The Great Depression Begins
CHAPTER 14

THE GREAT DEPRESSION BEGINS

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1930-1933
8.02 million Americans are unemployed.

1929
The first Academy Awards are presented.

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The stock market crashes.

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Japan invades Manchuria.

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The year is 1929. The U.S. economy has collapsed. Farms, businesses, and banks nationwide are failing, causing massive unemployment and poverty. You are out of work with little prospect of finding a job.

**What would you do to feed your family?**

**Examine the Issues**
- What groups of people will be most hurt by the economic crash?
- What can you do to find a paying job?
- What can unemployed and impoverished people do to help each other?

Women serve soup and slices of bread to unemployed men in an outdoor breadline in Los Angeles, California during the Great Depression.

Visit the Chapter 14 links for more information related to The Great Depression Begins.
The Nation’s Sick Economy

As the prosperity of the 1920s ended, severe economic problems gripped the nation. The Great Depression has had lasting effects on how Americans view themselves and their government.

Terms & Names
- price support
- credit
- Alfred E. Smith
- Dow Jones Industrial Average
- speculation
- buying on margin
- Black Tuesday
- Great Depression
- Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act

One American’s Story

Gordon Parks, now a well-known photographer, author, and filmmaker, was a 16-year-old high school student in the fall of 1929. He supported himself as a busboy at the exclusive Minnesota Club, where prosperous club members spoke confidently about the economy. Parks, too, looked forward to a bright future. Then came the stock market crash of October 1929. In his autobiography, Parks recalled his feelings at the time.

A PERSONAL VOICE  GORDON PARKS

“I couldn’t imagine such financial disaster touching my small world; it surely concerned only the rich. But by the first week of November . . . I was without a job. All that next week I searched for any kind of work that would prevent my leaving school. Again it was, ‘We’re firing, not hiring.’ . . . I went to school and cleaned out my locker, knowing it was impossible to stay on. A piercing chill was in the air as I walked back to the rooming house.”

—A Choice of Weapons

The crash of 1929, and the depression that followed, dealt a crushing blow to the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans. The high-flying prosperity of the 1920s was over. Hard times had begun.

Economic Troubles on the Horizon

As the 1920s advanced, serious problems threatened economic prosperity. Though some Americans became wealthy, many more could not earn a decent living. Important industries struggled, and farmers grew more crops and raised more livestock than they could sell at a profit. Both consumers and farmers were steadily going deeper into debt. As the decade drew to a close, these slippages in the economy signaled the end of an era.
INDUSTRIES IN TROUBLE The superficial prosperity of the late 1920s shrouded weaknesses that would signal the onset of the Great Depression. Key basic industries, such as railroads, textiles, and steel had barely made a profit. Railroads lost business to new forms of transportation (trucks, buses, and private automobiles, for instance).

Mining and lumbering, which had expanded during wartime, were no longer in high demand. Coal mining was especially hard-hit, in part due to stiff competition from new forms of energy, including hydroelectric power, fuel oil, and natural gas. By the early 1930s, these sources supplied more than half the energy that had once come from coal. Even the boom industries of the 1920s—automobiles, construction, and consumer goods—weakened. One important economic indicator that declined during this time was housing starts—the number of new dwellings being built. When housing starts fall, so do jobs in many related industries, such as furniture manufacturing and lumbering.

FARMERS NEED A LIFT Perhaps agriculture suffered the most. During World War I, prices rose and international demand for crops such as wheat and corn soared. Farmers had planted more and taken out loans for land and equipment. However, demand fell after the war, and crop prices declined by 40 percent or more.

Farmers boosted production in the hopes of selling more crops, but this only depressed prices further. Between 1919 and 1921 annual farm income declined from $10 billion to just over $4 billion. Farmers who had gone into debt had difficulty in paying off their loans. Many lost their farms when banks foreclosed and seized the property as payment for the debt. As farmers began to default on their loans, many rural banks began to fail. Auctions were held to recoup some of the banks’ losses.

Congress tried to help out farmers with a piece of legislation called the McNary-Haugen bill. This called for federal price-supports for key products such as wheat, corn, cotton, and tobacco. The government would buy surplus crops at guaranteed prices and sell them on the world market.

President Coolidge vetoed the bill twice. He commented, “Farmers have never made money. I don’t believe we can do much about it.”

CONSUMERS HAVE LESS MONEY TO SPEND As farmers’ incomes fell, they bought fewer goods and services, but the problem was larger. By the late 1920s,
Americans were buying less—mainly because of rising prices, stagnant wages, unbalanced distribution of income, and overbuying on credit in the preceding years. Production had also expanded much faster than wages, resulting in an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor.

