all in the same shape - fear, fear driving them into a state of semi-collapse cracking nerves; and an overpowering terror of the future.... They can't pay rent and are evicted. They are watching their children grow thinner and thinner; fearing the cold for children who have neither coats nor shoes; wondering about coal.”

When they could no longer pay the rent and were evicted from their apartments, they used scraps of lumber and cardboard boxes to build shacks that they could live in. These new shantytowns on the edges of the cities were called Hoovervilles, for President Herbert Hoover, since many blamed him for causing the depression. In some areas government agencies could not be established quickly enough to take care of all of the needy, so many of them continued to depend on breadlines, where charitable organizations dispensed bread and soup or hospitals offered their leftovers. And relief payments were often inadequate. Lorena Hickok reported:

“There is no margin for clothing or medical service in the present relief grants to most families, and, while the present law continues, no cash for car-fare, medical supplies, and the other small, but indispensable, household necessities. The inadequacy of the present food allowance under Home Relief is emphasized by the fact that prices have risen markedly, so that the same quantity of food that could have been purchased last March for 96 cents now costs \$1.10.”

Farrell, Jacqueline. The Great Depression. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1996.

As the Depression deepened, cities attracted beaten people from all parts of the country. Farmers whose livelihoods had been foreclosed packed up their families and moved into the cities. Hoboes and other itinerants sought shelter in cities during harsh winters. City dwellers themselves were not immune to the rails of the nation. Thousands of unemployed residents who could not pay their rent or mortgages were evicted into the world of public assistance and bread lines. At the peak of the Depression, seventeen thousand families were put out on the street each month. Although residents were given priority over newcomers for local aid, there were too many other residents standing in the same lines waiting for a check or a bowl of soup. Municipal resources were overwhelmed quickly, and city agencies resorted to thinning relief payments to below the cost of living and watering down the soup to help more people over a longer time.

Many cities just ran out of money and were even forced to pay city employees in scrip (a temporary voucher, redeemable for food and other products). At the height of the Depression Chicago had half a million unemployed, and in New York the jobless figure topped a million. With so many taxpayers both jobless and homeless, American cities lost a major source of income. Relief budgets meant to last a year were spent in several months.

At President Hoover's beckoning, charities had stepped in to help ease the burden on municipal resources. Hoover was a firm believer in volunteerism. Feeling that each community was responsible for aiding people in distress, Hoover created programs that bolstered morale and encouraged charity. But the charities were themselves in trouble because they depended on contributions from a public who could not give any more. In many cities philanthropic groups of businessmen mounted relief drives, but the funds collected dwindled quickly as conditions worsened.

In 1930 the International Apple Shippers Association was faced with an oversupply of fruit and came up with a unique solution to a national problem: to clear out their warehouses and give the unemployed a way to make a little money, they sold apples on credit. The ploy worked. Months later a shivering apple vendor could be found standing over a fruit

crate on the corner of every major American city. By the end of November there were six thousand people selling apples in New York alone. The trend spread, and suddenly there were pitchmen of all persuasions standing alongside the apple sellers, handling everything from patent medicines to gaudy neckties. There were even chalk artists who drew figures of women on the sidewalks for passersby to appreciate with a few coins. Many cities soon passed ordinances, however, which banned the street vendors as a nuisance to the public.

With foreclosures and evictions becoming all too common, Hoovervilles rose up in every city under bridges, in abandoned lots, in city dumps, and alongside major highways across America. These makeshift shantytowns, filled with hunger, crime, and disease, provided a final refuge for people with no place left to go. Brooklyn's "Hoover City" housed six hundred residents. Another such community, in Oklahoma next to city stockyards, was home to over two thousand. The smell was overwhelming, but the cows provided milk for starving residents, who crept into the pens at night.

Hoovervilles had no electricity or running water but were usually built near rivers or fireplugs. They were not supported by the city or government in any way, so moving into such an encampment required no registration or security deposit. Prospective residents simply looked around and picked a spot. City dumps, construction sites, and trash bins provided materials for constructing shelters. The gutted husks of old cars made acceptable homes, as did stacks of fruit boxes and worn tires. If a shelter was built well enough, a resident could sell it. There was always turnover, since people continually came and went. A good prebuilt home could easily be worth as much as \$50.



