

Enduring the Great Depression

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Great Depression affected millions of people. In towns and cities across the nation, shops and factories closed and workers lost their jobs. In rural areas, the prices of crops dropped so significantly that farmers were unable to pay their debts. In the Great Plains, drought left the ground barren and unfit for agriculture.

By viewing events through different lenses and referring to different sources, historians have uncovered the variety of ways Americans endured the Great Depression.

This tutorial elaborates on how Americans endured the Great Depression in three parts:

1. Descent Into Poverty

By the end of 1932, the Great Depression impacted 60 million Americans, including many who had lived comfortable, middle-class lives during the 1920s. However, under the Hoover administration, federal relief efforts were limited. Private charities lacked the means and money to provide help to so many.

In New York, Chicago, and other cities, breadlines and soup lines were common sights.



Men stand outside a soup kitchen in Chicago opened by Al Capone in February 1931.



DID YOU KNOW

At one time in 1932, 82 breadlines were counted in New York.

As the Depression worsened, families first exhausted their savings (if they had any). Those who had insurance often cashed out their policies to keep their businesses and homes afloat.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Cash surrender payments of individual insurance policies tripled in the first 3 years of the Great Depression. Insurance companies made payments in excess of \$1.2 billion in 1932 alone. When savings and insurance were exhausted, people borrowed from family and friends. When that was no longer a possibility, they stopped making rent and mortgage payments. When they were evicted from their homes, people moved in with relatives. The burden of providing food and shelter to additional people was too much for many families, and the descent into poverty continued.

As an example of this progression, let's analyze the experiences of the Donner family, which owned a printing business in Chicago before the Great Depression. Mr. Donner and his family arrived in Chicago when he was 13 years old. In 1938, an interviewer described Donner's experiences from that point onward:

Interview with Mr. Donner, Chicago, 1938

“After completing a 2-year business college course in 1907, [Mr. Donner] began work in the office of a Chicago insurance firm. He was soon promoted to salesman; he continued at this job until 1918, when he took over a Chicago printing establishment. His mother had inherited the business from her uncle, and Mr. Donner purchased it from his mother. He continued to make payments to his mother until 1931 . . . Through the [1920s] the business had prospered. Mr. Donner employed from 12 to 30 men; ‘at a conservative estimate’ the business was worth \$15,000 in 1929, and Mr. Donner’s income averaged about \$300 a month.”

The interviewer continued by describing Mr. Donner’s experiences during the early years of the Great Depression:

“Awareness of the depression came early to the Donners, who had savings in one of the first banks to fail after the 1929 stock market crash. The Chicago bank that went under early in November, 1929 paid only 30 per cent of the total deposits. Through 1930 and 1931 Mr. Donner’s business was fairly good; he considered himself rather fortunate, for many of his friends had already begun to suffer heavy losses.

Mr. Donner continued to hope to meet ‘prosperity just around the corner’ as long as he dared, but the time came when he could no longer wait for prosperity. He thinks now that he held on too long, but he had no way of knowing that the depression would last so long, and that in the end he would save nothing from his business. He hated to discharge his employees, so [he] kept as many as possible [for] as long as possible. He also hated to see his huge presses standing idle. All of the family’s assets were converted into cash to be put into the business, and besides, Mr. Donner borrowed from relatives money which he has only recently succeeded in repaying. The Donners gave up the large home which they had been renting but had hoped to buy as soon as the business was paid for, put their furniture in storage, and moved into furnished rooms . . .

Finally, Mr. Donner had fired all of his employees, sold some of his presses, and rented a part of the floor space. But he still couldn’t give up altogether. He was gathering up what orders were to be had even when he did the printing, the delivering, and the bookkeeping all alone. He was worrying so continually and so excessively that he lost 35 pounds in a few months and couldn’t sleep at night.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Mr. Donner’s story reflect the prosperity that many Americans experienced during the 1920s?
2. How was Mr. Donner’s descent into poverty similar to that of others? In what ways were Mr. Donner’s experiences unique?



