



# Life in the Great Depression

## Objectives

1. Discover how the Great Depression and the New Deal affected women, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans.
2. Learn about the causes and effects of the Dust Bowl.
3. Understand how art, radio, and movies informed and entertained people during the Depression.

## Main Idea

During the Depression, many women had to find ways to help support their families.

## Vocabulary Builder

**domestic** (doh MEHS tihk) *adj.*  
having to do with the home or housework

## Prepare to Read

### Reading Skill

**Analyze Effects** Effects are the results of an action, event, or attitude. Often an action, event, or attitude will have several effects. Certainly, the events of the Great Depression had dramatic effects on American business, families, and culture. As you read this section, ask yourself: What happened to businesses and individuals because of these events? How did American culture change because of these events?

## Vocabulary Builder

### High-Use Words

**domestic**, p. 782

**confer**, p. 783

### Key Terms and People

**Eleanor Roosevelt**, p. 783

**civil rights**, p. 784

**Mary McLeod Bethune**, p. 784

**Marian Anderson**, p. 784

**migrant worker**, p. 784

**John Collier**, p. 785

**John Steinbeck**, p. 786

★ **Background Knowledge** In Section 2, you saw how the New Deal attempted to relieve hard times. In this section, you will see how the Great Depression and New Deal affected everyday life.

## Women in the Depression

With so many men out of work, many Americans felt that women should stay at home. Yet, women often had to help support themselves or their families. By the end of the Great Depression, more women were working outside the home than at the start.

**Women in the Workplace** Women enjoyed two small advantages in the workplace. Female salesclerks and secretaries faced little competition from men. In addition, such jobs were less likely to disappear than the factory jobs many men held.

Still, most women with jobs struggled. For example, women who had trained to become schoolteachers or librarians suddenly found themselves competing for jobs with men who had lost other work. Female factory workers were more likely than men to lose their jobs or to have their wages cut. Many maids, seamstresses, and housekeepers also lost their jobs because fewer people could afford **domestic** help. African American women were especially hard hit because they held the majority of domestic jobs.

The Great Depression complicated life for most women, whether or not they worked outside the home. To save money, more women found themselves sewing clothes, canning fruits and vegetables, and baking bread instead of buying it.



## Eleanor Roosevelt

Born to a wealthy New York family, Eleanor Roosevelt spent much of her time as First Lady visiting the needy. At far left, she greets two children with polio—the same disease that struck her husband. At left, she descends into a coal mine. **Critical Thinking:** **Apply Information** How did Eleanor Roosevelt assist the President?



**An Active First Lady** The most famous working woman in the country was FDR's wife, **Eleanor Roosevelt**. After polio had stricken her husband in 1921, Mrs. Roosevelt overcame her shyness to begin speaking and traveling on his behalf.

Eleanor Roosevelt helped transform the role of First Lady. The wives of earlier Presidents had hosted teas and stayed in the background. By contrast, the energetic Mrs. Roosevelt crisscrossed the country, serving as the President's "eyes and ears." Then, she conferred with FDR on what she had seen and what he should do. In 1933 alone, Eleanor Roosevelt logged 40,000 miles, including a trip down into a West Virginia coal mine. She also made frequent radio speeches and wrote a daily newspaper column.

Mrs. Roosevelt used her position to champion women's rights. She held press conferences limited to female reporters. She also urged FDR to appoint more women to government positions.

**✓Checkpoint** What challenges did women face during the Great Depression?

## African Americans in the Depression

African Americans had been hit hard by the Depression. They generally suffered more unemployment, homelessness, illness, and hunger than did whites.

**South and North** In the South, plunging cotton prices forced many African American sharecroppers off their land. Moving to southern cities, they found that many jobs traditionally done by blacks, such as cleaning streets, were now filled by jobless whites. By 1932, more than half the African Americans in the South were unemployed.

## Vocabulary Builder

**confer** (kahn FER) v. to exchange ideas with someone

## Main Idea

The New Deal offered some opportunities to African Americans, but many others faced even harder times.

## Biography Quest



**Marian  
Anderson**  
1897–1993

Marian Anderson began singing in a local Philadelphia church at the age of six. By 1934, she was singing for the kings of Sweden and Denmark.

Anderson is best remembered for her 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial. At first, she shied away from the attention. But she realized, "I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people."

### Biography Quest

**What other barriers did Anderson break in her career?**

**For:** The answer to the question about Anderson

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The migration of African Americans to the North, which had started after World War I, continued at an even faster pace. Even in northern cities, though, more black than white factory workers lost their jobs. African Americans were usually the last hired and the first fired. In New York, almost 50 percent of blacks were jobless.