**LIVING ON CREDIT** Although many Americans appeared to be prosperous during the 1920s, in fact they were living beyond their means. They often bought goods on credit—an arrangement in which consumers agreed to buy now and pay later for purchases. This was often in the form of an installment plan (usually in monthly payments) that included interest charges.

By making credit easily available, businesses encouraged Americans to pile up a large consumer debt. Many people then had trouble paying off their growing debts. Faced with debt, consumers cut back on spending.

**UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME** During the 1920s, the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. Between 1920 and 1929, the income of the wealthiest 1 percent of the population rose by 75 percent, compared with a 9 percent increase for Americans as a whole.

More than 70 percent of the nation’s families earned less than $2,500 per year, then considered the minimum amount needed for a decent standard of living. Even families earning twice that much could not afford many of the household products that manufacturers produced. Economists estimate that the average man or woman bought a new outfit of clothes only once a year. Scarcely half the homes in many cities had electric lights or a furnace for heat. Only one city home in ten had an electric refrigerator.

This unequal distribution of income meant that most Americans could not participate fully in the economic advances of the 1920s. Many people did not have the money to purchase the flood of goods that factories produced. The prosperity of the era rested on a fragile foundation.

**Hoover Takes the Nation**

Although economic disaster was around the corner, the election of 1928 took place in a mood of apparent national prosperity. This election pitted Republican candidate Herbert Hoover against Democrat **Alfred E. Smith.**

**THE ELECTION OF 1928** Hoover, the secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge, was a mining engineer from Iowa who had never run for public office. Smith was a career politician who had served four terms as governor of New York. He was personable and enjoyed being in the limelight, unlike the quiet and reserved Hoover. Still, Hoover had one major advantage: he could point to years of prosperity under Republican administrations since 1920. Many Americans believed him when he declared, “We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before.”

It was an overwhelming victory for Hoover. The message was clear: most Americans were happy with Republican leadership.

**DREAMS OF RICHES IN THE STOCK MARKET** By 1929, some economists had warned of weaknesses in the economy, but most Americans...
maintained the utmost confidence in the nation’s economic health. In increasing numbers, those who could afford to invested in the stock market. The stock market had become the most visible symbol of a prosperous American economy. Then, as now, the Dow Jones Industrial Average was the most widely used barometer of the stock market’s health. The Dow is a measure based on the stock prices of 30 representative large firms trading on the New York Stock Exchange.

Through most of the 1920s, stock prices rose steadily. The Dow had reached a high of 381 points, nearly 300 points higher than it had been five years earlier. Eager to take advantage of this “bull market” — a period of rising stock prices — Americans rushed to buy stocks and bonds. One observer wrote, “It seemed as if all economic law had been suspended and a new era opened up in which success and prosperity could be had without knowledge or industry.” By 1929, about 4 million Americans — or 3 percent of the nation’s population — owned stocks. Many of these investors were already wealthy, but others were average Americans who hoped to strike it rich.

However, the seeds of trouble were taking root. People were engaging in speculation — that is, they bought stocks and bonds on the chance of a quick profit, while ignoring the risks. Many began buying on margin — paying a small percentage of a stock’s price as a down payment and borrowing the rest. With easy money available to investors, the unrestrained buying and selling fueled the market’s upward spiral. The government did little to discourage such buying or to regulate the market. In reality, these rising prices did not reflect companies’ worth. Worse, if the value of stocks declined, people who had bought on margin had no way to pay off the loans.

The Stock Market Crashes

In early September 1929, stock prices peaked and then fell. Confidence in the market started to waver, and some investors quickly sold their stocks and pulled out. On October 24, the market took a plunge. Panicked investors unloaded their shares. But the worst was yet to come.
BLACK TUESDAY  On October 29—now known as Black Tuesday—the bottom fell out of the market and the nation’s confidence. Shareholders frantically tried to sell before prices plunged even lower. The number of shares dumped that day was a record 16.4 million. Additional millions of shares could not find buyers. People who had bought stocks on credit were stuck with huge debts as the prices plummeted, while others lost most of their savings.

A Pen and Paper Operation
In the 1920s, orders to buy or sell a stock arrived at brokers’ telephone booths located around the edge of the trading floor. They were then carried by hand or sent by pneumatic tube to the trading post where that stock would be traded. NYSE employees called reporters had to record every transaction. For each new sale, they wrote out a slip of paper containing the stock’s abbreviation, the number of shares, and the price, and then transmitted it to the ticker room. Market information was typed into a keyboard that converted the keystrokes into electrical impulses that drove the clattering print wheels in ticker machines along the network. People would read the current display at the trading posts.