Despite zoning violations and health hazards, many Hoovervilles were allowed to exist. Some cities even lent tracts of public land for the cultivation of small gardens. Not everybody was tolerant, however. Many Hoovervilles were raided and burned down by sheriffs and vigilante groups.

City residents who managed to keep their jobs and houses took pay cuts or large reductions in their work schedules. A survey of fifteen hundred companies suggested that workers lost 32 percent of their pay between 1929 and 1932. Of those people, it is estimated half worked part-time. It became a financial necessity for working-class households to take on boarders and roommates. Newly arrive migrants, workers, and poor single parents who could not afford their own accommodations lived cheaply with a score of roommates and offered a small additional in- come for the hosts.

Crowded living conditions were not uncommon in the working-class home. Extended families were formed who shared the same space, food costs, rent, and even bedding: the "hotbed- was a living arrangement in which night workers slept during the day and day workers used the same beds at night. Furnishings in working-class apartments were sparse. There were a few chairs, tables, and boxes that served as dressers. There was rarely any carpeting, and not all homes had hot water. In older buildings heat was provided through coal grates, which forced ten- ants to scour the neighborhood for coal or other fuel. Many people planted subsistence gardens in vacant lots or rooftops to feed themselves when grocery money was really scarce. Twenty thousand of these gardens were reported in Gary, Indiana, alone.

Interestingly enough, during the Depression people held onto their cars as long as they could financially afford them, and many held onto them even when they could not afford the expense. Will Rogers was quoted as saying: "The American people will be the first in history to ride to the poorhouse in their own automobiles." The automobile was changing the landscape by forcing cities to accommodate the increasing number of cars on the road. Signs, lights, boulevards, parkway and highway construction, and even parking meters cost billions of dollars annually. Thanks to the automobile, the middle class moved out of the city into the suburbs, a region that was made more accessible by the newly constructed roads. Many moved into tract housing, which utilized mass production techniques to bring construction prices down. Large-scale housing developments were built between the 1920s and 1930s. The cheaper land also encouraged commercial development of stores and other outlets that made life more convenient and less dependent on the cities.

Life During the Great Depression

Migrant Workers

Large numbers of ruined farmers abandoned their land, now worthless, and let it fall into foreclosure. Some packed everything they could carry or fit onto their trucks and migrated west. Some hopped freight trains, took buses, or hitchhiked. Most drove in their own vehicles to California. Some came through Idaho and others traveled Highway 66 across New Mexico and Arizona. Those who took the southern route did not cross the large stretches of desert during the hot summer months, since their old cars and trucks were prone to overheat.



By the end of the decade, an estimated 2.5 million people had moved out of the Plains states, making the dust bowl exodus the largest migration in American history. Over two hundred thousand people moved to California. The dispossessed south-westerners were largely illiterate and unskilled by California standards. Corporate California farms utilized the latest technologies to harvest unfamiliar crops. Whereas in Oklahoma the largest crops were cotton and wheat, California farms grew fruit, nuts, and vegetables, but very little grain. As in John Steinbeck's important novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the Joad family's journey from Oklahoma, 40 percent of the migrant farmers moved to the San Joaquin Valley, where cotton was grown. The Oklahomans already understood the basics of harvesting cotton. They ended up picking grapes, pears, melons, peaches, and other fruits that required simple but different skills.



Once in California, many of the new migrants gave up their agrarian lifestyles upon discovering that the state's bountiful farmland was mostly controlled by agricultural monopolies. They moved into and around the urban areas in California and joined the legion of unemployed looking for jobs. The sheer number of them changed the cultural landscape of many California communities. Shacktowns called Little Oklahomas or Okieville sprang up in open lots around cities such as Modesto, Fresno, and Bakersfield. Local landowners who had been sitting on undeveloped property came up with the idea of subdividing the land into small plots, which were sold for as little as \$5 down and \$3 a month, on the installment plan. Houses were built from scrounged scraps. Sanitation was nonexistent, as was plumbing, electricity, and police and fire protection. Available water was often polluted. Trash and waste were allowed to accumulate, creating a health hazard. Typhoid, malaria, smallpox, and tuberculosis broke out among the migratory workers.



