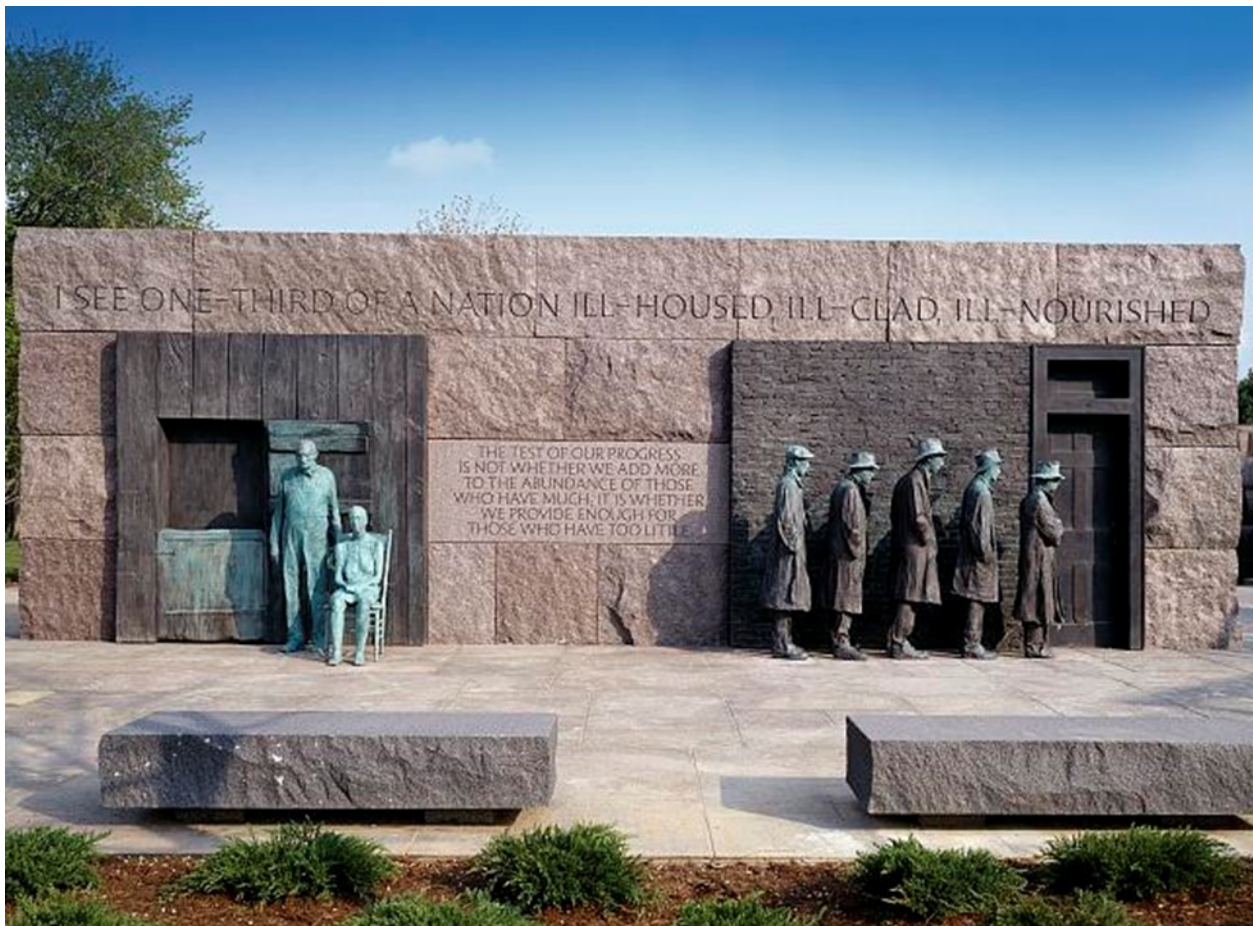


## The Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and New Deal in Oklahoma

The Great Depression is one of the single most-important events to occur in world history during the twentieth century. It is also a defining moment in American government, politics, culture, economics, and even Oklahoma history. The Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the New Deal all brought on big changes in the United States; changes that we can still see today. What is a depression, though? What made this depression “Great?” And, how did people react to the problems that caused, and were caused, by the Great Depression?