DID YOU KNOW

Mr. Donner and his family moved to Dubuque, Iowa, in 1934 to live with his wife’s family. One year later, he found employment with a federal work relief program.

Mr. Donner’s experiences revealed that the Great Depression affected almost everyone, including those who had been relatively well-off before the Great Crash. Like many Americans, Donner believed that the depression would end soon. The fact that it did not took a tremendous toll not only on the family business but

2. The Scottsboro Boys

Like Mr. Donner and his family, most African Americans did not participate in the stock market speculation that contributed to the Great Crash. That did not stop the Great Depression from hitting them hard and in ways that did not impact the Donner family and other White Americans.

African Americans were subject to racial discrimination, which limited their options during the Great Depression.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Although unemployment was rampant throughout the United States, many White citizens believed that any available jobs should go to them first. Even in Northern cities, some White workers and foremen conspired to have African American workers fired so that their jobs could be given to White workers.



DID YOU KNOW

By 1932, approximately half of all African Americans in the United States were unemployed. Racism and racial violence persisted in the United States during the Great Depression. Communities preoccupied with their economic hardships often ignored these problems. The **Scottsboro Boys** incident, however, gained national attention.



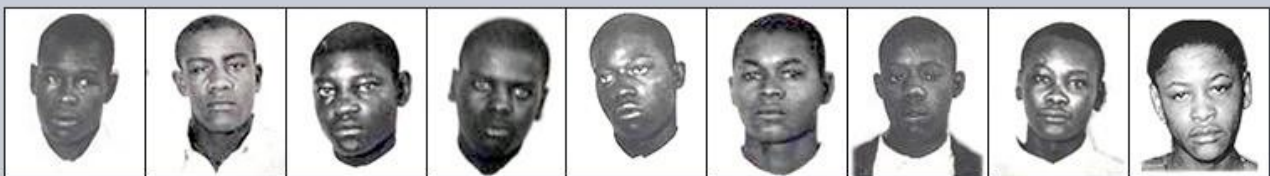
TERM TO KNOW

Scottsboro Boys

Reference to a trial in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931, in which nine Black teenagers were falsely convicted of raping two White women and sentenced to death.

In 1931, nine Black teenagers were arrested for vagrancy and disorderly conduct after an altercation with White travelers on a train. The teens had been “riding the rails,” a common occurrence during the Great Depression in which impoverished Americans traveled around the country on freight trains in search of work. Two young White women, who were traveling with a group of White youths, said that the Black teenagers had raped them.

The Scottsboro Boys



Left to right: Clarence Norris, Charlie Weems, Haywood Patterson, Ozie Powell, Willie Roberson, Eugene Williams, Olen Montgomery, Andy Wright, Roy Wright

The Scottsboro Boys case illustrated the racial injustice of the Southern court system. Despite significant evidence that the women had not been raped (one of the women recanted her testimony), an all-White jury convicted the defendants within 2 weeks of the incident. All but one of them were sentenced to death.

News of the verdict sparked protests from Northern newspaper editors, academics, and social reformers. The Communist Party of the United States, which viewed the trial and its outcome as an opportunity to gain the support of African Americans and White Northerners, offered to take charge of the defense and to seek a retrial.



The *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of the United States, announces a march on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys.

In October 1932, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Scottsboro Boys had been denied adequate legal representation at their original trial and had been denied due process because of the exclusion of potential Black jurors. However, the state of Alabama continued to prosecute the Scottsboro Boys. A series of trials and retrials, appeals, and overturned convictions illuminated a Southern justice system that provided inadequate legal counsel, relied on all-White juries, and required prisoners to endure terrible conditions. In 1937, the defense lawyers agreed to a deal in which most of the defendants were released on parole for a crime they did not commit.



The Scottsboro Boys with their lawyer, Samuel Liebowitz.



DID YOU KNOW

In 2013, the state of Alabama granted posthumous pardons to all of the Scottsboro Boys.

3. The Dust Bowl

Economic hardship and an environmental catastrophe on the Great Plains combined to create the **Dust Bowl**, one of the most significant disasters in American history.



