

## LESSON 2

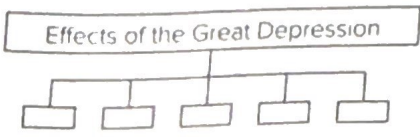
# Life During the Great Depression

Vicki Lynn Ruiz is a Professor of History and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She has extensively studied the lives of women working in the canning factory, and their struggle to set up a union of their own to fix the harsh conditions of their work.

“Canneries and packing houses in California have historically been lucrative enterprises, yet their workers, particularly women, reaped few benefits. They labored long hours for low pay under hazardous, unsanitary conditions. . . . A myriad of factors, including ethnic discrimination, relegated Mexican women to the lowest positions on the production line. In an atmosphere of competition and prejudice, women workers developed communication and support networks within the plants. These groups . . . helped women endure and at times alleviate the harsh conditions of cannery life.”

—From *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950*, by Vicki L. Ruiz





ANALYZING KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

ORGANIZING As you read, use a graphic organizer such as this one to describe the effects of the Depression.

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ANALYZING KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

1. CITING TEXT EVIDENCE What two types of repatriation occurred among immigrants during the Great Depression? *ELA RI 11-12.1*
2. ANALYZING EVENTS How did deep-plowing in the Great Plains worsen the effect of that region’s severe drought in the 1930s? *ELA RI 11-12.3*

DETERMINING MEANING

Read the sentence that contains the word **balliffs**. Based on the context, what might be a synonym for the word? *ELA RH 11-12.4*

# THE DEPRESSION WORSENS

**GUIDING QUESTION** How did economic changes affect everyday life during the 1930s?

The Depression grew steadily worse during President Hoover’s administration. In 1930, across the nation, 1,352 banks **suspended** operations, more than twice the number of bank failures in 1929. In 1932 alone, some 30,000 companies went out of business. By 1933, roughly one-fourth of the workforce was unemployed.

## STRUGGLING TO GET BY

**SL** The jobless often went hungry. When possible, they stood in breadlines for free food or lined up outside soup kitchens. People who could not pay their rent or mortgage lost their homes. Some, paralyzed by fear and humiliation, did not move and were evicted by court officers called **balliffs**. Throughout the country, newly homeless people put up shacks on unused or public lands. They built shantytowns, which they called Hoovervilles after the president they blamed for their plight. In search of work or a better life, many homeless, unemployed Americans began walking, hitchhiking, or, most often, “riding the rails” across the country. These wanderers, called **hoboes**, would sneak into open boxcars on freight trains. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly boys and young men, wandered from place to place in this way.

**R** The Depression also caused many immigrants to return to their native countries. In some cases, this repatriation was voluntary as jobs became scarce. The Filipino Repatriation Act of 1935 offered Filipino residents in the United States free transportation back to the Philippines. The act was not without its problems. It paid for the transportation of single adults, which forced families to split up, but strict immigration quotas meant it was very difficult to reunite families afterwards.

In other cases, repatriation was forced. The federal government launched repatriation drives to send poor immigrants back to their home countries. It also stepped up efforts to deport immigrants who had violated the law. In the Southwest, federal officials rounded up Mexicans (often without regard to their citizenship status) and forcibly returned them to Mexico. Although estimates vary, historians believe that during the Mexican Repatriation, between 500,000 and 2 million people of Mexican heritage, perhaps more than half American citizens, were forced to move to Mexico. Hispanics were one of the most visible immigrant minorities remaining after the immigration laws of the 1920s had restricted ;immigration from other nations.



In 2005, the California State legislature issued an apology to all those who had been affected by the Mexican Repatriation, acknowledging the impact these actions had on many people, immigrants and citizens alike:

“Beginning in 1929, government authorities . . . in California and throughout the United States undertook an aggressive program to forcibly remove persons of Mexican ancestry from the United States. . . . Throughout California, massive raids were conducted on Mexican-American communities, resulting in the clandestine removal of thousands of people, many of whom were never able to return to the United States, their country of birth. . . . These raids targeted persons of Mexican ancestry, with authorities and others indiscriminately characterizing these persons as ‘illegal aliens’ even when they were United States citizens or permanent legal residents.”

—“Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program,” 2005

## ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

**INTEGRATING INFORMATION**  
How does the excerpt indicate that the full document is indeed an apology? ELA RI.11-12.7

## THE DUST BOWL

Farmers soon faced a new disaster. The Great Plains tended to be arid and experienced high wind speeds. Topsoil was held in place by deep rooted prairie grasses that preserved moisture in times of low rainfall. The Homestead Act encouraged large-scale settlement of the region, and tractors and combines were widely used. Much of the Great Plains were extensively deep-plowed, making the topsoil susceptible to rapid erosion.