Depression Breadline, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Memorial, Washington, DC (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

## What was the Great Depression?

The Great Depression was the worst depression in modern history, lasting from 1929 to 1941. It affected countries around the world, not just the United States. In the United States, one out of four people lost their job and about 1,000 people lost their homes every day during the worst year of the depression. Many people built makeshift homes in towns called “**Hoovervilles**,” named after President Herbert Hoover who was the president at the start of the Great Depression. Americans were scared and hungry and wanted to know how it happened and who could fix the problem.

### Depression versus Recession

Economies around the world go through ups and downs over time. The ups are called growth periods. The downs are called either a “**recession**” or a “**depression**.” Even **economists** have a hard time telling the difference between recessions and depressions, but both of them are hard times when people lose money, jobs, homes or farms, and businesses. Many people can even go hungry. Depressions tend to be longer than recessions.



Families waiting in line for bread and soup (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

## What Caused the Great Depression?

Many people in the past have argued that the **stock market** crash or President Hoover's "hands-off" policy of the government staying out of economic affairs caused the Great Depression, but this simply is not true. The Great Depression was caused by a combination of economic issues and bad luck and it affected the entire world. Here are a few of the main causes of the Great Depression.

### Buying on Credit

Using a **loan** to buy something is called **buying on credit**. A bank offers you money and asks you to pay them back, along with some extra money called interest. **Interest** is a fee for borrowing money. The problem is that farmers were not the only people buying things on credit. Millions of Americans used credit to buy all sorts of things, like radios, refrigerators, washing machines, and cars. The banks even used credit to buy stocks in the stock market. This meant that everyone used credit, and no one had enough money to pay back all their loans, not even the banks.

### World War I and Over Production

World War I was the largest war the world had ever seen in 1914. Millions of people fought and died during the war. With so many people fighting, there were not enough farmers growing food for everyone. This made the cost of food go up, so the farmers still at home bought more land and new tractors to make more money. They used bank loans to buy the land and tractors, because they thought they would make enough money to pay the banks back quickly. When the war ended, the food prices went back down again, so the farmers had to take more and more loans to pay for all the land and equipment they had bought. No one thought this was a problem, as long as the farmers kept growing crops and making enough money to pay the banks for their loans.

Gas-powered farming equipment cut the labor required for farming in half. This meant more acres could be farmed, but fewer farmers were needed (OHS Collections).

The 1920s saw a rise in buying cars and appliances "on installment," or what we call credit today (image courtesy of the Joliet Public Library).





## The Stock Market Crash and the Dust Bowl



A “Black Blizzard” or Dust Storm in the Panhandle. Taken April 11, 1935, in Texhoma, Oklahoma (17831, Hardy Keylon, Mrs. Collection, OHS).

In 1929, the New York Stock Market crashed. Everyone had been buying **stocks** on credit and not using real money. When people and banks started asking for the money they had loaned to be paid, no one had enough money. There were whole countries that went bankrupt when their loans were called in! Now, no one in the stock market had money, which meant none of the banks had money. This meant that people who **deposited** their savings in banks could not get any of their money back. It was all lost.

## Political Decisions



President Herbert Hoover (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Hoover did take action to intervene in the economy, but by that point it was too late. Hoover dramatically increased government spending for relief, allocating millions of dollars to wheat and cotton farmers. Within a month of the crash, Hoover met with key business leaders to urge them to keep wages high, even though prices and profits were falling. The greatest mistake of the Hoover administration was the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff in 1930. It was meant to promote more spending on American-made products in the United States but eventually led to an international trade war.