The Southwesterners sent their children to the local public schools and collected relief when they could. Over many years the shacks were replaced by real houses and the Little Oklahomas were absorbed into the towns they bordered. Urbanites were not happy to receive additional burdens on local relief, and they made life difficult for the new residents. Property taxes were increased to compensate for the rising costs of schooling and local relief. The "Okies" and "Arkies," as all the migrants were dubbed regardless of state of origin, were openly discriminated against by employers and harassed by police.

James Davis, the police chief of Los Angeles, took it upon himself to plug the flood of transients entering the state at the source. He sent 125 policemen eight hundred miles out of their jurisdiction to turn away anybody deemed undesirable at the Arizona/California border. This mission also gave LAPD an excuse to fingerprint the transients. The "bum blockade," as it would be called by the press, was not popular, however, with many citizens of the border regions. Eventually the city attorney of Los Angeles questioned the usage of city funds for Davis's border patrol, and the officers were recalled.

Driven by the Great Depression, drought, and dust storms, thousands of farmers packed up their families and made the difficult journey to California where they hoped to find work. Why did so many of the refugees pin their hopes for a better life on California? One reason was that the state's mild climate allowed for a long growing season and a diversity of crops with staggered planting and harvesting cycles. For people whose lives had revolved around farming, this seemed like an ideal place to look for work. Popular songs and stories, circulating in oral tradition for decades, exaggerated these attributes, depicting California as a veritable promised land. In addition, flyers advertising a need for farm workers in the Southwest were distributed in areas hard hit by unemployment. Finally, the country's major east-west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 -- also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," "The Main Street of America," and "Will Rogers Highway" -- abetted the westward flight of the migrants. A trip of such length was not undertaken lightly in this pre-interstate era, and Highway 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to an area just south of the Central Valley of California.

Although the Dust Bowl included many Great Plains states, the migrants were generically known as "Okies," referring to the approximately 20 percent who were from Oklahoma. The migrants represented in *Voices from the Dust Bowl* came primarily from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Most were of Anglo-American descent with family and cultural roots in the poor rural South.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tsme.html>



Madonna Wyckoff looks back on her youth on the road to California:

"Then the Depression hit. Mom had relatives in California who urged us to come West, and they decided to go. It was a "burning your bridges" decision: they knew once we arrived, we wouldn't have the means to come back. We left Iowa with \$85 cash and all our possessions packed in and on our 1925 Model T.

Like pioneers of old, we set up roadside camps each night, where we prepared the evening meal and the next morning's breakfast. Lunch was never elaborate: we simply pulled off the road and ate wherever we happened to be at noon. Travel was much different then; traffic was light, and towns and accommodations were few and far between.

It was a dirty, dusty trip, and when we reached clear water near the Nevada-California line, we laid over an extra day so everyone could bathe

and shampoo their hair. The laundry was done on a washboard and spread out on bushes to dry.

To eyes accustomed to Iowa's cornfields, soft green timber and rolling hills, the desert plains, antelope, prairie dogs and mountains were marvelous curiosities. But California, we believed, would be lush and green. How wrong we were! The weather had been so dry that water was being rationed.

When we arrived at our destination of Paradise, California, my parents' \$85 had dwindled to \$8, they had no jobs, and the old Model T was worn out from the trip. We stayed with relatives for a couple of weeks. With a few odd jobs and an assist from the Salvation Army, Mom and Dad were able to rent a small cabin for us before winter set in.

Dad scoured the countryside for work, with no success. One day he heard about a rock-crushing job, hurried to check it out and was hired immediately. He commuted to work with a fellow employee, but one morning overslept and had to take his own car to work. The boss saw dad's Iowa license plates and fired him on the spot, saying the jobs were only for Californians."