**FDR's Mixed Record** The majority of African American voters had backed Roosevelt. Still, the President had a mixed record on civil rights. Civil rights are the rights guaranteed in the Constitution, especially voting and equal treatment under the law. For example, FDR failed to support a federal antilynching bill, which his wife strongly supported. The President feared that he might lose the support of southern senators for his New Deal programs.

Still, in part due to his wife's prodding, Roosevelt appointed at least 100 African Americans to government posts. Educator Mary McLeod Bethune, a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's, became the top-ranking African American in the government.

Bethune was a member of FDR's "Black Cabinet," a group of high-ranking appointees who advised the President on African American issues. Other members of the Black Cabinet included William Hastie, who later became the first African American federal judge.

**A Symbolic Moment** In 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to allow African American singer Marian Anderson to perform at their hall. Eleanor Roosevelt, a DAR member, resigned in protest. She then arranged for Anderson to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday.

Anderson's performance drew a crowd of 75,000 listeners. The concert became a key symbol of the struggle for civil rights.

 **Checkpoint** What was the Black Cabinet?

### Main Idea

During the Great Depression, many Mexican Americans were expelled from the country, and new laws changed the lives of Native Americans.

## Other Americans in the Depression

All Americans were affected by the Depression. Yet, some faced special circumstances. Many Mexicans and Mexican Americans were not only forced out of work but also out of the country. Meanwhile, the New Deal meant a new government policy toward Native Americans.

**Mexican Immigrants Are Deported** Many Mexican immigrants lived in the Southwest as migrant workers, people who travel from farm to farm picking crops. During good times, farm owners had welcomed the Mexicans, who were willing to toil for low wages under harsh conditions. During the Depression, though, thousands of white migrant workers also flooded the area looking for work.

Many Americans wanted the government to force the Mexicans out of the country. Federal immigration officials rounded up hundreds of thousands of people and deported them to Mexico. Some of those deported were not immigrants but were citizens who had been born in the United States.

**The Indian New Deal** A law in 1924 had granted American citizenship to Native Americans. Still, when the Great Depression hit, most of the nation's 170,000 Indians lived in poverty on reservations administered by the government.

Under FDR, John Collier became Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Collier, a white man who had lived among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, embarked on an ambitious program that became known as the Indian New Deal. With funding from federal agencies, he hired Native Americans to build needed schools, hospitals, and irrigation systems. Collier also hoped to put reservations under Indian control, stop sales of Native American lands, and encourage Indian schools to teach Native American history and the arts.

Congress approved part of Collier's plan in the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. The IRA did restrict tribal land sales. Yet, it failed to bring self-government to the tribes or to promote education. Native Americans continued to be the poorest Americans.

**Checkpoint** Why were many Mexican Americans expelled from the country during the Great Depression?

## The Dust Bowl

In the southwestern Plains, farmers already suffering the effects of the Great Depression faced another disaster. In 1930, very little rain fell. The resulting drought caused widespread crop failure and sent storms of dust swirling across the land. These gigantic dust storms lasted for five years, turning 100 million acres of rich farmland into a wasteland known as the Dust Bowl.

**Black Blizzards** Modern farming methods contributed to the Dust Bowl. Mechanical farming equipment, which had made farming easier, encouraged farmers to clear huge plots of land. They removed native grasses along with the sod formed by the grass roots. This sod layer, however, had held the dry Plains soil in place. When the rains failed, the rootless soil blew away like powder. (See the Geography and History feature following this section.)

Some dust storms arose so suddenly that people called them "black blizzards." Black blizzards made noon seem like midnight, buried fences, seeped into houses, and killed people and animals. "We went to school with headlights on and with dust masks on," recalled one man.



### Native Americans and the New Deal

In addition to the Indian Reorganization Act, Native Americans benefited from other New Deal programs. These farmers display the blue eagle, symbol of the National Recovery Act. **Critical Thinking: Apply Information** What was the Indian New Deal?

### Main Idea

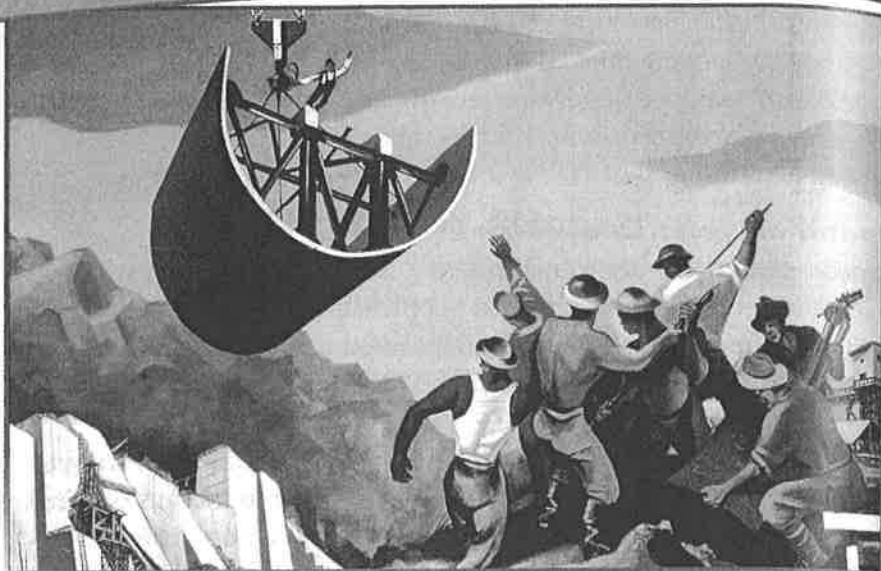
Drought and dust storms brought misery to farmers on the Plains.

