Historical Background

The Great Depression had an unprecedented impact on America during the 1930s. Lives were changed forever as breadwinners lost their jobs, families lost their homes, banks collapsed, and people endured tremendous sacrifice to make ends meet. Agricultural workers were arguably affected most of all. In addition to the falling cost of crops, farmers also had to manage their properties during “The Dust Bowl” storms. These conditions meant that many people could not pay their debts or mortgages and lost their farms.

A number of circumstances contributed to the economic crisis. Americans during the 1920s were used to a consumer culture where they could purchase items on credit, but once unemployment rose, purchasing decreased. Businesses lost their value, banks failed, and the cycle continued. At the time, little government intervention was in place to stop the crisis from snowballing.

During the 1930s, the federal government created dozens of programs under The New Deal in order to put Americans back to work, many of which are still in effect today. A direct correlation can be drawn from many of the causes of the Great Depression to the government programs of the 1930s which of the have helped to prevent the occurrence of major economic depressions ever since.

Suggestions for Teachers

This primary source set is organized thematically and focuses on causes of the Great Depression including mechanization of farming, consumerism, and unemployment. Encourage students to think about how these aspects of American culture can have a dramatic effect on the economy. Consider asking students questions such as: Which cause is most responsible for the depression? What have we as a country learned from the Great Depression? In what ways has the government attempted to protect the public from future economic crises?

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Additional resources can be found in the Horydzak Collection, which includes photographs from Washington, D.C. during the Depression period. Ask students to search for specific automobiles such as Studebaker, Cadillac, or Jeep to see how they compare with today’s popular vehicles.

Additional Links

- [Calvin Coolidge Papers: McNary-Haugen Bill](#)
- [Lesson Plan: Hoover and the Bonus Marchers](#)
- [Lesson Plan: The Great Depression](#)
- [The Great Depression: Themed Resources](#)
- [TPS–MTSU Primary Source Set: Depression and the New Deal](#)
- [Songs of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl Migrants](#)
Abandoned house in Carey, Texas. Mechanized cotton farming and displacement of tenant families is fast making Carey a ghost town [1937 May]

Abandoned tenant house seen across tractored fields, Hall County, Texas. Many tenants who have filled the land on the family-farm basis are made landless, forced by the machine into the towns, or reduced to day labor on the farms. Large numbers who have gone to the towns have fallen on relief, or even have sought refuge in distant parts. Not only is their security gone, but the opportunity even to rise to ownership is diminished, for profitable operation of mechanized farms requires more land and more capital equipment per farm [1938 June]

Mechanization of cotton [between 1935 and 1942]

Day laborers hoeing cotton. Many tenant farmers become day laborers on mechanized farms, Near Corsicana, Texas [1937 June]
Automobiles. Automobiles in full parking lot
[ca. 1920–ca. 1950]

Electric Institute of Washington. Woman with washing machine
[ca. 1920–ca. 1950]

Good housekeeping: selected issue from
1926 [1926 February]

Electric Institute of Washington. Cooking and planning II
[ca. 1920–ca. 1950]
If you boys can agree you may get something from Santy [1927 November 12]

I'd rather not be on the rolls of relief. Or work on the W. P. A. We'd rather work for the farmer if the farmer could raise the pay; then the farmer could plant more cotton and he'd get more money for spuds, instead of wearing patches, we'd dress up in new duds.

I'd rather not be on relief [1938]

The interview for unemployment compensation. San Francisco, California [1938 January]

Text

- Savage Blames Labor Unions for the Great Depression
- The Stock Market Fell to Its Lowest Point During the Depression
- Today in History: The Depths of Depression
- The Migrant Experience

[Two men in car at jammed intersection: "Listen - - if those European financiers aren't careful there's going to be a crash"; "Yeah -- that's what we gotta look out for"] [1931 Oct 12]

[Crowd of people gather outside the New York Stock Exchange following the Crash of 1929] [1929]
CITATIONS

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is 2/26/19.


Lange, Dorothea, photographer. *Abandoned tenant house seen across tractored fields. Hall County, Texas. Many tenants who have filled the land on the family-farm basis are made landless, forced by the machine into the towns, or reduced to day labor on the farms. Large numbers who have gone to the towns have fallen on relief, or even have sought refuge in distant parts. Not only is their security gone, but the opportunity even to rise to ownership is diminished, for profitable operation of mechanized farms requires more land and more capital equipment per farm.* Hall County Texas, 1938. June. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa2000001802/PP/.


*Good housekeeping; selected issue from 1926* [1926 February]