Technological Changes
While still centered around human interaction, the exchange has incorporated a number of computer technologies to keep up with the times. For example, members now receive stock bids and offers through an electronic delivery system known as SuperDot, which enables them to make a trade in less than 12 seconds. Electronic communications networks now allow individuals to buy and sell stocks themselves over the Internet at a fraction of what it would cost to use a specialist. Such innovation has prompted some to insist that all future trading will be done via computers, thus eliminating a need for physical exchanges such as the NYSE.

SKILLBUILDER
1. **Hypothesizing** What scenarios can you imagine that might prompt someone to submit a market order on a certain stock?

2. **Comparing** How has technology on the trading floor changed since the 1920s?
By mid-November, investors had lost about $30 billion, an amount equal to how much America spent in World War I. The stock market bubble had finally burst. One eyewitness to these events, Frederick Lewis Allen, described the resulting situation.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN**

"The Big Bull Market was dead. Billions of dollars’ worth of profits—and paper profits—had disappeared. The grocer, the window cleaner, and the seamstress had lost their capital [savings]. In every town there were families which had suddenly dropped from showy affluence into debt. . . . With the Big Bull Market gone and prosperity going, Americans were soon to find themselves living in an altered world which called for new adjustments, new ideas, new habits of thought, and a new order of values."

—Only Yesterday

### Financial Collapse

The stock market crash signaled the beginning of the **Great Depression**—the period from 1929 to 1940 in which the economy plummeted and unemployment skyrocketed. The crash alone did not cause the Great Depression, but it hastened the collapse of the economy and made the depression more severe.

**BANK AND BUSINESS FAILURES** After the crash, many people panicked and withdrew their money from banks. But some couldn’t get their money because the banks had invested it in the stock market. In 1929, 600 banks closed. By 1933, 11,000 of the nation’s 25,000 banks had failed. Because the government did not protect or insure bank accounts, millions of people lost their savings accounts.

The Great Depression hit other businesses, too. Between 1929 and 1932, the gross national product—the nation’s total output of goods and services—was cut nearly in half, from $104 billion to $59 billion. Approximately 90,000 businesses went bankrupt. Among these failed enterprises were once-prosperous automobile and railroad companies.

As the economy plunged into a tailspin, millions of workers lost their jobs. Unemployment leaped from 3 percent (1.6 million workers) in 1929 to 25 percent (13 million workers) in 1933. One out of every four workers was out of a job. Those who kept their jobs faced pay cuts and reduced hours.

Not everyone fared so badly, of course. Before the crash, some speculators had sold off their stocks and made money. Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of future president John F. Kennedy, was one who did. Most, however, were not so lucky or shrewd.

**WORLDWIDE SHOCK WAVES** The United States was not the only country gripped by the Great Depression. Much of Europe, for example, had suffered throughout the 1920s. European countries trying to recover from the ravages of World War I faced high war debts. In addition, Germany had to pay war reparations—payments to compensate the Allies for the damages Germany had caused. The Great Depression compounded these problems by limiting America’s ability to import European goods. This made it difficult to sell American farm products and manufactured goods abroad.
Economic indicators are measures that signal trends in a nation's economy. During the Great Depression several trends were apparent. Those indicated at the right are linked—the conditions of one can affect another. For instance, when banks fail, some businesses may have to close down, which can cause unemployment to rise. Thus, people have less money and spending declines.

**SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs**

1. In what year did the biggest jump in bank failures occur?
2. What measure on the graphs seems to indicate an improvement in the U.S. economy during the Depression? What might explain this?

**Depression Indicators**

[Graphs showing bank failures, business failures, unemployment, and income and spending for the years 1928 to 1933.]

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States.
In 1930, Congress passed the **Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act**, which established the highest protective tariff in United States history. It was designed to protect American farmers and manufacturers from foreign competition. Yet it had the opposite effect. By reducing the flow of goods into the United States, the tariff prevented other countries from earning American currency to buy American goods. The tariff made unemployment worse in industries that could no longer export goods to Europe. Many countries retaliated by raising their own tariffs. Within a few years, world trade had fallen more than 40 percent.

**CAUSES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION** Although historians and economists differ on the main causes of the Great Depression, most cite a common set of factors, among them:

- tariffs and war debt policies that cut down the foreign market for American goods
- a crisis in the farm sector
- the availability of easy credit
- an unequal distribution of income

These factors led to falling demand for consumer goods, even as newly mechanized factories produced more products. The federal government contributed to the crisis by keeping interest rates low, thereby allowing companies and individuals to borrow easily and build up large debts. Some of this borrowed money was used to buy the stocks that later led to the crash.

At first people found it hard to believe that economic disaster had struck. In November 1929, President Hoover encouraged Americans to remain confident about the economy. Yet, the most severe depression in American history was well on its way.