Mulvey, Deb, ed. *We Had Everything But Money*. New York: Crescent Books, 1992.

Life During the Great Depression

Mexican Americans

By the beginning of the 1930s, the Mexican American population was about 1.5 million, much of it the result of immigration – both legal and illegal. Many of the immigrants had gone north to work in the sugar beet fields of Michigan and other Great Lakes states, while others moved to the cities of the Midwest looking for work in the steel mills, automobile plants, and other industries. Most of the immigrants scattered across the Southwest, going to the sugar beet and cotton fields of Texas, Colorado, and Arizona, or into the huge agricultural farms of the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys in California. Many Hispanics also settled in the cities of the Southwest, especially in Los Angeles. By 1930, there were almost 100,000 Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles, making it the “Mexican capital” of the country.

T.H. Watkins. *The Great Depression – America in the 1930s*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1993, pp. 68-70.



Mexican and Mexican American migrant farm workers expected conditions like those pictured above as they sought farm work in California and other states in the early 1900s. At that time, the Mexican Revolution and the series of Mexican civil wars that followed pushed many Mexicans to flee to the United States. Many U.S. farm owners recruited Mexicans and Mexican Americans because they believed that these desperate workers would tolerate living conditions that workers of other races would not.

Mexican and Mexican American workers often earned more in the United States than they could in Mexico's civil war economy, although California farmers paid Mexican and Mexican American workers significantly less than white American workers. By the 1920s, at least three quarters of California's 200,000 farm workers were Mexican or Mexican American.

As this rapid shift of Mexico's working population occurred, the first labor agreement between the United States and Mexico was formed. Mexico required that U.S. farm owners provide legal contracts for all Mexican workers guaranteeing conditions such as wages and work schedules. The U.S. government, in turn, enforced the border between the United States and Mexico, checking that all Mexican immigrants had the proper work contract so they would not be exploited.

As the Great Depression took a toll on California's economy during the 1930s, however, Mexicans and Mexican Americans became targets for discrimination and removal. White government officials claimed that Mexican immigrants made up the majority of the California unemployed. White trade unions claimed that Mexican immigrants were taking jobs that should go to white men. In reality, a new supply of white refugees desperate for jobs was flooding California from the Midwest, making up the majority of the unemployed.

At the same time that wages were dropping due to the new white refugee labor, established Mexican and Mexican American farm workers had become a threat by banding together, often with other non-whites, and organizing strikes to protest lowered wages and worsening living conditions. Agriculture in the United States was crippled due to the ongoing Dust Bowl drought in the Midwest, while California was relatively untouched - the farm owners had a chance to profit immensely from the supply of cheap labor, but not if these protests succeeded.

California state and local governments responded to white farm owner pressure and implemented "repatriation" plans to send Mexican immigrants back to Mexico in busloads and boxcars. Many Mexican Americans were also sent out of the United States under these programs, there being no differentiation between Mexicans and Mexican American U.S. citizens. Mexican American U.S. citizens who were children at the time were also deported to Mexico along with their Mexican parents.



“Picture This: The Depression Era”. The Oakland Museum of California. [online] Available at http://www.museumca.org/picturethis/3_2.html.

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit Mexican immigrants especially hard. Along with the job crisis and food shortages that affected all U.S. workers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans had to face an additional threat: deportation. As unemployment swept the U.S., hostility to immigrant workers grew, and the government began a program of repatriating immigrants to Mexico. Immigrants were offered free train rides to Mexico, and some went voluntarily, but many were either tricked or coerced into repatriation, and some U.S. citizens were deported simply on suspicion of being Mexican. All in all, hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants, especially farmworkers, were sent out of the country during the 1930s--many of them the same workers who had been eagerly recruited a decade before.

The farmworkers who remained struggled to survive in desperate conditions. Bank foreclosures drove small farmers from their land, and large landholders cut back on their permanent workforce. As with many Southwestern farm families, a great number of Mexican American farmers discovered they had to take on a migratory existence and traveled the highways in search of work.