TERM TO KNOW

Dust Bowl

A portion of the Great Plains that was overfarmed in the 1920s and experienced drought in the 1930s, resulting in dust storms that ruined many farmers.

The Dust Bowl was, in large part, the result of overfarming and speculation. During World War I, farmers in the southern Great Plains region, particularly in western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, experienced

prosperity because of good growing conditions and the high prices of wheat. As the federal government encouraged them to increase production to support the war effort, many farmers mortgaged their land and borrowed money against future production in order to expand.

Boom times went bust in the early 1920s as crop prices declined. Seeking to recoup their losses, farmers and speculators consolidated operations to take full advantage of the available land and machinery. Farmers plowed under native grasses and planted acres of wheat. Few considered the long-term effects on the soil. Commodity prices stabilized for a while, but they plummeted in 1929 when the price of wheat dropped from \$2 to 40 cents per bushel.

Exacerbating the problems caused by overproduction, a natural drought cycle began in 1931 and lasted for most of the decade. As crops failed and grass withered, little remained to hold the soil. Dust storms, also known as “black blizzards,” rose in huge, choking clouds. Dust piled up in doorways and filtered into homes across the Great Plains.

During the dust storms, what had once been a land of agricultural opportunity dried up. Livestock died or had to be sold since there was no money for feed. Crops intended for family use and for market withered and died. As the dust continued to blow, a new illness known as “dust pneumonia” spread.

Additional Resource

Listen to an audio interview from the Library of Congress ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) about dust storms in 1940.

During the New Deal, photographers who worked with the Farm Security Administration traveled through the Dust Bowl and documented what they saw. Their photographs indicated that overfarming and speculation, along with the drought, caused the Dust Bowl. They also celebrated the persistence of farmers and their families who tried to remain on the land.



A farmer from Cimarron County, Oklahoma, rebuilding his fence to prevent it from being buried by sand.

Source: Arthur Rothstein, April 1936.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why do you think Rothstein chose to take this photograph?
2. Based on this image, what was life like for a Dust Bowl farmer?



A photograph titled “One of the pioneer women of the Oklahoma Panhandle dust bowl.”

Source: Arthur Rothstein, April 1936.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think Rothstein described the woman in this picture as a “pioneer”?



A photograph titled "Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma."

Source: Arthur Rothstein, April 1936.



THINK ABOUT IT

What kinds of emotional responses could this image elicit from an audience?



BRAINSTORM

1. How do the three photographs portray the Great Plains environment?
2. What values and/or attitudes do the subjects of these photographs convey?

Photographs of the Dust Bowl told stories of a landscape and the people who inhabited it. They were stories of destruction and the dire consequences of stripping the topsoil from the land and upsetting nature's delicate balance. New Deal agricultural reformers would use these photographs as evidence of the need to adopt new agricultural practices, including crop rotation and contour plowing. These photographs also promoted the

traditional values of persistence and hard work. By describing a woman as a “pioneer” and portraying a farmer determined to rebuild his fence in a sea of sand, these photographs conveyed the determination of those who, despite a dust-filled catastrophe, were determined to remain on the land and make it bloom again.

Additional Resource

Check out a collection of audio recordings, images, and print material from “Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940 to 1941” at the [Library of Congress](#).



SUMMARY

By examining primary sources and viewing events through a number of lenses, this tutorial provided a glimpse of how Americans endured the Great Depression. Although the Depression affected much of the nation’s population, individual experiences differed: Some were hit harder than others. White Americans who once belonged to the middle class struggled to survive the descent into poverty. At the same time, the trials of the Scottsboro Boys revealed that racial injustice continued during the Great Depression. On the Great Plains, overcultivation and drought caused the Dust Bowl. Government-sponsored photographers documented the experiences of those who struggled to continue their lives there.

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REFERENCES

The Donners Recall the Great Depression, WPA Interview, 1938, Ret from bit.ly/2oCjH2r



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- [Image of Scottsboro Boys & Lawyer](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Image of Daily Worker](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Men standing outside soup kitchen in Chicago](#) | License: Public Domain



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