**GLOBAL EFFECTS OF THE DEPRESSION** As the American economy collapsed, so too did Europe’s. The world’s nations had become interdependent; international trade was important to most countries. However, when the U.S. economy failed, American investors withdrew their money from European markets.

To keep U.S. dollars in America, the government raised tariffs on goods imported from other countries. World trade dropped. Unemployment rates around the world soared. Germany and Austria were particularly hard hit. In 1931 Austria’s largest bank failed. In Asia, both farmers and urban workers suffered as the value of exports fell by half between 1929 and 1931. The crash was felt in Latin America as well. As U.S. and European demand for Latin American products like sugar, beef, and copper dropped, prices collapsed.

**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- price support
- credit
- Alfred E. Smith
- Dow Jones Industrial Average
- speculation
- buying on margin
- Black Tuesday
- Great Depression
- Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act

**2. TAKING NOTES** In a diagram like this, record the causes of the 1929 stock market crash.

**SUMMARIZING** How did the Great Depression affect the world economy?

**CRITICAL THINKING** How did the economic trends of the 1920s help cause the Great Depression? Think About:

- what happened in industry
- what happened in agriculture
- what happened with consumers

Judging from the events of the late 1920s and early 1930s, how important do you think public confidence is to the health of the economy? Explain. Think About:

- what happened when overconfidence in the stock market led people to speculate and buy on margin
- how confidence affects consumer borrowing

_The Great Depression Begins_ 471
### One American’s Story

Ann Marie Low lived on her parents’ North Dakota farm when the stock market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression hit. Hard times were familiar to Ann’s family. But the worst was yet to come. In the early 1930s, a ravenous drought hit the Great Plains, destroying crops and leaving the earth dry and cracked. Then came the deadly dust storms. On April 25, 1934, Ann wrote an account in her diary.

**A Personal Voice  ANN MARIE LOW**

“[T]he air is just full of dirt coming, literally, for hundreds of miles. It sifts into everything. After we wash the dishes and put them away, so much dust sifts into the cupboards we must wash them again before the next meal. . . . Newspapers say the deaths of many babies and old people are attributed to breathing in so much dirt.”

—Dust Bowl Diary

The drought and winds lasted for more than seven years. The dust storms in Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, and Texas were a great hardship—but only one of many—that Americans faced during the Great Depression.

### The Depression Devastates People’s Lives

Statistics such as the unemployment rate tell only part of the story of the Great Depression. More important was the impact that it had on people’s lives: the Depression brought hardship, homelessness, and hunger to millions.

**THE DEPRESSION IN THE CITIES**  In cities across the country, people lost their jobs, were evicted from their homes and ended up in the streets. Some slept in parks or sewer pipes, wrapping themselves in newspapers to fend off the cold.
Others built makeshift shacks out of scrap materials. Before long, numerous **shantytowns**—little towns consisting of shacks—sprang up. An observer recalled one such settlement in Oklahoma City: “Here were all these people living in old, rusted-out car bodies. . . . There were people living in shacks made of orange crates. One family with a whole lot of kids were living in a piano box. . . . People were living in whatever they could junk together.”

Every day the poor dug through garbage cans or begged. **Soup kitchens** offering free or low-cost food and **bread lines**, or lines of people waiting to receive food provided by charitable organizations or public agencies, became a common sight. One man described a bread line in New York City.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**  HERMAN SHUMLIN

“Two or three blocks along Times Square, you’d see these men, silent, shuffling along in a line. Getting this handout of coffee and doughnuts, dealt out from great trucks. . . . I’d see that flat, opaque, expressionless look which spelled, for me, human disaster. Men . . . who had responsible positions. Who had lost their jobs, lost their homes, lost their families . . . They were destroyed men.”

—quoted in *Hard Times*

Conditions for African Americans and Latinos were especially difficult. Their unemployment rates were higher, and they were the lowest paid. They also dealt with increasing racial violence from unemployed whites competing for the same jobs. Twenty-four African Americans died by lynching in 1933.

Latinos—mainly Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the Southwest—were also targets. Whites demanded that Latinos be deported, or expelled from the country, even though many had been born in America. By the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people of Mexican descent relocated to Mexico. Some left voluntarily; others were deported by the federal government.