Erosion was not a problem at first, as the Great Plains experienced higher than normal rainfall from the late 1800s to the 1920s. But many farmers left their fields uncultivated when crop prices fell in the 1920s. At the same time, temperatures climbed and rainfall declined. When a severe drought hit in the early 1930s, there was nothing to anchor the soil, and it turned to dust. Human and physical geographic factors had combined to create a disaster.

Winds blew the arid soil aloft, blackening the sky for hundreds of miles. Dust buried crops and livestock. Humans and animals caught outdoors sometimes died of suffocation when the dust filled their lungs. During most of the 1930s, an average of 50 dust storms a year hit the Plains.

Some farmers managed to hold on to their land, but others were not so lucky. If their land was mortgaged, the loss of crops meant that they could not pay the mortgage payments and had to turn their property over to the banks. Nearly penniless, many families headed west, hoping for a better life in California. California offered a milder climate and longer growing season, and looked like a haven to the farming families fleeing the Dust Bowl. However, in California, their struggles continued. Many migrants—called “Okies” because many were from Oklahoma—were turned away at California’s borders. Those who did make it settled in Hooverilles and competed with each other for too few jobs. While Okies took up some of the jobs recently vacated by repatriated Mexicans and Mexican Americans, the effects of the Depression and the large numbers of migrants drove down wages for farm workers and severely limited the number of jobs available.

## ✓ CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. **SUMMARIZING** How did economic changes affect everyday life during the 1930s? HSS.HI.4
2. **EXPLAINING EFFECTS** How did the Homestead Act contribute to the Dust Bowl? HSS.HI.2
3. **DETERMINING MEANING** What was the significance of the word *Hooverville*? ELA.RI.11-12.4



# ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## UNDERSTANDING CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

1. **ANALYZING STRUCTURE** How does the text argue for the importance of movies in Depression-era America? ELA RI.11-12.5
2. **DETERMINING POINT OF VIEW** What does the text indicate about the usefulness and popularity of radio during the Great Depression? ELA RI.11-12.6

## MAKING CONNECTIONS: MUSIC

### POP TUNES OF THE 1930S

As is true in any period, Depression-era pop music reflected its times. In one popular 1931 tune, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" the singer reflects on how his faith in tradition—hard work rewarded with success—was betrayed, leaving him in poverty. The majority of successful songs, however, were intended to raise spirits. "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries," advised listeners "Don't take it serious. It's too mysterious." And "We're in the Money," from the movie musical *Gold Diggers of 1933*, assured everyone that the Great Depression had passed: "Old Man Depression, you are through. You done us wrong," it asserted, pleasantly but unrealistically.

## DETERMINING MEANING

Read the sentence that explains why radio dramas were called **soap operas**. The sentence explains the word soap. Why would the word opera also be part of the term? ELA.RH.11-12.4, ELA.RI.11-12.4

**GUIDING QUESTION** *In what ways did culture reflect the Depression experience?*

The hard times of the 1930s led many Americans to try to escape their worries temporarily 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.

**H1** Movies and radio programs grew increasingly popular. During the 1930s, more than 60 million Americans went to the movies each week. Child stars delighted viewers, and comedies provided a relief from daily worries. The Marx Brothers amused audiences in such films as *Animal Crackers*. Walt Disney produced the first featurelength animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937.

Serious films often celebrated ordinary people and the values of smalltown America. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Jimmy Stewart played a decent but naive senator who refuses to compromise his principles and exposes the corruption of some of his **colleagues**. Although few movies portrayed the hard times of the era, dramas tended to show heroes, often regular people, standing up to corruption or powerful forces. These films resonated because they relieved the helplessness many felt during the Depression, and portrayed characters like the audience as victims of corruption among the wealthy and powerful.

In 1939, MGM produced *The Wizard of Oz*. That same year, Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable thrilled audiences in *Gone with the Wind*, a Civil War epic that won nine Academy Awards. Hattie McDaniel won Best Supporting Actress, becoming the first African American to win an Academy Award.

**W** While movies captured the imagination, radio offered both information and entertainment. Tens of millions listened to the radio daily. Comedians such as Jack Benny were popular, as were the adventures of superheroes such as the Green Hornet. Daytime dramas continued their story lines from day to day. One such program, *The Guiding Light*, presented the personal struggles of middle-class families. Often sponsored by makers of laundry soaps, these dramas were called **soap operas**. Radio also exposed listeners to a variety of musical styles, such as songs from movies and Broadway musicals, swing music, and country.

