

Overview of life during the Great Depression, Part 1

The Great Depression affected everyone. From the very young to the old, everyone’s lives were changed drastically by the events of this period. Many people found themselves out of work and searching for a better life. Children had to deal with changes in their education if they could attend school. Teenagers and their parents were traveling to search for a new life. The middle class had to deal with a life without money and security. The years of the Great Depression were very difficult for those who lived through them and they also mark an important era in this country’s history.

During this time many children were deprived of an education because many communities had to close school during the 1932-1933 term because of a lack of money. Some children were lucky enough to be in schools where teachers did teach even though they were not paid. Children also greatly suffered from malnutrition. In 1932, 20% of the children in New York City were suffering from malnutrition; children in rural areas were even worse off. Dietary diseases were rampant because adequate food such as milk, fruit, fresh vegetables, and eggs could not be bought with the family’s low income. The death rate for children suffering from undernourishment was on the rise because children were losing their stamina and were unable to fight off disease.

Many teenagers of this period were known for "riding the rails." Teenagers who felt that they were a burden to their families or were ashamed of their unemployment and poverty felt the need to leave their homes to find a life of their own. They wanted to take the adventure of living on their own and trying to find a better life. During the height of the Depression, 250,000 teenagers were roaming around America by freight trains. Some people admired these teenagers for their spirit while others feared them as potentially dangerous. About 85% of these teenagers were in search of employment.

During this period, most of the country’s African-American population lived in rural areas and worked on farms owned by white landowners. Even though these rural African-Americans had known poverty most of their lives, the Great Depression was a hard hit. Their living conditions worsened due to the fact that the farmers they worked for lost their land. Life for African-Americans in urban areas was harder. Those who had been enjoying the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s found themselves forced to move elsewhere in search for work. Everywhere, those of African heritage continued to work hard at their jobs. They would do hard manual labor or worked in areas that were known for their dangerous conditions such as foundries. Others might have worked as domestic servants for white people. Some also worked for railroads, steel mills, and coal mines. Still others became street vendors or peddlers.

Farmers found themselves in a very desperate situation during the Great Depression. In the decade prior to this period, farmers were already losing money because of greater industrialization in cities. For them, the Great Depression just made worse an already dismal situation. Many of these farmers were renting their land and their machinery because of the loss of money in the 1920s. At the beginning of the depression, prices on food that the farmers produced deflated so much that the farmers were unable to make a profit off of their land. As a consequence of this, they refused to sell what they produced. If they lived in the middle portion of the country, affected by the Dust Bowl, they were also experiencing long-term drought. They could no longer make money off of what they land provided. Usually it was barely enough to maintain their families. As the farmers grew deeper into debt and could no longer make payments on their land and machinery, the banks where they loaned money from foreclosed on their land. Some of these displaced farmers hoped to move West to find better land to farm and better opportunities for themselves and their families.

Question 1

How did the Great Depression affect African Americans? Use at least two details from the text to support your answer. (*use back if you need more room*)

Question 2

Identify any correct answer which reveals what life was like for youth during the Great Depression.

- A. Many children were deprived of an education because many communities had to close their schools because of lack of money
- B. Life for African-Americans in urban areas was harder.
- C. Children suffered from malnutrition.
- D. As the farmers grew deeper into debt and could no longer make payments on their land and machinery, the banks where they loaned money from foreclosed on their land
- E. The death rate for children suffering from undernourishment was on the rise.
- F. Teenagers who felt that they were a burden to their families or were ashamed of their unemployment and poverty felt the need to leave their homes to find a life of their own.
- G. Some also worked for railroads, steel mills, and coal mines.
- H. During the height of the Depression, 250,000 teenagers were roaming around America by freight trains.

Question 3

Read the following section from paragraph 5. Then, answer the question that follows.

“In the decade prior to this period, farmers were already losing money because of greater industrialization in cities.”

What is the meaning of industrialization as it is used in the text?

- A. Agricultural farming
- B. A social and economic change based in cities which challenged the success of farming.
- C. Unemployment caused by increased industry.
- D. Economic instability in the form of deflation or inflation, or business consolidation in the form of trusts or monopolies.

