

SECTION 2

Life During the Depression

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

Many people were impoverished during the Great Depression, but some found ways to cope with the hard times.

Key Terms and Names

bailiff, shantytown, Hooverville, hobo, Dust Bowl, Walt Disney, soap opera, Grant Wood, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner

Reading Strategy

Taking Notes As you read about life in the United States during the Great Depression, use the major headings of the section to create an outline similar to the one below.

Life During the Depression
 I. The Depression Worsens
 A.
 B.
 C.
 II.

Reading Objectives

- **Describe** how the Great Depression affected American families.
- **Discuss** how artists portrayed the effects of the Depression.

Section Theme

Culture and Traditions Radio and motion pictures provided ways to escape the worries that plagued people during the Depression's early years.

Preview of Events



★ An American Story ★



An unemployed man advertising his skills

A young girl with the unusual name of Dynamite Garland was living with her family in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s when her father, a railroad worker, lost his job. Unable to afford rent, they gave up their home and moved into a two-car garage.

The hardest aspect of living in a garage was getting through the frigid winters. "We would sleep with rugs and blankets over the top of us," Garland later recalled. "In the morning we'd . . . get some snow and put it on the stove and melt it and wash 'round our faces." When Garland's father found a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant, the family "lived on those fried noodles."

On Sundays the family looked at houses for sale. "That was a recreation during the Depression," said Garland. "You'd go and see where you'd put this and where you could put that, and this is gonna be my room." In this way, the family tried to focus on better times. Movies and radio programs also provided a brief escape from their troubles, but the struggle to survive left little room for pleasure.

—adapted from *Hard Times*

The Depression Worsens

In 1930, 1,352 banks suspended operations across the nation, more than twice the number of bank failures in 1929. The Depression grew steadily worse during Hoover's administration. By 1933 more than 9,000 banks had failed. In 1932 alone some 30,000 companies

