

READING 1: AMERICAN SOCIETY DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a period in American history that saw the collapse of the U.S. economy, a rapid closure of factories, and a lack of goods and food production, all resulting in widespread hardships for virtually all Americans. Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929, which wiped out millions of dollars in investments, the United States entered an era marked by extreme poverty and joblessness.

Companies laid off workers, and by 1933, about 15 million American workers were unemployed. Millions of unemployed workers and their families stood in bread lines and visited soup kitchens so that they could eat. Crime rates rose as jobless workers turned to theft to pay for food and shelter. Suicide rates increased as many people felt helpless and hopeless to turn their lives around.

By 1932, more than 20% of the U.S. population was unemployed. During the '30s, many African Americans worked domestic and low-paying jobs as bellmen, waiters, farm workers, and servants. Racial discrimination, already prevalent, became even more apparent toward African Americans and immigrants as the competition and pressure to find any type of work intensified for everyone.

Many farmers did not have money to pay for seeds or supplies to plant crops. During this same period, the Great Plains, from Texas to Nebraska, experienced severe drought and high winds that left fields unsuitable for planting and harvesting crops. This "Dust Bowl," as the event became known, prompted many farm families to leave their homes to seek work or help elsewhere. Thousands of migrants left the Plains states for places such as California and Arizona to find a better way of life.

Herbert Hoover was president during this period. As a Republican, he believed that government should neither interfere with the economy nor provide jobs or relief to Americans. Hoover's administration did try to support failing banks with government loans, but this type of aid was not enough to improve the economy or help the average citizen.

In 1932 alone, 273,000 families were evicted from their homes, because they could not make mortgage or rental payments. Cardboard houses and tents arose as a response to homelessness. These areas became known as "shantytowns" or "Hoovervilles," a derogatory term used to blame Herbert Hoover for the nation's economic problems. Hoover was defeated in the 1932 presidential election by Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt promised more aid and programs from the government to ordinary citizens. Though the Depression continued until about 1939, many of the programs Roosevelt initiated offered work and support to slowly improve American life.

Sources:

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