Ch. 32 – The Human Impact of the Great Depression/EQ: How did ordinary Americans endure the hardships of the Great Depression?

32.1 – Introduction

- In 1933, Harry Hopkins, director of the newly formed Federal Emergency Relief Administration, hired a journalist named Lorena Hickok to travel around the country as his eyes and ears. He instructed her,

  - Go talk with the preachers and teachers, businessmen, workers, farmers. Go talk with the unemployed, those who are on relief and those who aren’t. And when you talk with them don’t ever forget that but for the grace of God you, I or any of our friends might be in their shoes. Tell me what you see and hear. All of it.
  —Harry Hopkins, quoted in One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression, 1981

- The Depression had left many Americans hungry and homeless, and it had forced others to give up school, postpone marriage, or put off parenthood.

32.2 – A Country in Economic Distress

Living in New York City during the Depression, songwriter E. Y. Harburg saw the effects of unemployment all around him. He later recalled, “The prevailing greeting at that time, on every block you passed, by some poor guy coming up, was: ‘Can you spare a dime?’” Harburg turned this observation into a song titled “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” It told of the sense of betrayal felt by many hardworking people who had suddenly become poor.

- As Harburg explained,

  This is the man who says:
  “I built the railroads.
  I built that tower.
  I fought your wars.
  I was the kid with the drum.
  Why . . . should I be standing in line [for a handout] now? What happened to all this wealth I created?”


Rising Unemployment Affects Millions of Americans

- From 1929 to 1933, almost one in every seven businesses failed.
- In 1933, when Lorena Hickok began her travels, 13 million Americans were out of work. That number amounted to about 25 percent of the workforce.
- In comparison, only about 3.1 percent of the population had been jobless before the stock market crash in 1929.
- Most unemployed Americans wanted to work.
- When companies had to lay people off, they first let go of very young, elderly, and minority workers.
- At first, the economic collapse struck men harder than women.
- As the Depression wore on, employers began firing women to give the jobs to men with families to support.
- Many states refused to hire women for government jobs if their husbands earned a living wage, or a wage high enough to provide an acceptable standard of living.
- Unemployment had a cascading effect.
  - The unemployed had little to spend, so many businesses lost customers and had to close—increasing unemployment.
  - In addition to losing their jobs, many people lost their savings and their homes.

Farmers Lose Their Farms

- Farmers had faced economic troubles even before the Depression began.
  - But as unemployment reduced consumers’ buying power, many farmers could no longer sell their crops.
  - As a result, they could not make mortgage payments to banks that had loaned them money.
  - In desperation, some farmers tried to sell their farms—only to find that their property values had sunk along with the economy.
  - Property value tells what a piece of real estate is worth on the market.
  - During the Depression, many farms lost more than half their value.
- Those who could not sell their farms lost them to foreclosure, a legal process that allows a lender to take over the property it has helped a borrower buy.
Farm families that went through foreclosure lost their homes, their livelihoods, and all the money they had invested. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South suffered the most, for these farmers, both black and white, could not afford to buy land.

Financial Woes Stress American Families
- Families suffered not only financial but also psychological stress when breadwinners lost their jobs.
- Families struggled to stay together during the lean years.
- The Depression affected family life in other ways as well.

32.3 – “Ill-Housed, Ill-Clad, Ill-Nourished”
In 1937, as Franklin Roosevelt began his second term as president and addressed the nation, he told of improvements made over the previous four years. But he also called attention to the many Americans still suffering from the Depression:

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

...I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions. I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

—Franklin Roosevelt, second inaugural address, January 20, 1937

- While the Depression affected all Americans in some way, this one third of the nation suffered the most.

Evictions Force People Out of Their Homes
- Without a steady income—or sometimes any income at all—many people could not pay their rent. When they failed to pay, their landlords would evict them. Eviction is a legal process that landlords use to remove tenants from their property. Similarly, if homeowners could not make their monthly mortgage payments, banks would foreclose on their homes, forcing families to find shelter elsewhere.
- As an increasing number of people lost their homes, Hoovervilles sprang up around many cities.
- Although divorce rates dropped during the 1930s, desertion rates rose.
- Teenagers also left home, often to ride the railroads in search of work.

Millions Face Hunger and Starvation
- In addition to homelessness, loss of work often led to hunger
  - Hunger led to malnutrition—a physical condition that results from not getting an adequate diet of healthy food—among the poor.
  - Lack of proper nutrition left people vulnerable to diseases.
  - People did their best to feed themselves and their families.
  - Some picked through garbage cans looking for scraps, some stole, and still others begged.
- To feed the hungry, soup kitchens [soup kitchen: a place that serves free meals to the needy] sprang up across the country.
  - Soup was easy to prepare and could be increased in order to feed more people by adding water.
  - Breadlines [breadline: a line of needy people waiting for handouts of free food] —long lines of people waiting for their bowl of soup and piece of bread—became a common sight in most cities.
  - For many, that soup kitchen meal was the only food they would eat all day. At one point, New York City had 82 soup kitchens, which provided the needy with 85,000 meals a day.