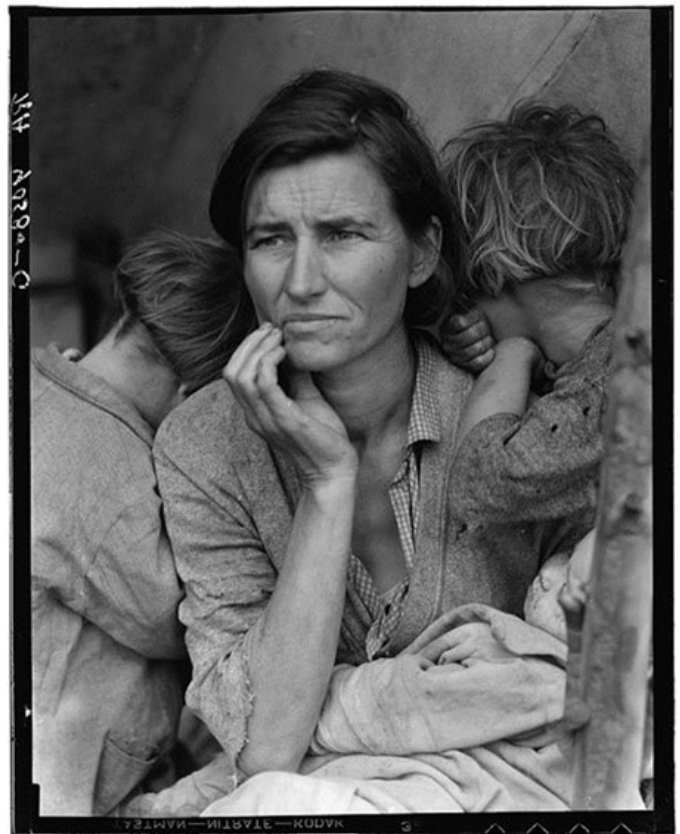
## What was the Dust Bowl?

To make things worse, the Dust Bowl started. Farmers plowed a lot of the new land on the prairie during World War I. The prairie needed its grass, or crops like wheat, to hold down the soil and dirt. When a **drought** started on the prairie in 1930, there was no grass or crops to hold down the dirt! Dust storms blew all across the country, taking dirt from Colorado clear east to Washington, DC. Animals died without enough crops to feed them, and the price of food went up again. Without any crops or animals to sell, the prairie farmers had no money to pay the banks back. They lost their farms and their homes. Without farms, food was expensive and people without jobs, who had lost all their savings, could not afford to buy much of it. People were desperate. By 1934, it had turned the Great Plains into a desert that came to be known as the Dust Bowl. In Oklahoma, the Panhandle area was hit hardest by the drought.

[Listen to Flora Robertson talk about her experience in the Dust Bowl.](#)



This boy is on a farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, during the Dust Bowl. Arthur Rothstein, 1936 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother" photograph (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

# The Dust Bowl



Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Kansas were all a part of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In Oklahoma, the panhandle cities and towns suffered the worst droughts and dust storms (map courtesy of PBS).



Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



## What was the New Deal?



Franklin Delano Roosevelt congratulating Wiley Post on his first solo flight around the world (OHS Collections).

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933, he came into the White House with a plan. The New Deal had three goals: relief, recovery, and reform. Relief meant that the president wanted to help those in crisis immediately by creating jobs, bread lines, and welfare. Recovery was aimed at fixing the economy and ending the Depression. Reform was President Roosevelt's objective of finding the sources of the Depression and creating a plan so that it would never happen again. When President Roosevelt accepted the nomination for president in 1932, the first line of his acceptance speech said:

*"I pledge you, I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people...This is more than a political campaign. It is a call to arms."*

There are many programs that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Congress created to try to fight the Depression, but together they are all called the "New Deal" because of this speech. Many historians still argue about what ended the Great Depression, but most agree that it was not the programs begun under the New Deal. The programs of the New Deal did

help people in the United States, however. It helped them find homes and work and helped stop them from starving. The New Deal is also responsible for many of the roads, bridges, electrical wires, buildings, and art that we all use and love to this day.

## The Farm Security Administration and the Soil Erosion Service



This photo shows how the different agencies of the New Deal worked together. The Soil Erosion Service helped farmers move off of unproductive land, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (workers pictured here) removed trees, built dams, and moved dirt to make Lake Murray State Park. You can also see that, adding to the hardships of the Great Depression, even federal government agencies still functioned under segregation at this time (OHS Collections).

Rural **poverty** was a large problem in the Great Depression. Congress created many of the first New Deal programs to give relief to the rural poor. Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) so they could pay farmers money to not farm. Many thought it might help raise crop prices and help farmers make money. The program worked for those farmers with large farms, but the smaller **tenant farmers** and **sharecroppers** benefited little.

Congress also created the Soil Erosion Service (SES) to help farmers learn how to preserve their soil. Good soil is heavy and does not blow in the wind as much. Good soil can also help crops to survive short periods of drought. The SES taught farmers how to plow in curves, so the soil would not blow away so much. They also taught farmers to rotate crops, since crops like corn hurt soil more than crops like beans. Like the AAA, the SES paid farmers not to farm, so fields could recover the nutrients that crops take from the soil.