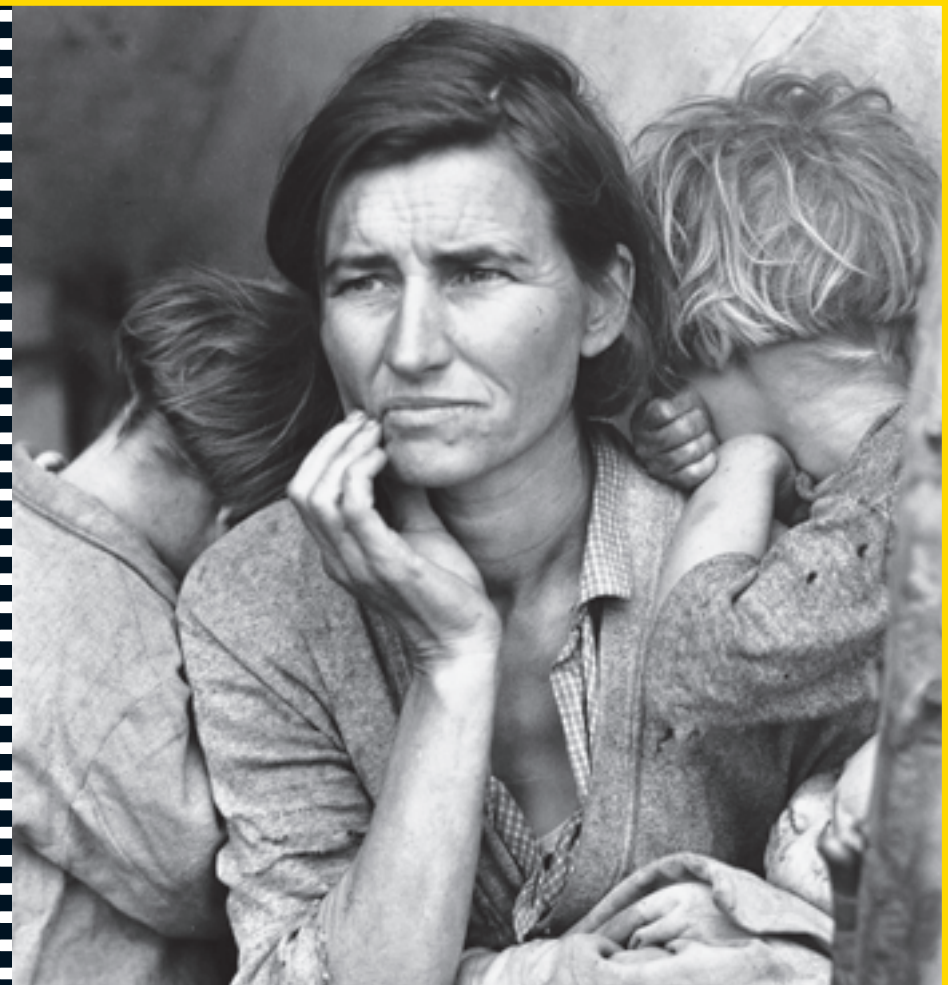


**NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC**

MOMENT in HISTORY

IMAGE OF AN ERA

Lasting a decade, the Great Depression deprived many Americans of jobs, land, and livelihoods. Plummeting crop prices and farms withering under drought and dust clouds forced many families to take to the road in search of work, often with little success. Dismayed by scenes of destitution and homelessness, photographer Dorothea Lange joined the Resettlement Administration in 1935. In 1936 in rural Nipomo, California, Lange photographed this “Migrant Mother,” a 32-year-old woman with seven children. She had just sold her car tires to buy food.



went out of business. By 1933 more than 12 million workers were unemployed—about one-fourth of the workforce. Average family income dropped from \$2,300 in 1929 to \$1,600 just three years later.

Lining Up at Soup Kitchens People without jobs often went hungry. Whenever possible they joined **bread lines** to receive a free handout of food or lined up outside **soup kitchens**, which private charities set up to give poor people a meal.

Peggy Terry, a young girl in Oklahoma City during the Depression, later told an interviewer how each day after school, her mother sent her to the soup kitchen:

“If you happened to be one of the first ones in line, you didn’t get anything but water that was on top. So we’d ask the guy that was ladling out soup into the buckets—everybody had to bring their own bucket to get the soup—he’d dip the greasy, watery stuff off the top. So we’d ask him to please dip down to get some meat and potatoes from the bottom of the kettle. But he wouldn’t do it.”

—quoted in *Hard Times*

Living in Makeshift Villages Families or individuals who could not pay their rent or mortgage lost their homes. Some of them, paralyzed by fear and humiliation over their sudden misfortune, simply would not or could not move. Their landlord would then ask the court for an eviction notice. Court officers called **bailiffs** then ejected the nonpaying tenants, piling their belongings in the street.

Throughout the country, newly homeless people put up shacks on unused or public lands, forming communities called **shantytowns**. Blaming the president for their plight, people referred to such places as **Hoovervilles**.

In search of work or a better life, many homeless and unemployed Americans began to wander around the country, walking, hitchhiking, or, most often, “riding the rails.” These wanderers, called **hobos**, would sneak past railroad police to slip into open boxcars on freight trains for a ride to somewhere else. They camped in “hobo jungles,” usually situated near rail yards. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly boys and young men, wandered from place to place in this fashion.





CLICK HERE



Student Web Activity Visit the *American Vision* Web site at tav.glencoe.com and click on **Student Web Activities—Chapter 22** for an activity on the Great Depression.

GEOGRAPHY

The Dust Bowl Farmers soon faced a new disaster. Since the beginnings of homesteading on the Great Plains, farmers had gambled with nature. Their plows had uprooted the wild grasses that held the soil's moisture. The new settlers then blanketed the region with wheat fields.

When crop prices dropped in the 1920s, however, Midwestern farmers left many of their fields uncultivated. Then, beginning in 1932, a terrible drought struck the Great Plains. With neither grass nor wheat to hold the scant rainfall, the soil dried to dust. From the Dakotas to Texas, America's pastures and wheat fields became a vast "Dust Bowl."

Winds whipped the arid earth, blowing it aloft and blackening the sky for hundreds of miles. When the dust settled, it buried crops and livestock and piled up against farmhouses like snow. No matter how carefully farm families sealed their homes, dust covered everything in the house. As the drought persisted, the number of yearly dust storms grew, from 22 in 1934 to 72 in 1937.