Overview of life during the Great Depression, Part 2

The main role of women during the Great Depression was that of the homemaker. Of course, some women had gone through college and were having a difficult time of finding employment. Those with families had the task of keeping their family together when the principal moneymaker of the family was out of work. These women worked as hard as they could to support their families during this difficult time.

By 1932, three years after the initial crash, nearly thirty million Americans had lost their source of income; this included over 25% of Washington state. Ethnic communities, often marginalized by race or religious categorizations, sought out different strategies for economic and social survival. Nearly two weeks of state-wide national bank closures in 1933 meant that cooperative systems of checks and bartering had to replace cash. Sports took on new meanings for community involvement and pride, while female students at the University of Washington redefined what "women's education" and reimagined what women's roles might be. The repeal of prohibition further changed how leisure was understood.

Many people who, after being thrown off their land, chose to move were known as vagrants or migrant workers. In 1932, the United States Children's Bureau and the National Association of Traveler's Aid Societies reported that there were at least 25,000 families wandering around the country and it was believed that this was only a portion of the actual number. These families became very susceptible to disease while traveling because of a lack of food and a lack of proper shelter. Most of the time, the families would travel in their cars and would stop at campsites set up by other vagrants along the way to search for jobs in the area. If they were able to find a job, which was practically impossible, they would not have earned enough to support their families. For example, the net earnings for an agricultural migratory worker averaged \$110 in 1933 and \$124 in 1934. These farmers were some of the hardest hit groups during the depression.

One group that had to deal with drastic changes during the depression was the middle class. This group accounted for 15% to 20% of Americans at this time. The collapse of the stock market and the closing of more than 5,000 banks mostly affected the middle class. The professional men that worked at these jobs now had to deal with a loss of income and unemployment. They now found themselves having a hard time supporting their families. Many of these people could no longer consider themselves in the middle class after the depression took its toll on them. Most people who had worked their way through college found themselves unable to find a job during this time. Their degrees were in no way useful to them. Among the professions that had few job openings were bankers, architects, agriculturalists, educators, and salesmen. A study of fifty-four colleges conducted by the American College Personnel Association showed that 21,974 women and men holding degrees from these colleges were without jobs. This proves what a dire state the middle class was in because those who would make up the middle class, those with higher educations, had a difficult time of finding a job. The middle class was in danger of becoming politically and socially insignificant because of the numbers of people who were descending from the middle class into the lower classes.

Everyone had to adjust to a new way of living during the Great Depression. The people of this time knew that they had to change in order to survive. Practically everyone had to deal with major losses and drastic changes. Children had to cope with the loss of a stable life and an education. Farmers had to learn to live with the loss of their farms that had supported their families. The middle class had to deal with the loss of money and the potential disappearance of their social class. This period might have been a dark one for this country, but it brought about many changes that still affect the country to this day and, therefore, this was a very important time for America's history.

Question 1

Consider this sentence from the text, and the directions which follow.

"Everyone had to adjust to a new way of living during the Great Depression."

Identify any of the following sentences which support the thesis

- A. Practically everyone had to deal with major losses and drastic changes.
- B. Children had to cope with the loss of a stable life and an education.
- C. Farmers had to learn to live with the loss of their farms that had supported their families.
- D. The middle class had to deal with the loss of money and the potential disappearance of their social class.
- E. This period might have been a dark one for this country, but it brought about many changes that still affect the country to this day and, therefore, this was a very important time for America's history

Question 2

Highlight (or underline) the section in the article which alludes to the impact of furthering of the women's rights movements

Question 3

This question has two parts. First answer Part A, then answer Part B

Part A

Several ways in which American culture was changing were detailed in this reading. Identify what you believe are the most important two ways in which culture was affected by the Depression.

Part B

Explain why you believe the two cultural changes you selected are the most significant relative to others. (*use back if you need more room*)

The following are a sampling of newspaper headlines from the era of the Great Depression.