**THE DEPRESSION IN RURAL AREAS** Life in rural areas was hard, but it did have one advantage over city life: most farmers could grow food for their families. With falling prices and rising debt, though, thousands of farmers lost their land. Between 1929 and 1932, about 400,000 farms were lost through foreclosure—the process by which a mortgage holder takes back property if an occupant has not made payments. Many farmers turned to tenant farming and barely scraped out a living.
The Dust Bowl, 1933–1936

THE DUST BOWL  The drought that began in the early 1930s wreaked havoc on the Great Plains. During the previous decade, farmers from Texas to North Dakota had used tractors to break up the grasslands and plant millions of acres of new farmland. Plowing had removed the thick protective layer of prairie grasses. Farmers had then exhausted the land through overproduction of crops, and the grasslands became unsuitable for farming. When the drought and winds began in the early 1930s, little grass and few trees were left to hold the soil down. Wind scattered the topsoil, exposing sand and grit underneath. The dust traveled hundreds of miles. One windstorm in 1934 picked up millions of tons of dust from the plains and carried it to East Coast cities.

The region that was the hardest hit, including parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, came to be known as the Dust Bowl. Plagued by dust storms and evictions, thousands of farmers and sharecroppers left their land behind. They packed up their families and few belongings and headed west, following Route 66 to California. Some of these migrants—known as Okies (a term that originally referred to Oklahomans but came to be used negatively for all migrants)—found work as farmhands. But others continued to wander in search of work. By the end of the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of farm families had migrated to California and other Pacific Coast states.

Effects on the American Family

In the face of the suffering caused by the Great Depression, the family stood as a source of strength for most Americans. Although some people feared that hard times would undermine moral values, those fears were largely unfounded. In gen-
eral, Americans believed in traditional values and emphasized the importance of family unity. At a time when money was tight, many families entertained themselves by staying at home and playing board games, such as Monopoly (invented in 1933), and listening to the radio. Nevertheless, the economic difficulties of the Great Depression put severe pressure on family life. Making ends meet was a daily struggle, and, in some cases, families broke apart under the strain.

**MEN IN THE STREETS** Many men had difficulty coping with unemployment because they were accustomed to working and supporting their families. Every day, they would set out to walk the streets in search of jobs. As Frederick Lewis Allen noted in *Since Yesterday*, “Men who have been sturdy and self-respecting workers can take unemployment without flinching for a few weeks, a few months, even if they have to see their families suffer; but it is different after a year . . . two years . . . three years.” Some men became so discouraged that they simply stopped trying. Some even abandoned their families.

During the Great Depression, as many as 300,000 transients—or “hoboes” as they were called—wandered the country, hitching rides on railroad boxcars and sleeping under bridges. These hoboes of the 1930s, mainly men, would occasionally turn up at homeless shelters in big cities. The novelist Thomas Wolfe described a group of these men in New York City.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** THOMAS WOLFE

“These were the wanderers from town to town, the riders of freight trains, the thumbers of rides on highways, the uprooted, unwanted male population of America. They . . . gathered in the big cities when winter came, hungry, defeated, empty, hopeless, restless . . . always on the move, looking everywhere for work, for the bare crumbs to support their miserable lives, and finding neither work nor crumbs.”

—You Can’t Go Home Again

During the early years of the Great Depression, there was no federal system of **direct relief**—cash payments or food provided by the government to the poor. Some cities and charity services did offer relief to those who needed it, but the benefits were meager. In New York City, for example, the weekly payment was just $2.39 per family. This was the most generous relief offered by any city, but it was still well below the amount needed to feed a family.

**WOMEN STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE** Women worked hard to help their families survive adversity during the Great Depression. Many women canned food and sewed clothes. They also carefully managed household budgets. Jean Westin, the author of *Making Do: How Women Survived the ’30s*, 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. Many people believed that women, especially married women, had no right to work when there were men who were unemployed.
In the early 1930s, some cities refused to hire married women as schoolteachers. Many Americans assumed that women were having an easier time than men during the Great Depression because few were seen begging or standing in bread lines. As a matter of fact, many women were starving to death in cold attics and rooming houses. As one writer pointed out, women were often too ashamed to reveal their hardship.

**A Personal Voice**  
**MERIDEL LE SEUER**

“I’ve lived in cities for many months, broke, without help, too timid to get in bread lines. I’ve known many women to live like this until they simply faint in the street. . . . A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse. . . . [She] will go for weeks verging on starvation, . . . going through the streets ashamed, sitting in libraries, parks, going for days without speaking to a living soul, shut up in the terror of her own misery.”

—America in the Twenties

**CHILDREN SUFFER HARDSHIPS** Children also suffered during the 1930s. Poor diets and a lack of money for health care led to serious health problems. Milk consumption declined across the country, and clinics and hospitals reported a dramatic rise in malnutrition and diet-related diseases, such as rickets. At the same time, child-welfare programs were slashed as cities and states cut their budgets in the face of dwindling resources.