Some Midwestern and Great Plains farmers managed to hold on to their land, but many had no chance. If their withered fields were mortgaged, they had to

turn them over to the banks. Then, nearly penniless, many families packed their belongings into old cars or trucks and headed west, hoping for a better life in California. Since many migrants were from Oklahoma, they became known as "Okies." In California, they lived in makeshift roadside camps and remained homeless and impoverished.

Reading Check Explaining What chain of events turned the once-fertile Great Plains into the Dust Bowl?

Escaping the Depression

Despite the devastatingly hard times, Americans could escape—if only for an hour or two—through entertainment. Most people could scrape together the money to go to the movies, or they could sit with their families and listen to one of the many radio programs broadcast across the country.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The Dust Bowl, 1930s

Legend

- State with population loss, 1930–1940
- Area with severe loss of topsoil
- Area with moderate loss of topsoil
- Movement of people
- Destination of Dust Bowl emigrants

Okies escaping the Dust Bowl

0 500 miles
0 500 kilometers
Lambert Azimuthal Equal-Area projection

Geography Skills

1. **Interpreting Maps** Which states lost population in the 1930s?
2. **Applying Geography Skills** Why did most of the routes shown on the map lead to cities?



The Hollywood Fantasy Factory Ordinary citizens often went to the movies to see people who were rich, happy, and successful. The 60 to 90 million weekly viewers walked into a fantasy world of thrills and romance. Comical screenplays offered a welcome release from daily worries. Groucho Marx wise-cracked while his brothers’ antics provoked hilarity in such films as *Animal Crackers*.

Many European actors, writers, and directors, fleeing economic hardship and the threat of dictatorships, went to Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s. Two European women emerged as superstars. Germany’s **Marlene Dietrich** portrayed a range of roles with subtlety. Swedish actress **Greta Garbo** often played a doomed beauty, direct and unhesitating in her speech and actions.

Moviegoers also loved cartoons. **Walt Disney** produced the first feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937. Its box office appeal may have spurred MGM two years later to produce *The Wizard of Oz*, a colorful musical that lifted viewers’ spirits.

Even when films focused on serious subjects, they usually contained a note of optimism. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, James Stewart plays a naïve youth leader who becomes a senator. He dramatically exposes the corruption of some of his colleagues

and calls upon his fellow senators to see the American political system as the peak of “what man’s carved out for himself after centuries of fighting for something better than just jungle law.”

Gone with the Wind, an elaborately costumed film nearly four hours long, topped the Depression-era epics. Its heroine, Scarlett O’Hara, played by British actress Vivien Leigh, struggles to maintain her life on a Georgia plantation during and after the Civil War. Romance enters as Clark Gable, playing the masterful Rhett Butler, woos Scarlett. Audiences found inspiration in Scarlett’s unassailable will to survive.





On the Air While movie drama captured the imagination, radio offered entertainment on a more personal level. People listened to the radio every day, gathering around the big wooden box in the living room. It could have been the voice of the president or a newscaster that held their attention. More often it was the comedy of Jack Benny or George Burns and Gracie Allen, or the adventures of a hero like the Green Hornet.

One of the most popular heroes was the Lone Ranger, who fought injustice in the Old West with the help of his “faithful Indian companion,” Tonto. The listener needed only to picture the hero with a black mask hiding his identity, as he fired a silver bullet to knock a gun from an outlaw’s hand.

Daytime radio dramas carried their stories over from day to day. Programs such as *The Guiding Light* depicted middle-class families confronting illness, conflict, and other problems. These short dramas allowed listeners to escape into a world more exciting than their own. The shows’ sponsors were often makers of laundry soaps, so the shows were nicknamed **soap operas**.

While the Depression tore at the fabric of many towns, radio created a new type of community. Even strangers found common ground in discussing the lives of radio characters.

 **Reading Check** **Evaluating** What movies and radio shows entertained Americans during the Depression?

Fact	Fiction	Folklore
<p>Hobo Signs The hundreds of thousands of hobos who roamed the country developed intricate symbols that they wrote on trees, fences, or buildings to warn or inform other hobos. Many became a part of American folklore.</p>		
	(a closed eye)	This community is indifferent toward hobos.
	(an open eye)	The authorities here are alert; be careful.
		This is a dangerous neighborhood.
		Fresh water and a safe campsite.
		This is dangerous drinking water.
		This is a good place for a handout.
		You may sleep in the hayloft here.