Many found temporary stability in the migrant work camps established by the U.S. Farm Security Administration, or FSA. The FSA camps provided housing, food, and medicine for migrant farm families, as well as protection from criminal elements that often took advantage of vulnerable migrants. The FSA set up several camps specifically for Mexican Americans in an attempt to create safe havens from violent attacks

The camps also provided an unexpected benefit. In bringing together so many individual farm families, they increased ties within the community. Many residents began organizing their fellow workers around labor issues, and helped pave the way for the farm labor movements that emerged later in the century.

Immigration. The Library of Congress. [online] Available at <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/mexican6.html>

Hard Times were especially trying for Mexican Americans as well. As the Great Depression drastically reduced the demand for their labor, they faced massive layoffs, deepening poverty, even starvation. In Houston, a settlement association survey made in 1935 reported that "no group are greater sufferers from the present economic situation than members of the Mexican colony."

In 1931, President Hoover's Secretary of Labor, William N. Doak, announced a plan for repatriating illegal aliens and giving their jobs to American citizens. The federal campaign focused on Mexican immigrants in California and the Southwest, where local governments were eager to eliminate the minority poor from relief rolls. The U.S. Immigration Service swooped in on businesses and homes in a number of publicized raids, rounded up large numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and demanded that each detainee prove his or her legal status. Those who failed to produce the necessary documentation were deported. Altogether, the federal government repatriated 82,000 Mexican immigrants between 1929 and 1935.

Local governments pressured many more into leaving. Los Angeles County official, for example, "persuaded" 12,000 unemployed Mexicans to leave by threatening to remove them from the relief rolls and offering them free railroad tickets to Mexico; Colorado officials secured the departure of 20,000 Mexicans through the use of similar techniques. The combined efforts of federal, state, and local governments created a climate of fear in Mexican communities that prompted 500,000 to return to Mexico by 1935. This totaled equaled the number of Mexicans who had come to the United States in the 1920s. Los Angeles lost one-third of its Mexican population. Included in the repatriate ranks, in Los Angeles, were a significant number of legal immigrants who were unable to produce their immigration papers, the American-born children of illegals, and some Mexican Americans who had lived in the Southwest for generations.

Staying in the United States often turned out to be as difficult as leaving. The average income of Mexican American families in the Rio Grande valley of Texas was \$506 a year. The sum represented the combined income of parents and children. Following the harvest made schooling particularly difficult: fewer than 2 Mexican American children in 10 completed five years of school.

Nichols, Kimberly. "Minorities During the Depression." History 1302: U.S. History Since 1877. [online] Available at <http://www.people.memphis.edu/~kenichls/2602GDMinorities.html>

Life During the Great Depression

Urban African Americans

The Depression was, of course, an economic disaster for most Americans, but African Americans suffered a disproportionate share of the burden. The old and true saying that blacks were the last hired and first fired cut both ways during the Depression. Unemployment in the 20s had been much more among blacks than whites.

As layoffs began in late 1929 and accelerated in the following years, blacks were often the first to get pink slips. By 1932 black unemployment reached approximately 50 percent nationwide. Some undesirable jobs had long been reserved for blacks, but such jobs became more attractive to whites when the Depression hit. Whites demanded that blacks be discharged as domestic servants, garbage collectors, elevator operators, waiters, bellhops, and street cleaners.

Those blacks that had been able to keep their jobs suffered great hardship as well. In Harlem, an investigation indicated that skilled workers experienced a drop of nearly 50 percent in their wages since the onset of the Depression. The lack of employment opportunities cut down the rate of black migration to the northern cities, but more than 40,000 blacks still made the Great Migration in the 30s.

McElvaine, Robert S. The Great Depression. New York: Times Books.



The Negro was born in depression. It didn't mean too much to him, The Great American Depression, as you call it. There was no such thing. The best he could be is a janitor or a porter or a shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man. If you can tell me the different between the depression today and the Depression of 1932 for a black man, I'd like to know it. Now, it's worse, because of the prices. Know the rents they're payin' out here? I hate to tell ya....

