

Uprootedness

The Great Depression is marked by an overwhelming sense of dislocation, both physical and psychological. Children of immigrants raised on the American Dream - that if one just worked hard enough, one could be successful and make a better life for one's children - were suddenly unable to find even the most menial jobs. The United States had weathered recessions and depressions in the past, but the lingering repercussions of the First World War meant that this time was different. Many Americans saw it as a very real possibility that the U.S. and the world would never emerge from this Depression. Accompanying this psychological dislocation was the more tangible physical dislocation. The solution to the job shortage for many impoverished Americans was to go off in search of greener pastures - places where they had heard of jobs being available. Individual workers and whole families trekked from state to state, following the merest rumor of an opportunity to work. The irony of Depression-era migrancy is that even as one family was arriving at a location to take advantage of the employment opportunities that were rumored to be available there, other families were leaving that area due to a lack of jobs. The great tragedy of the Depression-era search for employment is that by moving, families often made themselves ineligible for any type of aid: the home community no longer had to support them, and the receiving communities often had residency restrictions in place to prevent abuse of the system. These conditions left hundreds of thousands of people trapped in a worsening cycle of poverty, joblessness, and hunger.

The Feds and the Reds

The initial response of the Hoover administration toward the Great Depression was to avoid direct federal aid, feeling that providing such aid would be overstepping the bounds of the federal government. Instead, the Hoover Administration insisted that each locality rely on existing voluntary relief organizations, most of which were severely strained in the early days of the Depression as conditions worsened and joblessness and homelessness skyrocketed. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency was seen as a mandate for action and change, but there was no predetermined pattern for what form the New Deal would take. Choosing an active approach, Roosevelt created dozens of new federal organizations – including FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Agency), the WPA (Works Progress Administration), the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), and the NRA (National Recovery Administration). Nicknamed the Alphabet Soup organizations, these New Deal endeavors were experiments in managed government. Some succeeded, but many failed. Worse still, these programs had huge price tags that necessitated heavy taxation of an already overburdened populace.

For many Americans, the programs of the New Deal were merely half-measures that salved the problem temporarily while laying the foundations for future economic Depressions. To them, the only path out of the Depression was fundamental social change of the sort that had occurred in Russia only a few years earlier. Socialists and Communists were often cast as extremists whose solutions would bring only chaos and violence to the United States, but these parties still consistently tapped into the sense of disenchantment experienced by many Americans who felt increasingly powerless in the face of the severe economic and social forces that beset them. Communist groups particularly targeted Black Americans who had long faced discrimination, highlighting the egalitarianism of Communism.

Plight of the Farmer

“I put mine in what I thought was the best investment – the good old earth – but we lost on that, too. The finance Co. caught up with us, the mortgage Co. caught up with us. Managed to lose \$12,000 in three years. My boys have no more future than I have so far as I can see ahead.”

-- Farmer forced to leave his Nebraska farm for prospects in California, 1939

In many ways, Depression-era farmers were victims of their own success. Two factors came into play: the first was the increasing mechanization of farming processes. This meant that fewer people were required to produce many more crops, which after the First World War led to overproduction and plummeting crop values that worsened throughout the 1920s. This problem was exacerbated by the beginning of a seven-year drought, known as the Dust Bowl, named for the massive dust storms that blew across the Great Plains. Ironically, even with so many American farmers unable to produce crops, overproduction was still driving farm product prices through the floor. Government responses to the plight of agriculture, while innovative, were not well-received by the American farmer. They made good economic sense but seemed to violate common sense. To artificially inflate prices on farm goods, the government paid farmers to plow over crops and kill their cattle. While this was good for farmers, it was yet another nail in the coffin for workers who still couldn't find work and thus couldn't afford food.

Racial Disharmony

“Guys don’t come to a colored man’s room.”

-- Crooks

The harsh realities of the Great Depression were even harsher for black Americans. The increased mechanization and greater efficiency of agricultural industry affected the southern United States as it had many other regions, casting tenant farmers off the land, and subjecting black southerners to even harsher employment conditions. Segregation and blatant racism meant that they were often forced to work for lower wages, and tended to be the last hired and first fired. Black workers who participated in the mass migrations of the Depression were often excluded from the social safety nets that kept many white workers from hitting rock bottom. To compensate, they were forced to take even lower paying jobs and compete with impoverished white workers, leading to greater racial tension.

Such tensions often boiled over into lynching. Lynch mobs were more than simply tools of vigilante justice. Rather, these mobs were a way of punishing blacks who broke the unwritten law by transgressing the color barrier. Lynch murders were often described as impossible for local law enforcement to stop because they were carried out extra-legally by large groups of people. In fact, notices of planned lynchings would appear in newspapers in advance of the event, reporters would cover the activity, and members of the lynch mob would allow themselves to be proudly photographed with their victims. Even when the numbers of lynchings remained relatively low, the culture of fear that they bred kept blacks fiercely contained in their place of inferiority.