Falling tax revenues also caused school boards to shorten the school year and even close schools. By 1933, some 2,600 schools across the nation had shut down, leaving more than 300,000 students out of school. Thousands of children went to work instead; they often labored in sweatshops under horrendous conditions. Many teenagers looked for a way out of the suffering. Hundreds of thousands of teenage boys and some girls hopped aboard America’s freight trains to zigzag the country in search of work, adventure, and an escape from poverty. These “wild boys” came from every section of the United States, from every corner of society. They were the sons of poor farmers, and out-of-work miners, and wealthy parents who had lost everything. “Hoover tourists,” as they were called, were eager to tour America for free.

From the age of eleven until seventeen, George Phillips rode the rails, first catching local freights out of his home town of Princeton, Missouri. “There is no feeling in the world like sitting in a side-door Pullman and watching the world go by, listening to the clickety-clack of the wheels, hearing that old steam whistle blowing for crossings and towns.”

While exciting, the road could also be deadly. Many riders were beaten or jailed by “bulls”—armed freight yard patrolmen. Often riders had to sleep standing up in a constant deafening rumble. Some were accidentally locked in ice cars for days on end. Others fell prey to murderous criminals. From 1929 to 1939, 24,647 trespassers were killed and 27,171 injured on railroad property.

Two young boys, ages 15 and 16, walk beside freight cars in the San Joaquin Valley.
SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

The hardships of the Great Depression had a tremendous social and psychological impact. Some people were so demoralized by hard times that they lost their will to survive. Between 1928 and 1932, the suicide rate rose more than 30 percent. Three times as many people were admitted to state mental hospitals as in normal times.

The economic problems forced many Americans to accept compromises and make sacrifices that affected them for the rest of their lives. Adults stopped going to the doctor or dentist because they couldn’t afford it. Young people gave up their dreams of going to college. Others put off getting married, raising large families, or having children at all.

For many people, the stigma of poverty and of having to scrimp and save never disappeared completely. For some, achieving financial security became the primary focus in life. As one woman recalled, “Ever since I was twelve years old there was one major goal in my life . . . one thing . . . and that was to never be poor again.”

During the Great Depression many people showed great kindness to strangers who were down on their luck. People often gave food, clothing, and a place to stay to the needy. Families helped other families and shared resources and strengthened the bonds within their communities. In addition, many people developed habits of saving and thriftiness—habits they would need to see themselves through the dark days ahead as the nation and President Hoover struggled with the Great Depression. These habits shaped a whole generation of Americans.

Vocabulary

_stigma:_ a mark or indication of disgrace

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- _shantytown_
- _soup kitchen_
- _bread line_
- _Dust Bowl_
- _direct relief_

2. MAIN IDEA In a Venn diagram, list the effects that the Great Depression had on farmers and city dwellers. Find the differences and the similarities.

Which group do you think suffered less?

3. CRITICAL THINKING

3. CONTRASTING

How was what happened to men during the Great Depression different from what happened to women? children? **Think About:**

- each group’s role in their families
- the changes each group had to make
- what help was available to them

4. ANALYZING EFFECTS

How did Dust Bowl conditions in the Great Plains affect the entire country?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

In what ways did the Great Depression affect people’s outlook?
Hoover Struggles with the Depression

**Main Idea**
President Hoover’s conservative response to the Great Depression drew criticism from many Americans.

**Why It Matters Now**
Worsening conditions in the country caused the government to become more involved in the health and wealth of the people.

**Terms & Names**
- Herbert Hoover
- Boulder Dam
- Federal Home Loan Bank Act
- Reconstruction Finance Corporation
- Bonus Army

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One American’s Story

Oscar Ameringer was a newspaper editor in Oklahoma City during the Great Depression. In 1932, he traveled around the country collecting information on economic and social conditions. Testifying in unemployment hearings that same year, Ameringer described desperate people who were losing patience with the government. “Unless something is done for them and done soon you will have a revolution on hand.” Ameringer told the following story.

**A Personal Voice** OSCAR AMERINGER

“The roads of the West and Southwest teem with hungry hitchhikers. . . . Between Clarksville and Russellville, Ark., I picked up a family. The woman was hugging a dead chicken under a ragged coat. When I asked her where she had procured the fowl, first she told me she had found it dead in the road, and then added in grim humor, ‘They promised me a chicken in the pot, and now I got mine.’”

—quoted in The American Spirit

The woman was recalling President Hoover’s empty 1928 campaign pledge: “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” Now many Americans were disillusioned. They demanded that the government help them.

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**Hoover Tries to Reassure the Nation**

After the stock market crash of October 1929, President Herbert Hoover tried to reassure Americans that the nation’s economy was on a sound footing. “Any lack of confidence in the economic future . . . is foolish,” he declared. In his view, the important thing was for Americans to remain optimistic and to go about their business as usual. Americans believed depressions were a normal part of the business cycle. According to this theory, periods of rapid economic growth were naturally followed by periods of depression. The best course in a slump, many
experts believed, was to do nothing and let the economy fix itself. Hoover took a slightly different position. He felt that government could play a limited role in helping to solve problems.