In re-thinking the AAA programs, Congress created the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937. The FSA provided loans to small farmers so that they could buy the land they worked and even expand. The FSA also helped farmers move from farms with bad soil to farms that were better for growing crops. This is how many state parks were created, like Lake Murray State Park or Greenleaf State Park. The State of Oklahoma bought the land that the farmers left and turned it into parks. That way people would not farm where the soil was poor.



Looking eastward into the bed of Lake Murray.  
The trees indicate the shore line of the lake.

Photo of Lake Murray being built in 1933 (OHS Collections).



This man is enjoying the fishing now offered at Lake Murray State Park, ca 1937 (OHS Collections).





Capitol of Oklahoma with surrounding derricks. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



City dump, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was on top of trash such as this that the May Avenue camp was built. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



Hog pen and wallow adjacent to city dump. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Man who owns hogs rents land from city and also the privilege of feeding them from city dump. Near May Avenue camp. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



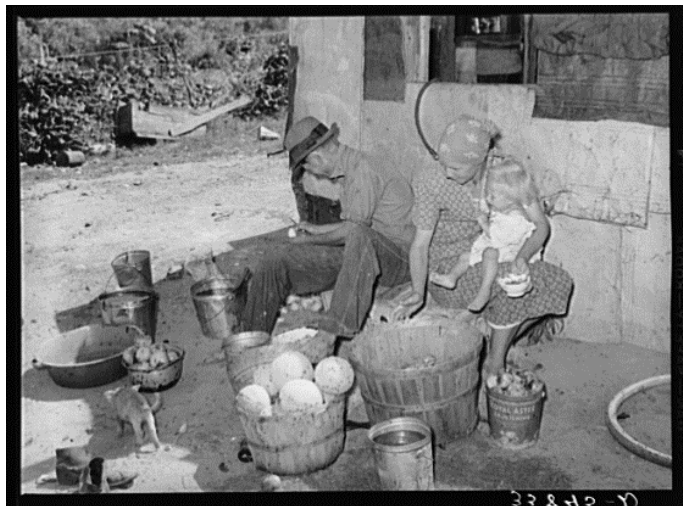
Home of a family in May Avenue camp, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



Partially paralyzed man in May Avenue camp, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



This well was the only water supply for about a dozen families at May Avenue camp. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



Family living in May Avenue camp. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This family had been farmers in Oklahoma until four years ago. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



Children in May Avenue camp playing under the bridge. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



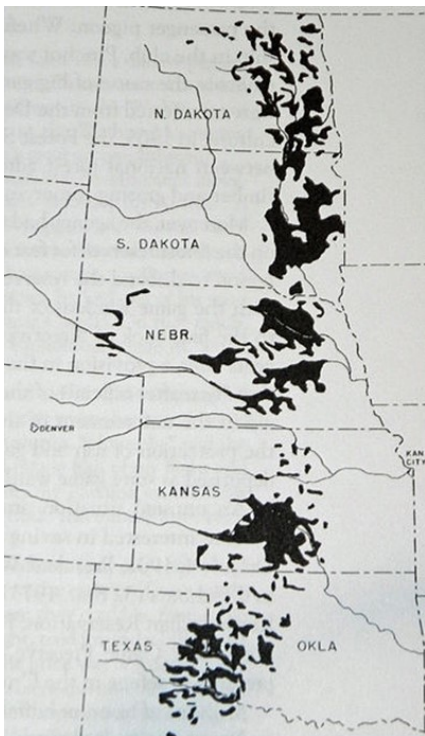


Children of May Avenue camp have a small shack used as sleeping quarters. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).



Family of agricultural day laborers living in tent near Spiro, Oklahoma. This family had farmed in this vicinity for twenty-five years but could no longer find a place to rent. They had no money and no car but hoped to get work in the potato fields and chopping cotton and picking roasting ears. They wanted to buy a car and get on to California but if they couldn't make it the man said they couldn't run him out of Oklahoma. Russell Lee, 1939 (image courtesy of the Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress).

## The Civilian Conservation Corps



This map shows the forested areas planted as part of the Great Plains Shelterbelt, which began in Greer County, Oklahoma (map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

The government made the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to help people without jobs find work, people without homes have a place to live, and to help stop the spread of the Dust Bowl. Young, single men without jobs could apply to work for the CCC. They could have a place to live, food, and some money for their work. Men in the CCC built dams and lakes, and built the first state parks in Oklahoma: Boiling Springs, Roman Nose, Quartz Mountain, Osage Hills, Robbers Cave, Beavers Bend, and Spavinaw Hills state parks.