24 October 1929 – Bankers Check Crash in Stock Market

25 October 1929 – Worse Stock Crash Stemmed by Banks; 12,894,650-Share Day Swamps Market; Leaders Confer, Find Conditions Sound

25 October 1929 – Stock Market Crisis Over; Stock House Survives Worse Day in History; Banks Cheerful After Conference; Downslide Halted by Bank Support

25 October 1929 – Stock Market Recovers Strength

26 October 1929 – Stocks Gain as Market is Steadied; Bankers Pledge Continued Support; Hoover Says Business Basis is Sound

29 October 1929 – Wall Street in Panic as Stocks Crash

29 October 1929 – Stock Prices Slump \$14,000,000,000 in Nationwide Stampede to Unload

30 October 1929 – Stocks Plunge 508 Points, a Drop of 22.6%; 604 Million Volume Nearly Doubles Record

30 October 1929 – Greatest Crash in Wall Street History; Deluge of Panic Selling Overwhelms Market; Prices Tumble Like an Avalanche

30 October 1929 – Stocks Collapse in 16,410,030-Share Day, but Rally at Close Cheers Brokers; Bankers Optimistic, To Continue Aid

5 November 1929 – Stocks Sag 2 to 17 Points in Day of Orderly Selling; Session Cut to 3 Hours

12 November 1929 – Stocks Bleak Again in New Rush to Sell Steel at Years Low.

13 November 1929 – Stocks Sink to New Lows; Selling Puzzles Wall Street; Grain and Cotton Also Off

2 December 1930 – Hoover Asks for \$150,000,000 To Help Idle

20 April 1933 – Gold Standard Dropped Temporarily to Aid Prices and our Worlds Position; Bill Ready for Controlled Inflation

7 May 1933 – Decisive Break From Panic Shown in Business Figures; Depression Trend in Reversed and Carloadings, Steel and Commodities Are On Firmer and Surer Basis; Inflation Talk is Trade Stimulant

7 May 1933 – Roosevelt ‘Brain Trust’ Draws Up Program to Redistribute Wealth

11 May 1934 – Wheat Crops in 11 States Face Drought Ruin; Agricultural Experts Believe Crop Failure Will Still Leave Surplus

11 May 1934 – Violent Dust Storm Sweeps into State; All of Midwest Hit; Sun is Obscured; Airman Impeded

15 April 1935 – Dust Victims Pray for Oklahoma Rain; Farmers, Businessmen, Women and Children Crowd Church to Ask Relief; ‘Messiah’ Sung in Kansas

23 May 1937 – Roosevelt to Submit Labor Proposal Monday; Billions Asked for in Dust Bowl Aid

Question 1

Examine the progression of headlines. What pattern appears?

- Bad news is usually in the headline.
- Bad news is often paired with optimistic interpretations of the events
- The Dust Bowl was a pressing concern from the outset.
- The economic turmoil and Dust Bowl was blamed on a specific political party.

Question 2

Choose any statements which could be supported by the newspaper headlines.

- In times of uncertainty, people in the Midwest turned to religion.
- The US would invade China and confiscate its gold deposits.
- Business leaders were in denial as to the extent of the collapse, and put forth positive messages.
- Among multiple President’s, there was an effort to spend their way out of the Depression using government tax-collected money.
- American involvement in World War II brought the United States out of the Depression.
- Prohibition was ended so that the government had a new income source, by taxing alcohol.

Question 3

Why might newspaper have multiple headlines to accompany an article?

- Since everything is important, the editors cannot agree on what to have a headline cover.
- The more headlines, the better chance the newspaper has at being sold.
- A single headline is the best summary of the important news being reported on.
- Multiple headlines stress the importance of the stories, and often they are on related but not identical topics.

Question 4

This question involves instruction in two parts. First, complete part A. Then, complete part B.

Part A

Look at the headlines. Highlight (or underline) the headline which best describes the key event which happened in 1929.

Part B

Look at the headlines. Highlight (or underline) the headline which best describes how the events are affecting everyday people’s livelihood.

Herbert Hoover did not cause the Great Depression. The economic cataclysm struck eight months into his presidency. Traditionally, the government did nothing during economic downturns. Instead, officials stuck to *laissez faire* policies and waited the economy out. President Hoover ignored tradition. Instead of *laissez faire*, he led an unprecedented government effort to bring the country out of the Great Depression.

President Hoover rejected his treasury secretary's advice to sit back and wait the economy out. The president hoped a partnership between private business and the government would end the depression. He went to the business community and implored them to not cut wages or lay off workers. Despite Hoover's appeals, millions lost their jobs. Normally, private charities aided the indigent. Unfortunately, they were overwhelmed by the Depression. Desperate, people appealed to the federal government for help. President Hoover opposed direct aid payments for the unemployed. He felt direct aid acted like a narcotic and led people to sit home as opposed to job hunt.