**HOOVER’S PHILOSOPHY**  Herbert Hoover had been an engineer, and he put great faith in the power of reason. He was also a humanitarian, as he made clear in one of his last speeches as president.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  HERBERT HOOVER**

“Our first objective must be to provide security from poverty and want. . . . We want to see a nation built of home owners and farm owners. We want to see their savings protected. We want to see them in steady jobs. We want to see more and more of them insured against death and accident, unemployment and old age. We want them all secure.”

—“Challenge to Liberty,” October 1936

Like many Americans of the time, Hoover believed that one of government’s chief functions was to foster cooperation between competing groups and interests in society. If business and labor were in a conflict, for example, government should step in and help them find a solution that served their mutual interests. This cooperation must be voluntary rather than forced, he said. Government’s role was to encourage and facilitate cooperation, not to control it.

On the other hand, Americans also valued “rugged individualism”—the idea that people should succeed through their own efforts. They should take care of themselves and their families, rather than depend on the government to bail them out. Thus, Hoover opposed any form of federal welfare, or direct relief to the needy. He believed that handouts would weaken people’s self-respect and “moral fiber.” His answer to the needy was that individuals, charities, and local organizations should pitch in to help care for the less fortunate. The federal government should direct relief measures, but not through a vast federal bureaucracy. Such a bureaucracy, he said, would be too expensive and would stifle individual liberties.

However, when the Depression took hold, moral fiber wasn’t what people were worried about. Hoover’s response shocked and frustrated suffering Americans.

**HOOVER TAKES CAUTIOUS STEPS**  Hoover’s political philosophy caused him to take a cautious approach to the depression. Soon after the stock market crash, he called together key leaders in the fields of business, banking, and labor. He urged them to work together to find solutions to the nation’s economic woes and to act in ways that would not make a bad situation worse. For example, he asked employers not to cut wages or lay off workers, and he asked labor leaders not to demand higher wages or go on strike. He also created a special organization to help private charities generate contributions for the poor.

None of these steps made much of a difference. A year after the crash, the economy was still shrinking, and unemployment was still rising. More companies went out of business, soup kitchens became a common sight, and general misery continued to grow. Shantytowns arose in every city, and hoboes continued to roam.
BOULDER DAM One project that Hoover approved did make a difference. Years earlier, when Hoover served as secretary of commerce, one of his earliest proposed initiatives was the construction of a dam on the Colorado River. Aiming to minimize federal intervention, Hoover proposed to finance the dam’s construction by using profits from sales of the electric power that the dam would generate. He also helped to arrange an agreement on water rights among the seven states of the Colorado River basin—Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming.

By the time the massive project won congressional approval in 1928, as part of a $700 million public works program, Hoover occupied the White House. In the fall of 1929, nearly one year into his presidency, Hoover was finally able to authorize construction of Boulder Dam (later called Hoover Dam). At 726 ft. high and 1,244 ft. long it would be the world’s tallest dam and the second largest. In addition to providing electricity and flood control, the dam also provided a regular water supply, which enabled the growth of California’s massive agricultural economy. Today, the dam also helps to provide water for cities such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

DEMOCRATS WIN IN 1930 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS As the country’s economic difficulties increased, the political tide turned against Hoover and the Republicans. In the 1930 congressional elections, the Democrats took advantage of anti-Hoover sentiments to win more seats in Congress. As a result of that election, the Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives and saw their majority in the Senate dwindle to one vote.

As Americans grew more and more frustrated by the Depression, they expressed their anger in a number of ways. Farmers stung by low crop prices burned their corn and wheat and dumped their milk on highways rather than sell it at a loss. Some farmers even declared a “farm holiday” and refused to work their fields. A number blocked roads to prevent food from getting to market, hoping that food shortages would raise prices. Some farmers also used force to prevent authorities from foreclosing on farms.

By 1930, people were calling the shantytowns in American cities “Hoovervilles”—a direct slap at the president’s policies. Homeless people called the newspapers they wrapped themselves in “Hoover blankets.” Empty pockets turned inside out were “Hoover flags.” Many Americans who had hailed Hoover as a great humanitarian a few years earlier now saw him as a cold and heartless leader.
Despite public criticism, Hoover continued to hold firm to his principles. He refused to support direct relief or other forms of federal welfare. Some Americans were going hungry, and many blamed Hoover for their plight. Criticism of the president and his policies continued to grow. An anonymous ditty of the time was widely repeated.

