

THE HUMAN IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The human toll of the collapse of the American economy with 12 million people, or 25 percent of the labor force, unemployed by 1932 was seen in soup lines and bread lines. Even these relief efforts by organizations like the Red Cross had to be limited as the voluntary contributions that supported them slowed down. As banks failed, people lost their savings; as companies failed, they lost their jobs as well. Blacks and unskilled workers were the first to experience unemployment. In 1931 black unemployment was estimated as 30 to 60 percent greater than white unemployment. Women were criticized for working while men could not find jobs. In truth, female occupations such as nursing and clerical work were less hard hit than male positions in manufacturing.

Family life was disrupted. Women at home looked for ways to stretch what money the family had. Families moved in with relatives. Marriages were postponed. The birth rate dropped. Fewer were able to attend college.

Life in the Cities

As more Americans lost their homes, "Hoovervilles" grew in the cities. These were sites of shacks lacking heating or water, often made of crates, in which the homeless lived. These homeless slept under old newspapers called "Hoover blankets." Others slept in city parks. People selling apples and shoelaces on the street became a common sight. Malnutrition increased as did death from starvation. There were more cases of diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid as well as an increase in the suicide rate. Parents starved themselves to give what food they had to their children.

Life in the Country

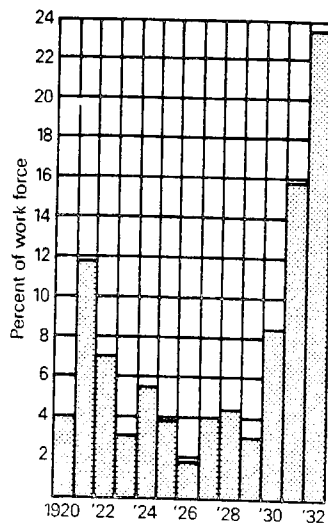
With more people unable to even buy food, farmers found that their already depressed income dropped by one-half. Farm foreclosure sales grew in number. The farmers' desperate situation only grew

worse in the 1930s with a drought in the Great Plains. Parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico suffered from year after year of drought, which resulted in the loss of the topsoil through dust storms. The **Dust Bowl's** effect created a group of migrant farmers called "Okies" who moved to California in search of work. Their sufferings were made famous in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Culture of the Great Depression

The Great Depression dominated every aspect of life in the 1930s. Therefore, it is understandable that the conditions it created are mirrored in the popular culture of the decade. In the 1930s people sought inexpensive and escapist leisure activities. Spectator sports remained popular, but fewer people could afford to attend. Instead, they played miniature golf or softball, pinball machines, the new board game *Monopoly*, or they read comic books. *Dick Tracy* was one of the popular comic strips of the decade. About one-third of the nation's movie theaters closed during the depression, but each week between 60 and 90 million people turned out to see films like *King Kong*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, the latest cowboy adventure, serials, musicals, or Walt Disney cartoons. It cost nothing to listen to the radio, which offered the comedy of George Burns and Gracie Allen or Jack Benny, as well as soap operas and serials.

The Human Impact of the Great Depression: Unemployment, 1920-1932



The literature, photography, and paintings of the 1930s all reflected the concerns of the times. The photographs of Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White revealed the suffering of the people. Bourke-White's work appeared in the new *Life* magazine, which for decades depicted American life in pictures until television took over that role. Paintings were often of ordinary people. Some novels such as those of John Dos Passos or John Steinbeck protested life of the 1930s. Other works, such as those of William Faulkner, were less political. Music of the 1930s continued to be dominated by jazz and jazz greats such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. It was also the age of swing (big) bands such as those of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. The musical became a popular form of theater with music by greats such as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Jerome Kern.

Social Studies 11
Human Impact of The Great Depression

Name:
Date:

1. What percentage of the population was unemployed in 1932?

2. How did the Red Cross try to help people during the depression?

3. Who were the first to become unemployed?

4. How was the family effected by the depression?

5. What were Hoovervilles?

6. What were Hoover blankets?

7. What was the Dust Bowl?

8. What were "okies"?

9. Name the novel that is based on "okies".

10. What did people do who could not afford spectator sports?

11. What was the new board game of the era?

12. Name three popular movies of the era?

13. What new magazine appeared in the 30's?

14. What new type of music developed from jazz in the 30's?

15. Name two popular musical writers of the 30's.
