The Great Depression

During the economic boom of the "Roaring Twenties," the traditional values of rural America were challenged by the Jazz Age, symbolized by women smoking, drinking, and wearing short skirts. The average American was busy buying automobiles and household appliances, and speculating in the stock market, where big money could be made. Those appliances were bought on credit, however. Although businesses had made huge gains -- 65 percent -- from the mechanization of manufacturing, the average worker's wages had only increased 8 percent.

On Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, triggering the Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the history of the modern industrial world. It spread from the United States to the rest of the world, lasting from the end of 1929 until the early 1940s. With banks failing and businesses closing, more than 15 million Americans (25% of the workforce) became unemployed.

President Herbert Hoover, underestimating the seriousness of the crisis, called it "a passing incident in our national lives," and assured Americans that it would be over in 60 days. A strong believer in rugged individualism, Hoover did not think the federal government should offer relief to the poverty-stricken population. Blamed by many for the Great Depression, Hoover was widely ridiculed: an empty pocket turned inside out was called a "Hoover flag;" the decrepit shantytowns springing up around the country were called "Hoovervilles." Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the rich governor from New York, offered Americans a New Deal, and was elected president in a landslide victory in 1932.

The New Deal programs created a liberal political alliance of labor unions, blacks and other minorities, some farmers and others receiving government relief, and intellectuals. Men were harder hit psychologically than women were. Since men were expected to provide for their families, it was humiliating to have to ask for assistance. Although some argued that women should not be given jobs when many men were unemployed, the percentage of women working increased slightly during the Depression. African Americans suffered more than whites, since their jobs were often taken away from them and given to whites. In 1930, 50 percent of blacks were unemployed. However, Eleanor Roosevelt championed black rights, and New Deal programs prohibited discrimination. Discrimination continued in the South, however, as a result a large number of black voters switched from the Republican to the Democrat party during the Depression.

The Great Depression and the New Deal changed forever the relationship between Americans and their government. Government involvement and responsibility in caring for the needy and regulating the economy came to be expected.

The Drought

The drought hit first in the eastern part of the country in 1930. In 1931, it moved toward the west. By 1934 it had turned the Great Plains into a desert. Black Sunday (April 14, 1935) was the day of the worst dust storms. "If you would like to have your heart broken, just come out here," wrote Ernie Pyle, a roving reporter in Kansas, just north of the Oklahoma border, in June of 1936. "This is the dust-storm country. It is the saddest

and I have ever seen."
US History-Johnson & Rasar
The Drought alone did not cause the black blizzards. Although dry spells are unavoidable in the region, occurring roughly every 25 years, it was the combination of drought and misuse of the land that led to the incredible devastation of the Dust Bowl years. Originally covered with grasses that held the fine soil in place, the land of the southern plains was plowed by settlers who brought their farming techniques with them when they homesteaded the area. Wheat crops, in high demand during World War I, exhausted the topsoil. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep herds stripped the western plains of their cover. When the drought hit, the land just blew away in the wind.

"Lured by the promise of rich, plentiful soil, thousands of settlers came to the Southern Plains, bringing farming techniques that worked well in the North and East. The farmers subsequently plowed millions of acres of grassland, only to have the rains stop in the summer of 1931. The catastrophic eight-year drought that followed led observers to rename the region "The Dust Bowl.""

Mass Exodus from the Plains

"The land just blew away; we had to go somewhere."
-- Kansas preacher, June, 1936

When the drought and dust storms showed no signs of letting up, many people abandoned their land. Others would have stayed but were forced out when they lost their land in bank foreclosures. In all, one-quarter of the population left, packing everything they owned into their cars and trucks, and headed west toward California. Although overall three out of four farmers stayed on their land, the mass exodus depleted the population drastically in certain areas. In the rural area outside Boise City, Oklahoma, the population dropped forty percent, with 1,642 small farmers and their families pulling up stakes.

The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history. By 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the Plains states; of those, 200,000 moved to California. When they reached the border, they did not receive a warm welcome, as described in this 1935 excerpt from Collier's magazine. "Very erect and primly severe, [a man] addressed the slumped driver of a rolling wreck that screamed from every hinge, bearing and coupling. 'California's relief rolls are overcrowded now. No use to come farther.'"