”Mellon pulled the whistle
Hoover rang the bell
Wall Street gave the signal
And the country went to hell.”

**Hoover Takes Action**

As time went on and the depression deepened, President Hoover gradually softened his position on government intervention in the economy and took a more activist approach to the nation’s economic troubles. **HOOVER BACKS COOPERATIVES** In Hoover’s view, Boulder Dam was a model of how the federal government could encourage cooperation. His attempts to relieve the depression involved negotiating agreements among private entities, again reflecting his belief in small government. For example, he backed the creation of the Federal Farm Board, an organization of farm cooperatives. The Farm Board was intended to raise crop prices by helping members to buy crops and keep them off the market temporarily until prices rose.

In addition, Hoover tried to prop up the banking system by persuading the nation’s largest banks to establish the National Credit Corporation. This organization loaned money to smaller banks, which helped them stave off bankruptcy. **DIRECT INTERVENTION** By late 1931, however, many people could see that these measures had failed to turn the economy around. With a presidential election looming, Hoover appealed to Congress to pass a series of measures to reform banking, provide mortgage relief, and funnel more federal money into business investment. In 1932, Hoover signed into law the **Federal Home Loan Bank Act**, which lowered mortgage rates for homeowners and allowed farmers to refinance their farm loans and avoid foreclosure. It was not until Hoover’s time in office was over that Congress passed the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, which separated investment from commercial banking and would, Congress hoped, prevent another crash.

Hoover’s most ambitious economic measure, however, was the **Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC)**, approved by Congress in January 1932. It authorized up to $2 billion for emergency financing for banks, life insurance companies, railroads, and other large businesses. Hoover believed that the money would trickle down to the average citizen through job growth and higher wages. Many critics questioned this approach; they argued that the program would benefit only corporations and that the poor still needed direct relief. Hungry people could not wait for the benefits to trickle down to their tables.

In its first five months of operation, the RFC loaned more than $805 million to large corporations, but business failures continued. The RFC was an unprecedented example of federal involvement in a peacetime economy, but in the end it was too little, too late.
Gassing the Bonus Army

In 1932, an incident further damaged Hoover’s image and public morale. That spring, between 10,000 and 20,000 World War I veterans and their families arrived in Washington, D.C., from various parts of the country. They called themselves the Bonus Expeditionary Force, or the Bonus Army.

THE PATMAN BILL DENIED Led by Walter Waters, an unemployed cannery worker from Oregon, the Bonus Army came to the nation’s capital to support a bill under debate in Congress. The Patman Bill authorized the government to pay a bonus to World War I veterans who had not been compensated adequately for their wartime service. This bonus, which Congress had approved in 1924, was supposed to be paid out in 1945 in the form of cash and a life insurance policy, but Congressman Wright Patman believed that the money—an average of $500 per soldier—should be paid immediately.

Hoover thought that the Bonus Marchers were “communists and persons with criminal records” rather than veterans. He opposed the legislation, but he respected the marchers’ right to peaceful assembly. He even provided food and supplies so that they could erect a shantytown within sight of the Capitol. On June 17, however, the Senate voted down the Patman Bill. Hoover then called on

In 1932, these veterans from Muncie, Indiana, decided to remain in the capital until their bonus was paid to them.
the Bonus Army marchers to leave. Most did, but approximately 2,000, still hop-
ing to meet with the president, refused to budge.  

**HOOVER DISBANDS THE BONUS ARMY** Nervous that the angry group could become violent, President Hoover decided that the Bonus Army should be disbanded. On July 28, a force of 1,000 soldiers under the command of General Douglas MacArthur and his aide, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, came to roust the veterans. A government official watching from a nearby office recalled what happened next.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** A. EVERETTE MCINTYRE

“The 12th infantry was in full battle dress. Each had a gas mask and his belt was full of tear gas bombs... At orders, they brought their bayonets at thrust and moved in. The bayonets were used to jab people, to make them move. Soon, almost everybody disappeared from view, because tear gas bombs exploded. The entire block was covered by tear gas. Flames were coming up, where the soldiers had set fire to the buildings to drive these people out... Through the whole afternoon, they took one camp after another.”

—quoted in *Hard Times*

In the course of the operation, the infantry gassed more than 1,000 people, including an 11-month-old baby, who died, and an 8-year-old boy, who was partially blinded. Two people were shot and many were injured. Most Americans were stunned and outraged at the government's treatment of the veterans.

Once again, President Hoover's image suffered, and now an election was near-
ing. In November, Hoover would face a formidable opponent, the Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When Roosevelt heard about the attack on the Bonus Army, he said to his friend Felix Frankfurter, “Well, Felix, this will elect me.” The downturn in the economy and Hoover’s inability to deal effectively with the Depression had sealed his political fate.