In an attempt to clear out jobs for workers, Hoover ordered Mexican repatriation. The federal government rounded up 500,000 Mexicans and deported them. Despite removing a half million people, the jobs did not materialize. Repatriation turned out to be the only direct aid Hoover would provide American workers before 1932. Instead, the president tried to stimulate business. In 1930, he signed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff; the act raised rates on thousands of imports in the hopes of protecting American jobs. Instead of helping the economy, it made the Depression worse as it created a worldwide trade war. In addition to protectionism, the Hoover Administration attempted to spur lending. He tried to persuade large banks to lend to smaller banks to keep them solvent. They formed the National Credit Corporation (NCC) in order to save small banks. Hoover twisted arms to gain cooperation, but the effort failed. Hoover scrapped the NCC and replaced it with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). This government agency provided \$2 billion in emergency aid to state and local governments and businesses.

Hoover's NCC and RFC did not end the Depression and did little to help. In 1932, another crisis struck. Banks began wholesale foreclosures. People lost their homes en masse. The homeless began congregating in shanty towns and tent cities they dubbed "Hoovervilles." This was a community of cardboard boxes, tents and small rickety wooden sheds built by homeless people who lived in the shacks and begged for food or went to soup kitchens. Terms such as "Hoover blanket" (an old newspaper used as blanketing) and "Hoover flag" (an empty pocket turned inside out) entered into common usage.

To combat the foreclosure crisis, Hoover signed the Federal Home Loan Bank Act designed to help stop foreclosures. Unlike his other policies, this had some effect and foreclosures dropped. However, the Depression itself continued. Despite Hoover's moderate success in curtailing foreclosures, the president grew desperate to end the Depression and began public works projects in 1932. The Emergency Relief and Construction Act represented the federal government's first attempts at direct aid for the poor and unemployed.

Hoover raised tariffs, income taxes, estate taxes, corporate taxes, and even slapped a tax on all bank checks. The last tax seems to have severely curtailed economic growth. Additionally, Hoover went after the New York Stock Exchange and Wall Street "fat cats." Hoover's tax increases and attack on Wall Street severely crippled the economy.

Although Hoover had come to detest the presidency, he agreed to run again in 1932, not only as a matter of pride, but also because he feared that no other candidate would deal with the Depression without resorting to what Hoover considered dangerously radical measures. He lost to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Question 1

This question has two parts. First, answer Part A. Then, answer Part B.

Part A

Click on the statement which best identifies the author's premise.

- A. Hoover did not cause the Depression, and his policies helped relive its economic impact.
- B. Hoover was uncertain as to what policies to pursue, so he tried many.
- C. The people blamed Hoover for the Depression

Part B

Choose the two statements that, if true, would most directly challenge the author's premise.

- A. Hooverville's were a direct reflection of the peoples discontent with Hoover's leadership
- B. Hoover's tax on all bank checks severely curtailed economic growth.
- C. Hoover's NCC and RFC programs achieved little, and did little to help people.
- D. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff created a global trade war.
- E. By repatriating Mexican workers and pushing businesses to hire, he was trying to create jobs.

Question 2

Identify any of the correct statements.

- A. Hoover is responsible for the Stock Market Crash.
- B. Hoover did not believe in giving direct aid to people, yet he did support businesses.
- C. People came to blame Hoover for the Depression
- D. He tried to persuade large banks to lend to smaller banks, so they would not be forced to close.
- E. Hoover was bitter upon losing the 1932 election, disappointed in that he was repudiated by the voters and unappreciated for his efforts.
- F. The number of people left needy by the Depression overwhelmed resources in the community which normally would have been able to provide support.

Question 3

Read the following section from the first paragraph. Then, answer the question that follows.

"Officials stuck to laissez faire policies and waited the economy out. President Hoover ignored tradition. Instead of laissez faire, he led an unprecedented government effort to bring the country out of the Great Depression."

What is the meaning of laissez faire as it is used in the text?

- A. Taking an active role in trying to influence the economy.
- B. Employing a lazy yet fair perspective to labor negotiations.
- C. Assuming a hands-off approach in addressing the economy, essentially allowing it to work itself out.