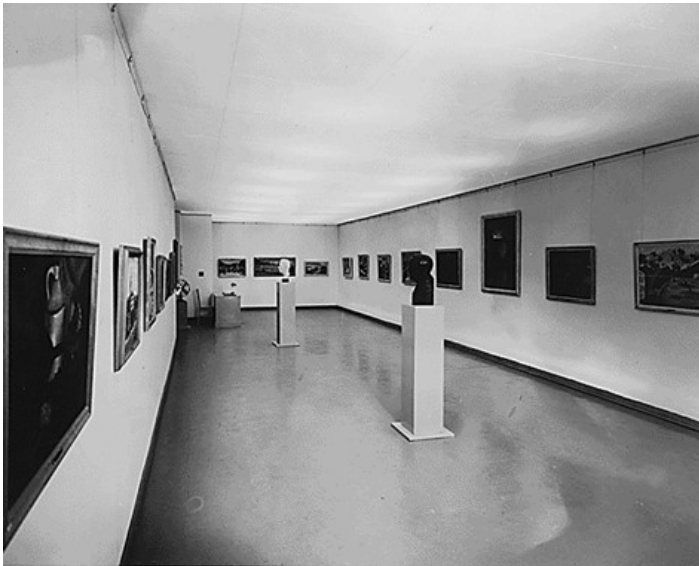
The CCC also planted many trees. Trees have strong roots that can hold down a lot of dirt. They also act as wind blocks, which helps to stop the dirt from blowing away. The “Number One Shelterbelt” was the first stand of trees planted by the CCC in a national program stretching from North Dakota to the Texas Panhandle. The Number One Shelterbelt is north of Mangum, Oklahoma, in Greer County. Oklahoma’s first state forester, George R. Phillips, planted the first tree in this shelter on March 18, 1935. There are almost 3,000 miles of trees that were planted in Oklahoma as a part of this program. Almost 19,000 miles and more than 223 million shelter trees were planted nationwide as a part of this program that started in Oklahoma.



## The Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration

Congress created the Public Works Administration (PWA) in 1933 to put citizens to work on large-scale building and construction projects as well as road and transportation maintenance. Its largest and most expensive project was the Grand River Project, which spent over \$20 million building the Pensacola Dam as well as other dams in the state. Similar to the PWA, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935. Its primary goal was to employ workers to create structures that provided long-term benefits to communities. Each state had its own priorities and ran its own projects. Road-building accounted for half of the projects completed by the WPA, but it also built canals, bridges, dams, post offices, National Guard Armories, schools, and even some sporting stadiums. The WPA also helped the people that it employed. As many people before World War II never finished high school, employees of the WPA were able to complete a high school diploma while working.

The PWA and the WPA also performed many special projects. Some of these projects included the archaeological survey of Spiro Mounds, the preservation of Sequoyah's Cabin, and construction of the replica of the original Fort Gibson. One part of the WPA was the Federal One Project. The Federal One Project hired artists, writers, and actors to create art, write plays, and perform for the public. Many pieces of American art that exist today were made as part of the Federal One Project. It was the PWA that then constructed the Oklahoma City Civic Center Theater and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art.



One of the first art exhibits at the Federal Art Center. The Federal Art Center is now the Oklahoma City Museum of Art (image courtesy of the FDR Library and Museum).



An art class being held at the Federal Art Center in the Municipal Auditorium of Oklahoma City. Today, the Municipal Auditorium is the Oklahoma City Civic Center (image courtesy of the National Archives).

Another set of special projects performed by the WPA were archival projects. This means that the WPA hired people to collect historic records and preserve them in state and federal offices, as well as local libraries and museums. One of these projects sought to collect information on American folklife from around the country. WPA writers collected thousands of **oral history interviews**, including a collection of slave narratives. During the 1930s, there were still people alive who had been slaves before the end of the Civil War, and WPA writers sought them out and interviewed them about their lives. In Oklahoma, the WPA interviewed about eighty people who were born as slaves. Their narratives are free to read, and listen to, at the Library of Congress.

The WPA completed many important projects in Oklahoma during its existence. The WPA also employed over 119,000 people in Oklahoma during the Great Depression.

