The Great Depression caused large numbers of people to lose their jobs and property. To help people escape their misery, popular entertainment offered humorous and optimistic movies and radio programs. Novelists and photographers created more realistic portrayals of American life.

The Depression Worsens

**MAIN Idea** Hunger and homelessness became severe problems by the early 1930s; then, a terrible drought devastated the Great Plains.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Have you ever been caught outside in a thunderstorm? Read about the deadly dust storms of the 1930s.

The Depression grew steadily worse during Hoover’s administration. In 1930, 1,352 banks **suspended** operations across the nation, more than twice the number of bank failures in 1929. More than 9,000 banks had failed by 1933. In 1932 alone, some 30,000 companies went out of business. By 1933 more than 12 million workers, or roughly one-fourth of the workforce, were unemployed.

Struggling to Get By

People without jobs often went hungry. Whenever possible they stood in bread lines—sometimes blocks long—for free food or lined up outside soup kitchens, which private organizations set up to give the poor meals. New York City’s YMCA fed up to 12,000 people daily.

Families or individuals who could not pay their rent or mortgage lost their homes. Some of them, paralyzed by fear and humiliation over their sudden misfortune, simply would not or could not move. Their landlord would then ask the court for an eviction notice. Court officers known as **bailiffs** then ejected the nonpaying tenants, piling their belongings in the street.

Throughout the country, newly homeless people put up shacks on unused or public lands, forming communities called shantytowns. Blaming the president for their plight, people referred to such places as Hoovervilles.

In search of work or a better life, many homeless and unemployed Americans began to wander around the country—walking, hitchhiking, or, most often, “riding the rails.” These wanderers, called **hobos**, would sneak past railroad police to slip into open boxcars on freight trains. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly boys and young men, wandered from place to place in this fashion.
Chapter 11  The Great Depression Begins

The Dust Bowl

Farmers soon faced a new disaster. Since homesteading had begun on the Great Plains, farmers’ plows had uprooted the wild grasses that held the soil’s moisture. When crop prices dropped in the 1920s, farmers left many of their fields uncultivated. Then, a terrible drought struck the Great Plains. With neither grass nor wheat to hold the scant rainfall, the soil dried to dust. From the Dakotas to Texas, America’s wheat fields became a vast “Dust Bowl.”

Winds whipped the arid earth, blowing it aloft and blackening the sky for hundreds of miles. When the dust settled, it buried crops and livestock. Humans and animals caught outdoors sometimes died of suffocation when the dust filled their lungs. The number of yearly dust storms grew, from 22 in 1934 to 72 in 1937. Will and Carolyn Henderson farmed in western Oklahoma. Carolyn wrote a series of articles for the Atlantic Monthly about their life during the drought.

The Dust Bowl went to California’s San Joaquin Valley to pick cotton and grapes. In his novel The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck describes what these migrants found when they arrived to harvest crops:

Primary Source

“At the little country store, after one of the worst of these storms, the candies in the show case all looked alike and equally brown. Dust to eat and dust to breathe and dust to drink. Dust in the beds and in the flour bin, on dishes and walls and windows, in hair and eyes and ears and teeth and throats. . . .”

— from The Grapes of Wrath

Some Great Plains farmers managed to hold on to their land, but many had no chance. If their withered fields were mortgaged, they had to turn them over to the banks. Then, nearly penniless, many families headed west, hoping for a better life in California. Because many migrants were from Oklahoma, they became known as “Okies.” In California, they lived in roadside camps and remained homeless and impoverished.

Reading Check  Explaining  What chain of events turned the once-fertile Great Plains into the Dust Bowl?
Art and Entertainment

**MAIN Idea** Movies and radio shows were very popular during the 1930s, a period that also produced new art and literature.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Has a movie ever helped you get through a difficult time? Read to learn ways that people coped with the Great Depression.

The hard times of the 1930s led many Americans to prefer entertainment that let them escape their worries. For this reason, movies and radio plays grew increasingly popular. Also, in the 1930s, comic books grew rapidly in popularity. The first comic books cheered people by reprinting newspaper comics, but in the late 1930s, the “superhero” genre was born with the printing of the first tales of *Superman* in 1938 and *Batman* in 1939.

**Hollywood**

During the 1930s more than 60 million Americans went to the movies each week. Child stars such as Shirley Temple and Jackie Coogan delighted viewers. Groucho Marx wisecracked while his brothers amused audiences in such films as *Animal Crackers*, and comedies became very popular because they provided a release from daily worries. *King Kong*, first released in 1933, showcased new special effects. Moviegoers also loved cartoons. *Walt Disney*, who brought Mickey Mouse to life in 1928, produced the first feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1937.

Even serious films were optimistic. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Jimmy Stewart played a naïve scout leader who becomes a senator. He exposes the corruption of some of his colleagues and calls upon senators to view American government as a high achievement.

In 1939 MGM produced *The Wizard of Oz*, a colorful musical that lifted viewers’ spirits. 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, who won the award for Best Supporting Actress, was the first African American to win an Academy Award.

**On the Air**

While movies captured the imagination, radio offered information and entertainment as near as the living room. Tens of millions of people listened to the radio daily, and radio comedians such as Jack Benny, George Burns, and Gracie Allen were popular, as were the radio adventures of superheroes such as the Green Hornet and the Lone Ranger.