## Links to Art

### Artists of the Depression

William Gropper created this painting, *Construction of the Dam*, for the Department of the Interior in 1937. The vibrant colors and dynamic poses reflect the strength of the men who labored on public works projects during the New Deal.

**Critical Thinking: Apply Information** Why was dam building a fitting subject for a painting during the era of the New Deal?



### Analyze Effects

Review and analyze the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on farmers in the Great Plains.

### Main Idea

Some artists and writers tried to give a realistic picture of hard times.

**Okies Head West** By the thousands, ruined farm families abandoned their dusty homes to seek work elsewhere. In some of the worst-hit Dust Bowl counties, as many as one family in three left. Many headed west to the rich farmlands of California.

California residents scornfully called the migrants Okies because so many had come from Oklahoma. The migratory agricultural workers found conditions in California almost as miserable as the ones they had left. Unable to buy land, they competed with local workers to pick crops at starvation wages. The police eventually closed some roads entering the state. Still, the migrants kept coming.

**Checkpoint** What were the causes of the Dust Bowl?

## Arts and Media of the Depression

In 1939, writer John Steinbeck captured the miseries of the Dust Bowl in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel tells the story of the Joads, Okies who seek a better life in California. In one scene, Ma Joad describes how her family has been shattered by hard times:

“They was the time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, and little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more. Pa’s lost his place. He ain’t the head no more. We’re cracking up, Tom. There ain’t no fambly now.”

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Steinbeck’s novel became the classic example of how American writers and artists tried to cope with the human toll of the Great Depression.



**Visual Arts** Photographers and painters used the Depression as a theme for their art. Under a New Deal program called the Farm Security Administration, photographer Dorothea Lange recorded the experiences of Dust Bowl migrants. Her classic photograph of a woman migrant farmworker remains the symbol of the Depression.

As you have read, the WPA hired artists to paint murals on public buildings. The realistic, colorful murals of artists such as Thomas Hart Benton paid tribute to the lives of ordinary working people.

**Movies and Radio** During the Depression, some movies dealt realistically with social problems. These included a 1940 movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Gangster films, such as *The Public Enemy*, depicted the rise of organized crime in American cities.

Most movies of the era, however, were meant to help people forget their problems. Audiences laughed at the antics of Mickey Mouse and thrilled to the adventure fantasy *King Kong*. One of the most popular stars was Shirley Temple, a little girl who symbolized optimism in the face of trouble.

The radio was a vital part of everyday life. Families gathered in their living rooms to listen to FDR's fireside chats. For entertainment, people enjoyed popular bands and comedians. During the day, many listeners tuned in to continuing dramas sponsored by soap companies. Such serials are still known as soap operas.

✓ **Checkpoint** How did movies and radio help Americans during the Great Depression?

★ **Looking Back and Ahead** In this section, you saw how the Great Depression affected Americans of the time. In the next section, you will look at the lasting impact of the New Deal.



Poster for the 1933 movie  
*King Kong*

## Section 3 | Check Your Progress

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### Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) Recall** How did Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt differ in their position on a proposed antilynching bill?  
**(b) Evaluate Information** Whose position do you agree with? Explain.
- (a) Describe** What caused the Dust Bowl in the 1930s?  
**(b) Make Predictions** What do you think might finally end Dust Bowl conditions?

### Reading Skill

- Analyze Effects** Reread the text under the heading "Other Americans in the Depression." Analyze the effects of the Depression on Mexican Americans.

### Vocabulary Builder

Answer the following questions in complete sentences that show your understanding of the key terms.

- What is the goal of people who seek civil rights?
- What did Mexican Americans and Okies do as migrant workers?

### Writing

- Choose one of the general topics from the list that follows. Narrow that topic down to a more specific subtopic that could be covered in a multimedia presentation of 5 minutes. List three elements for that presentation.
  - popular media of the 1930s
  - the Dust Bowl
  - the Depression and women
  - the Depression and African Americans
  - family life in the 1930s