Source: *Hobo Signs*.

The Depression in Art

Art and literature also flourished in the harsh and emotional 1930s. The homeless and unemployed became the subject of pictures and stories as artists and writers tried to portray life around them.

Thomas Hart Benton and **Grant Wood** led the regionalist school, which emphasized traditional American values, especially those of the rural Midwest and South. Wood’s most famous painting,



American Gothic, portrays a stern farmer and his daughter in front of their humble farmhouse. The portrait pays tribute to no-nonsense Midwesterners while at the same time gently making fun of their severity.

Novelists such as **John Steinbeck** added flesh and blood to journalists' reports of poverty and misfortune. Their writing evoked both sympathy for their characters and indignation at social injustice. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, Steinbeck tells the story of an Oklahoma family fleeing the Dust Bowl to find a new life in California. Steinbeck had seen firsthand the plight of migrant farm families uprooted by the Dust Bowl. After visiting camps of these families, he gained a better understanding of their fears. In his novel, he described these "people in flight" along Route 66. Inside one old jalopy sat the members of a family, worrying:

“There goes a gasket. Got to go on. Find a nice place to camp. . . . The food's getting low, the money's getting low. When we can't buy no more gas—what then? Danny in the back seat wants a cup a water. Little fella's thirsty.”

—from *The Grapes of Wrath*

Other novelists of this time influenced literary style itself. In *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, author **William Faulkner** shows what his characters are thinking and feeling before they speak. Using this stream of consciousness technique, he exposes hidden attitudes of Southern whites and African

Profiles IN HISTORY

Dorothea Lange 1895–1965

Before she had ever used a camera, Dorothea Lange knew she wanted to be a photographer. After finishing high school, she took a photography course in New York, then traveled around the world. Lange earned her keep by taking and selling photos. Her trip ended in San Francisco.

In San Francisco, Lange photographed homeless people and uncovered the desperation of her subjects. One day, while driving through California's Central Valley, Lange noticed a sign: "Pea-Pickers Camp." On impulse, she stopped. She approached a woman and her children

gazing listlessly out of a tattered tent. Lange took five pictures while the mother "sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me."

In the mid-1930s, Lange traveled through the Dust Bowl states, capturing the ravages of dust storms. When the images were reproduced in a best-selling book, *American Exodus*, the state of California created camps to shelter migrant workers.



Americans in a fictional Mississippi county. Another Southern writer, Thomas Wolfe, used the facts of his own life to examine the theme of artistic creation in such powerful novels as *Look Homeward Angel*.

While the written word remained powerful, the printed image was growing in influence. Magazine photographers roamed the nation armed with the new 35-millimeter cameras, seeking new subjects. Photojournalist **Margaret Bourke-White's** striking pictures, displayed in *Fortune* magazine, showed the ravages of drought. In 1936 *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce introduced *Life*, a weekly photojournalism magazine that enjoyed instant success.

Reading Check **Examining** What subjects did artists, photographers, and writers concentrate on during the 1930s?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

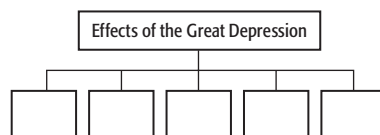
- Define:** *bailiff, shantytown, Hooverville, hobo, Dust Bowl, soap opera.*
- Identify:** Walt Disney, Grant Wood, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner.
- Explain** what caused the Dust Bowl conditions on the Great Plains.

Reviewing Themes

- Culture and Traditions** In what ways did people seek to forget about the Depression?

Critical Thinking

- Making Inferences** Why do you think *Life* magazine was so popular during the 1930s?
- Organizing** Use a graphic organizer to list the effects of the Great Depression.



Analyzing Visuals

- Analyzing Photos** Study the photograph on page 662. Think of three adjectives that you would use to describe the people in the photograph. Using these adjectives, write a paragraph describing the family pictured.

Writing About History

- Descriptive Writing** Imagine that you are living during the Great Depression. Write a journal entry describing a day in your life.