32.4 – Natural Disasters Intensify the Suffering
As the year 1931 began, most farmers on the Great Plains were feeling optimistic. Wheat prices were holding up despite the Depression, and prospects for a record-breaking crop looked good. That summer, however, the rains abruptly stopped, and crops began to wither; then strong winds began to blow across the plains. As one wheat farmer recalled,
“The winds unleashed their fury with a force beyond my wildest imagination. It blew continuously for a hundred hours and it seemed as if the whole surface of the earth would be blown away.”

- The farmer was hardly exaggerating—he was describing the beginning of one of the worst natural disasters in the nation’s history.
- Over the course of the next decade, drought, dust storms, and floods would add to the human misery already brought on by the hard times of the Great Depression.

**Black Blizzards Plague the Great Plains**

- The prolonged drought devastated farmers, who could not get their land to produce anything but dust.
  - As disruptive as the drought was, the dust storms proved to be worse.
  - Winds whipping across the plains picked up the dried-out topsoil and formed ominous black clouds.
  - The blowing dust became so thick that people called the storms black blizzards.
  - As one eyewitness recalled decades later,
  - The prolonged drought affected 100 million acres of farmland in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas.
  - A journalist traveling through the region at the time described it as a Dust Bowl [Dust Bowl: an area of the Great Plains of the United States that suffered severely from wind erosion during the 1930s]—a name that stuck.

**The Natural Impact of the Drought: Desertification**

- In 1932, the weather bureau reported the occurrence of 14 dust storms.
  - Within a year, the number nearly tripled, reaching 38.
  - The Great Plains was experiencing desertification, [desertification: a process by which land becomes increasingly dry and desert-like] a process in which land becomes increasingly dry and desert-like.
- Several factors contributed to the desertification of the Great Plains.
  - Drought, of course, was one, since without rain nothing would grow in farmers’ fields.
  - Decades of poor farming practices worsened the situation.

**The Human Impact of the Drought: Depopulation**

- Although the federal government geared up to combat the drought, it took action too late for many farmers.
- As the dry years piled up, depopulation [depopulation: the loss of residents from an area], or the loss of residents from an area, took a heavy toll on the region.
- Some of the Dust Bowl refugees headed for nearby cities in hopes of finding work.
  - However, with the unemployment rate still high, jobs were scarce, so many more people left the region entirely.
  - Like the fictional Joad family in John Steinbeck’s novel about Dust Bowl migrants, The Grapes of Wrath [The Grapes of Wrath: a novel, written by John Steinbeck and published in 1939, that won acclaim for its description of the experience of Dust Bowl migrants during the Great Depression], those who left often followed U.S. Route 66 to California. California appealed to migrants for its promise of farmwork in the fertile Central Valley.
  - Californians nicknamed the newcomers Okies [Okies: a nickname for a person who migrated from the Dust Bowl to California during the Great Depression] because many of them came from Oklahoma.
- During the 1930s, more than 300,000 people migrated from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri to California. Once they arrived, however, their travels were not always over.
  - Many trekked along a migrant-farmworker circuit that followed the ripening of crops up and down the state.

**From Drought to Deluge: The Great Flood of 1936**

- While the Great Plains suffered from drought, a different natural disaster—the Great Flood of 1936 [Great Flood of 1936: devastating flooding in New England that resulted from a series of record-breaking storms that pounded the region daily between March 9 and March 22, 1936]—struck the Northeast.
- The Great Flood of 1936 hit Pennsylvania the hardest of all states in the region.
- In the past, lawmakers had offered only weak support for flood-control measures.
  - However, after the floods of 1936, Business Week reported, flood-control legislation “has tremendous support in Congress.”
Within weeks, President Roosevelt signed a national flood program into law.

32.5 – Coping With Hard Times

Struggling to Get By
- People who lost their jobs did whatever they could think of to survive.
- Scraping by to meet basic needs, many Americans made sacrifices in all realms of life.

Looking for Help
- Despite people’s efforts, the day often came when even the proudest family had to look for relief.
- Before Franklin Roosevelt launched his New Deal in 1933, there were few places the poor and unemployed could turn for help.
- Local and state governments also attempted to aid people who were out of work.
  - They offered public assistance [public assistance: aid, in the form of money, goods, or services, that a government provides to those in need] —support in the form of money, goods, or services provided to those in need.
  - However, local and state relief agencies soon drained their funds.
  - There were simply too many people in need of help.

Summary

The Great Depression inflicted terrible hardships on millions of Americans. As unemployment rates skyrocketed to 25 percent, American families shouldered the burdens of financial and emotional stress, while many farmers, unable to pay their bills, lost their farms. Still, resourceful Americans found ways to endure during the hard times.

Homelessness  Without steady incomes, many people faced eviction from their homes. Some hit the road. Others moved into cramped apartments with family or friends. Still others lived on the streets or in shantytowns called Hoovervilles.

Hunger  The poor and unemployed often found food to be scarce. Children suffered the most from the effects of hunger and malnutrition. In many cities, soup kitchens offered free meals to the needy, who might not eat anywhere else.

The Dust Bowl  Years with no rain on the Great Plains created a disaster area known as the Dust Bowl. Hundreds of thousands of people left the drought-stricken region to find work in California.

The Great Flood of 1936  Floods in the Northeast caused millions of dollars of damage and put more people out of work. As a result, Congress finally created a national flood-control program.

Charity and public assistance  Private charities and state and local relief agencies attempted to relieve the human suffering of the Great Depression. However, by 1933, more needed to be done—and soon.