## LITERATURE

**H2** Literature flourished during the 1930s. Writers and artists tried to portray life around them, and novelists developed new writing techniques. In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner shows what characters are thinking and feeling before they speak. Using this stream of consciousness **technique**, he exposes hidden attitudes of the residents of a fictional Mississippi county. Another Southern writer named Thomas Wolfe used his own life to examine the theme of artistic creation in his powerful novels, including *Look Homeward Angel*.

Perhaps no writer did more to capture the Depression than reporter and novelist John Steinbeck. Steinbeck focused on the rural poor, particularly agricultural workers and farmers, and created a sense of realism with rich, detailed descriptions. Steinbeck's writings added depth to journalists' reports of poverty and misfortune and evoked both sympathy for his characters. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck describes the experiences of the Joad family who headed to California after losing their farm in the Dust Bowl.



## PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING

Photographers roamed the nation with the new 35-millimeter cameras, seeking new subjects. In 1936, *TIME* magazine publisher Henry Luce introduced *LIFE*, a weekly photojournalism magazine that enjoyed instant success. The striking pictures of photojournalists Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White showed how the Great Depression affected average Americans.

Lange photographed homeless people in San Francisco and poor migrant agricultural workers in California's Central Valley. Her most famous photo, "Migrant Mother" (1936), depicts a sad, weary woman with seven children.

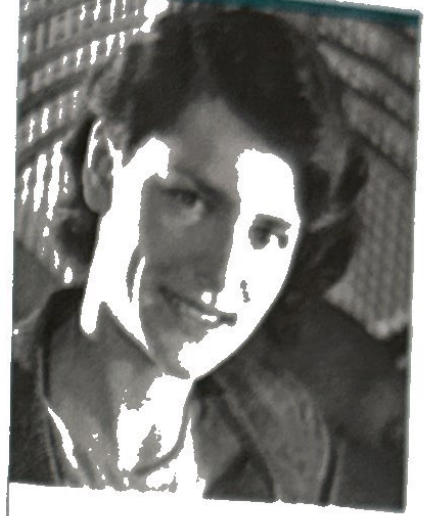
Like Lange, Margaret Bourke-White was a master at using photography to capture the era's ironies and contrasts. In 1937, *LIFE* magazine carried one of her most famous photographs. It showed a line of poor African American flood victims waiting for help in front of a billboard which declared, "World's Highest Standard of Living" and showed a white family happily driving a car.

Painters of the 1930s included Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, whose styles were referred to as the regionalist school. Their work emphasized traditional American values, especially those of the rural Midwest and South. Wood's best-known painting is *American Gothic*, which portrays a stern farmer and his daughter in front of their humble farmhouse. The portrait pays tribute to no-nonsense Midwesterners while gently making fun of their severity.

### ✓ CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. **IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS** In what ways did culture reflect the Depression experience? HSS HI.1
2. **UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT** What was significant about Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*? HSS HI.3
3. **SUMMARIZING** For what general theme was writer John Steinbeck noted? How does this theme tie into the concerns of this historical time period? HSS HI.4

### BIOGRAPHY



### MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE (1904–1971)

Margaret Bourke-White created the photo essay, which told the story of her subjects through powerful images. In 1935, she was hired by a new magazine, *LIFE*, and became its first female photojournalist. Bourke-White's career included covering the terrible conditions of sharecroppers in the South and being a war correspondent in World War II.

**DETERMINING CENTRAL IDEAS**  
Why do you think photojournalism became so influential?  
ELA.RH.11-12.2, ELA.RI.11-12.2

## LESSON 2 REVIEW

### Time and Place

1. **ANALYZING CHANGE** Explain how economic changes affected everyday American life in the 1930s. HSS CS.2

### Building History-Social Science Analysis Skills

2. **IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS** Describe the work of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. How did it reflect America's experience of the Great Depression? HSS HI.1
3. **IDENTIFYING CAUSES** Describe the Dust Bowl, and explain the conditions that caused it. HSS HI.2
4. **DETERMINING CONTEXT** Describe the lives of the unemployed during the Great Depression. HSS HI.1

### Writing About History

5. **INFORMATIVE WRITING** Choose a figure from Depression-era movies, radio, or literature. Write a one-page essay describing your choice. Give a brief overview of his or her career and explain how he or she was significant. Research as needed. ELA.WHST.11-12.2, ELA.WHST.11-12.7, ELA.W.11-12.2, ELA.W.11-12.7

### Collaborating

6. **ADAPTING SPEECH** Work in groups of four to research, write, and present brief monologues describing the effect of the Great Depression. You may each play the role of a business owner, an unemployed worker, an "Okie," an immigrant, a radio or movie star, or any other person of the time. Ask your classmates to take notes for a class discussion. Prepare at least two questions for each character presented. ELA.SL.11-12.1, ELA.SL.11-12.4, ELA.SL.11-12.6, ELA.WHST.11-12.7