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**Margaret Bourke-White**

1904–1971

While a student at Columbia University, Margaret Bourke-White took a photography course. She went on to become one of the leading photographers of her time. In 1927 she began photographing architectural and industrial subjects. Her originality led to jobs at major magazines such as *Fortune* and *Life*. During World War II she became the first woman photographer attached to the U.S. armed forces. She covered the Italian campaign and the siege of Moscow. She was among those who photographed concentration camp survivors. Bourke-White traveled to India after the war to document Gandhi’s efforts to gain that nation’s independence from Great Britain. During the Korean War, she traveled with South Korean troops.

What made Margaret Bourke-White’s career and photography unusual for the time?

*African American flood victims wait for food and clothing from the Red Cross in 1937 in one of Margaret Bourke-White’s most famous photos. The people contrast sharply with the billboard.*
Daytime radio dramas carried over their story lines from day to day. Programs such as The Guiding Light presented middle-class families confronting illness, conflict, and other problems. The shows’ sponsors were often makers of laundry soaps, so the shows were nicknamed soap operas. Radio created a new type of community. Even strangers found common ground in discussing the lives of radio characters.

Literature and Art

Literature and art also flourished during the 1930s. Writers and artists tried to portray life around them, using the homeless and unemployed as their subjects in stories and pictures.

Novelist John Steinbeck added flesh and blood to journalists’ reports of poverty and misfortune. His writing evoked both sympathy for his characters and indignation at social injustice. In The Grapes of Wrath (1939), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and was made into a movie, Steinbeck tells the story of the Joad family fleeing the Dust Bowl to find a new life in California after losing their farm. The novel was based on Steinbeck’s visits to migrant camps and his interviews with migrant families. In one article he described typical housing for the migrants, for which they paid the growers as much as $2.00 daily:

Primary Source

“[They have] one-room shacks usually about 10 by 12 feet, have no rug, no water, no bed. In one corner there is a little iron wood stove. Water must be carried from the faucet at the end of the street.”

—from Dust to Eat: Drought and Depression

Other novelists developed new writing techniques. In The Sound and the Fury, William Faulkner, who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature, shows what his characters are thinking and feeling before they speak. Using this stream of consciousness technique, he exposes hidden attitudes of Southern whites and African Americans in a fictional Mississippi county.

Although written words remained powerful, images were growing more influential. 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 had affected average Americans.

Painters in 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 painting that is best-known today is American Gothic. The portrait pays tribute to no-nonsense Midwesterners while gently making fun of their severity.

Examining What subjects did artists, photographers, and writers emphasize during the 1930s?
The Dust Bowl

In the late nineteenth century, settlers on the Great Plains turned the semiarid region into the breadbasket of America, growing vast fields of wheat and other crops. Intensive farming destroyed the region’s native grasses and loosened the soil. At first, this was not a problem, as the Great Plains experienced higher than normal rainfall in the late 1800s. Over time, however, farmers exhausted the soil. When rainfall began to decline and temperatures rose in the 1920s, the soil began to dry out. In 1932, a full-scale drought hit. The fierce heat dried the exhausted soil into fine dustlike particles. The high winds of the open plains easily lifted the dirt into the air creating “dust storms.” In 1932 alone, 14 dust storms struck the Great Plains. These storms carried the soil of the Great Plains hundreds of miles. In May 1934, a huge storm dumped piles of dirt in Chicago. Further east, silt from the storm collected on the windows of the White House.

How Did the Dust Bowl Affect Americans?
The “Dust Bowl” is sometimes called a human-made natural disaster. The drought and rising temperatures of the 1930s were a natural disaster. But the dust storms were human-made, the result of decades of overcultivation. These “black blizzards” scoured and buried homes, ruined vehicle engines, and diminished visibility. The blowing dirt could injure eyes and damage lungs; it even suffocated people. As the drought destroyed their livelihood, and the dust storms destroyed their belongings, many farmers abandoned the land, packed up their families, and fled the region in search of work elsewhere.

**Analyzing GEOGRAPHY**

1. **Movement** Which states lost population in the 1930s? In which direction did most people fleeing the Dust Bowl move?

2. **Human-Environment Interaction** Study the image at right. What problems and dangers does the dust storm create?

The drought on the Great Plains in the 1930s was the worst ever recorded in U.S. history. Summer temperatures soared above 110 degrees in many locations, setting records that still stand. The lack of water and fierce heat dried the soil to a fine dust. An estimated 200 million acres of land lost some or all of its topsoil.
The fine grit of dust storms could clog car engines and other mechanical devices beyond repair.

People raced for cover when a storm hit. The grit stung the skin and eyes. Breathing the dust could cause dust pneumonia. Many people, especially children and senior citizens, became sick, and many died.

Dust storms towered thousands of feet in the air and moved rapidly across the open plains. When a storm hit, it became dark outside, and visibility often dropped to only a few feet.

Many farmers in the Dust Bowl, such as Elmer Thomas and his family of Muskogee, Oklahoma (above), decided to leave the region. Many became migrant workers, traveling from across the west in search of short-term employment.