We had one big advantage. Our wives, they could go to the store and get a bag of beans or a sack of flour and a piece of fat meat, and they could cook this. And we could eat it. Steak? A steak would kick in my stomach like a mule in a tin stable. Now you take the white fella, he couldn't do this. His wife would tell him: Look, if you can't do any better than this, I'm gonna leave you. I seen it happen. He couldn't stand bringing home beans instead of steak

and capon [cornbread]. And he couldn't stand the ides of going on relief like a Negro.

You take a fella had a job paying him \$60, and here I am making \$25. If I go home taking beans to my wife, we'll eat it. The white man that's making big money, he's taking beans home, his wife'll say: Get out.

Why did these big wheels kill themselves? They weren't able to live up to the standards they were accustomed to, and they got ashamed in front of their women. You see, you can tell anybody a lie, and he'll agree with you. But you start layin' down the facts of real life, he won't accept it. The American white man has been superior so long, he can't figure out why he should come down.

I remember a friend of mine, he didn't know he was a Negro. I mean he acted like he never knew it. He got tied downtown with some stock. He blew about twenty thousand. He came home and drank a bottle of poison. A bottle of iodine or something like that. It was a rarity to hear a Negro killing himself over a financial situation. He might have killed himself over some woman. Or getting in a fight. But when it came to the financial end of it, there were so few who had anything.

Clifford Burke, "The Negro Was Born In Depression".

Urban black families were the victims of prejudice and discrimination. Many landlords would not even rent to African Americans, so tens of thousands of people lived packed together in aging tenement buildings in

segregated parts of the city. To save money, two or even three families might occupy a single family dwelling. Many of the buildings had attics, cellars, and basements converted into sparse apartment units. Some had no windows, no private baths, and perhaps not even a public bath. Those who were fortunate enough to find a bathtub installed it in the only room that had running water – the kitchen. Landlords knew how difficult it was for blacks to find housing in the city and systematically raised rents, making it difficult for even the thriftiest families to hold onto money. Many landlords failed to maintain the ramshackle buildings, some of which were on the verge of being condemned, creating a health and safety hazard for tenants and neighborhood alike.

Urban black Americans were also discriminated against in the workplace. Despite being forced to work longer hours than their white counterparts, they earned considerably less money and had less job security. They were often the last hired and the first fired for what few jobs were available. And jobs that had typically been held by unskilled black workers in the city were now being taken by white workers suddenly willing to become porters, garbage men, and domestic servants. Because of widespread discrimination, large numbers of black workers collected relief. In Philadelphia, blacks comprised 39 percent of those on relief. Other cities had similar numbers, which gave the false impression that black workers were lazy and unreliable.

Displaced southern blacks, many of whom had been tenant farmers, migrated north in record numbers. They found prejudice in the cities to be less obvious but just as pervasive as it was in the South.

Nishi, Dennis. *Life During the Great Depression*. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1998.

The problems of the Great Depression affected virtually every group of Americans. No group was harder hit than African Americans, however. By 1932, approximately half of black Americans were out of work. In some Northern cities, whites called for blacks to be fired from any jobs as long as there were whites out of work. Racial violence again became more common, especially in the South. Lynchings, which had declined to eight in 1932, surged to 28 in 1933.

Although most African Americans traditionally voted Republican, the election of President Franklin Roosevelt began to change voting patterns. Roosevelt entertained African-American visitors at the White House and was known to have a number of black advisors. According to historian John Hope Franklin, many African Americans were excited by the energy with which Roosevelt began tackling the problems of the Depression and gained "a sense of belonging they had never experienced before" from his fireside chats.

Still, discrimination occurred in New Deal housing and employment projects, and President Roosevelt, for political reasons, did not back all of the legislation favored by such groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When the U.S. entered World War II, labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a march on Washington to protest job discrimination in the military and other defense-related activities. In response, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, stating that all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, would be allowed to participate fully in the defense of the United States.

"Great Depression and WWII, 1929-1945." *Race and Relations in the 1930s*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Mar 2012.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/> .