

The Great Depression

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1 The 1930s were marred by the worst economic depression in the history of the United States. Nationwide the average unemployment reached nearly 25%, but was much higher in some areas and demographics. Politically the nation was transformed dramatically, leaving behind a much different federal government and a much stronger executive branch. The most fundamental change, however, was the social and psychological impact that the Great Depression had on people. Not everyone lost their farm in the Dust Bowl and not everyone lost their life savings following the stock market crash; the Great Depression did, however, touch everyone's life. For many, the Great Depression challenged their faith in the American Dream and created a sense of helplessness that affected them deeply.

Causes of the Great Depression

2 The Stock Market Crash in 1929 is often used as a benchmark for the start of the Great Depression. Between "Black Thursday" (October 24, 1929) and "Black Tuesday" (October 29, 1929) stock prices plummeted and billions of dollars were lost by investors. Most people, however, did not have their life savings tied up in the stock market. The fallout from the crash, however, devastated the economy and drove thousands of banks into bankruptcy. The nation's economic system was trapped in a rapid downward spiral.

3 For farmers, the Great Depression had been creeping up on them for most of the 1920s. In the early 1930s, their struggle was made worse by a devastating series of long droughts. The extra dry conditions killed off much of the crops planted by farmers, leaving insufficient vegetation to hold the soil in place. Native grasses had developed long roots to seek out water in times of drought, roots which also served to hold the soil in place. With those grasses gone, crops dying, and the topsoil lying exposed in long furrows, strong winds were able to easily erode the land.

The Dust Bowl

4 The severe drought conditions combined with farming techniques created the "perfect storm" conditions for the Dust Bowl. In 1931 great "black blizzards" began to occur. These "blizzards" were dust storms of immense proportions. The loose topsoil was whipped up and blown by the winds, leaving everything in its path coated in a fine dark silt. Massive storms picked up thousands of acres of soil and carried it all the way to the East Coast. These storms continued throughout the 1930s, displacing millions upon millions of tons of topsoil.

5 The Dust Bowl destroyed the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of farmers in the Great Plains region. Economically farmers had been suffering for a decade or more, the Dust Bowl made conditions even worse, pushing many into bankruptcy and foreclosure. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the devastating effect the Dust Bowl had on the Joad family. The Joads, like hundreds of thousands of families in the region, lost their land when they couldn't

repay bank loans. They were left with few choices - find work as laborers, or to move and try to find opportunity elsewhere.

6 For several hundred thousand farmers in the Dust Bowl region, the only answer seemed to be to move - particularly out to California. Handbills, or flyers, advertised the abundance of jobs and land available in California. California agriculture relied, and still relies, on migrant farm laborers for the harvest seasons. Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men* are migrant workers, traveling around California to where work was needed.

7 Although Lennie and George were successful in finding work by migrating across California, the Joads encountered a different scenario. The Dust Bowl drew more than 300,000 refugees into California during the 1930s. Although California farming required more labor, and therefore more people, there simply were not enough jobs available for the number of people migrating into the state. The Joads arrived in California to find that jobs were not plentiful and that opportunity was scarce. Their dream of laboring for a few months to scrape the money together to buy their own piece of land quickly fizzled away.

Welfare and "The Dole"

8 Prior to the New Deal, people who were "down on their luck," unemployed, or struggling did not have unemployment insurance and welfare to rely on. Local, private charities helped people in need to get back on their feet. Some cities and counties had programs to help the unemployed and homeless as well. It was taboo, however, to receive a "handout". What we would call welfare today was called "the dole" during the early 20th century. Being given money or food freely and not in return for work went against what many Americans saw as right or normal. To be reduced to asking for a handout was devastating psychologically and socially. People on the dole were looked down upon, and they looked down upon themselves as well.