Like the Joad family in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath", some 40 percent of migrant farmers wound up in the San Joaquin Valley, picking grapes and cotton. They took up the work of Mexican migrant workers, 120,000 of whom were sent back to Mexico during the 1930s. Life for migrant workers was hard. They were paid by the quantity of fruit and cotton picked, with earnings ranging from seventy-five cents to $1.25 a day. Out of that, they had to pay twenty-five cents a day to rent a tar-paper shack with no floor or plumbing. Many gave up farming. They set up residence near larger cities in shacktowns called Little Oklahomas or Okievilles, on open lots local landowners divided into tiny subplots and sold cheaply, for $5 down and $3 in monthly installments. They built their houses from scavenged scraps, and lived without plumbing and electricity. Polluted water and a lack of trash and waste facilities led to outbreaks of typhoid,
malaria, smallpox and tuberculosis.

Over the years, they replaced their shacks with real houses, sending their children to local schools and becoming part of the communities, although they continued to face discrimination when looking for work, and were called "Okies" and "Arkies" by the locals, regardless of where they came from.

The New Deal

In 1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected overwhelmingly on a campaign promising a New Deal for the American people. Although he had been struck by polio as an adult, Roosevelt refused to give up his political career. The press corps worked with him to present the image of a president sound in both mind and body, minimizing his paralysis, to the extent that most of the public was not aware of it at the time. Roosevelt worked quickly upon his election to deliver the New Deal, an unprecedented number of reforms addressing the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression. Unlike his predecessor, Herbert Hoover, who felt that the public should support the government and not the other way around, Roosevelt felt it was the federal government's duty to help the American people weather these bad times.

Together with his "brain trust," a group of university scholars and liberal theorists, Roosevelt sought the best course of action for the struggling nation. A desperate Congress gave him full control and rubber-stamped his proposals in order to hurry the reforms. During the first 100 days of his presidency, a never-ending stream of bills was passed, to relieve poverty, reduce unemployment, and speed economic recovery. While they did not end the Depression, the New Deal's experimental programs helped the American people immeasurably by taking care of their basic needs and giving them the dignity of work, and hope.

- Emergency Banking Bill of 1933, which stabilized the banking system
- Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 created the FDIC, federally insuring deposits
- Civil Conservation Corps (CCC), one of the New Deal's most successful programs; addressed the pressing problem of unemployment by sending 3 million single men from age 17 to 23 to the nations' forests to work
- Works Progress Administration (WPA), major work relief program, employed more than 8.5 million people to build bridges, roads, public buildings, parks and airports, WPA supported tens of thousands of artists, by funding creation of 2,566 murals and 17,744 pieces of sculpture that decorate public buildings nationwide
- National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA)/National Recovery Administration (NRA), addressed unemployment by regulating the number of hours worked per week and banning child labor
- Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) 1933, gave $3 billion to states for work relief programs
- Agricultural Adjustment Act, subsidized farmers for reducing crops and provided loans for farmers facing bankruptcy
- Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC,) helped people save their homes from foreclosure

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DEPRESSION ERA PHOTOS

(picture 1) Farm Security Administration: Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. (Circa February 1936)

(picture 2) Dust Storms: In 1934 and 1936 drought and dust storms ravaged the great American plains and added to the New Deal’s relief burden.

(picture 3) Dust Storms; "One of South Dakota's Black Blizzards, 1934" Photograph from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.
(picture 4) Farm foreclosure sale in Iowa (circa 1933)

(picture 5) Farm Security Administration: farmers whose topsoil blew away joined the sod caravans of "Okies" on Route 66 to California. (Circa 1935)

←(picture 6) Wife and children of a sharecropper in Washington County, Arkansas. (Circa 1935)

(picture 7) Farm Security Administration: School in Alabama. (Circa 1935)
(picture 8) Resettlement Administration; Rural Rehabilitation; "Dave Mayberry"; Iredell Co., N.C. (Circa November 1933)

(picture 9) Slaughter of the pigs for the hog reduction program.

(picture 10) Unemployed: Typical picture → capturing the number of people who were unemployed and looking for a job. (Circa 1935)
(picture 11) Depression: "Runs on Banks": people milling about outside of bank. (Circa 1933)

(picture 12) Depression: Breadlines: long line of people waiting to be fed: New York City: in the absence of substantial government relief programs during 1932, free food was distributed with private funds in some urban centers to large numbers of the unemployed. (Circa February 1932)

(picture 14) Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees clearing the land for soil conservation. (Circa 1934)

(picture 15) Civilian Conservation Corps. (Circa 1933)

http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blyindexdepression.htm

(picture 16) Franklin Delano Roosevelt