[Listen to the WPA's oral history interviews with former slaves.](#)



Katie Rowe, age 88, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, c. 1937 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

## How did Oklahomans Deal with the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl?

### “Alfalfa Bill” Murray and E. W. Marland

William, or “Alfalfa Bill,” Murray was the governor of Oklahoma when the Depression began. He wanted to help the people of Oklahoma and the United States out of the Depression, so he ran for the Democratic nomination against Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). When FDR won the nomination and then the presidency, Governor Murray was upset. So when the first New Deal Programs began, Governor Murray did everything he could to make sure they did not work. This angered many people in Oklahoma. When Governor Murray’s term was over in 1934, E. W. Marland succeeded him.

Marland was an oilman and entrepreneur who saw the New Deal as a good thing for the people of Oklahoma. His first priority as governor was to bring the New Deal to Oklahoma. In his term as governor, he brought in 1,300 WPA projects that employed approximately 90,000 Oklahomans. He helped to create the Interstate Oil Compact to help regulate oil prices, and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. When his term was over in 1939, he ran for a seat in the United States House of Representatives but was not elected. He returned home to Ponca City and attempted to revive his oil business.



A well-known politician and lawyer from Oklahoma, William “Alfalfa” Bill Murray participated in some of the most important political events in the early years of Oklahoma, including the drafting of the constitution for the proposed state of Sequoyah in 1905 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Ernest Whitworth Marland was a prominent entrepreneur and politician in Oklahoma. He was the founder of the oil company that became Conoco-Phillips and governor of Oklahoma from 1935 to 1939 (23139.G47, John Dunning Political Collection, OHS).



## Migrations



This family has built a temporary shelter in the May Avenue Camp. Camp residents used materials salvaged from the city dump to build many of their homes (photo by Russell Lee, courtesy of the Library of Congress).

were nicknamed “Okies.” They set up whatever shelters they could and began looking for work. Many of the migrants moved into the same area together, creating “shantytowns” or “Hoovervilles.” People called them “Hoovervilles” after President Hoover, who they blamed for the Depression. There was a large migrant community on May Avenue in Oklahoma City that was photographed extensively by a man working for the Farm Security Administration named Russell Lee. The camp was built partly on the city dump, south of the North Canadian River and between the May Avenue bridge and the Oklahoma National Stockyards.

The Depression caused many people to lose their jobs and their homes. Those same people took everything they still owned and went in search of work. Moving across the country in search of homes or jobs is often called “**migration**,” and the people who move are sometimes called “migrants.” People moved from rural or farm areas all over the country to the bigger cities, where they could still find some work. The mass movement of these people was difficult for cities to handle, as many of them were already crowded. This problem was not solved until after World War II.

Some of these people from Oklahoma went to California, a journey made famous by John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, but most families traveled to cities nearby, like Oklahoma City or Tulsa. The migrants



A family in Muskogee is getting ready to leave for California to find work. They have packed as many of their belongings as they could (photo by Russell Lee, courtesy of the Library of Congress).

## What Does it Mean to Be an “Okie?”



A billboard in California advertising *The Grapes of Wrath* (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

When John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, he put “Okies” on the national stage. The book highlights the Joads, a family from Oklahoma who decided to migrate to California because of the Dust Bowl. Although Steinbeck did not come up with the term “Okie” to describe migrants leaving the states affected by the Dust Bowl in search of jobs and relief from the Great Depression, many became upset with the term’s popularity and derogatory nature. For Oklahomans in the 1930s and even 1940s, being called an “Okie” was offensive.

Even twenty years later, when the state of Oklahoma was planning its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of statehood, the term “Okie” was still disliked by many people in Oklahoma. When Oklahoma Representative (and later Governor) George Nigh found out John Steinbeck was to be the

guest of honor, he requested Steinbeck’s invitation be rescinded. Here’s what George Nigh had to say about the situation:

“I’m tired of John Steinbeck. In fact, I took privileges of the floor in the semi-centennial for the State of Oklahoma. They invited John Steinbeck to be the guest of honor. The guy who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. The guy who put Oklahoma, gave it its image that to this day, holds us back.”

[Listen to George Nigh’s interview here.](#)

### Okie from Muskogee

By 1970, many Oklahomans had come to embrace the term “Okie.” Country western singer Merle Haggard brought the nickname to life with his hit song, “Okie from Muskogee.”

*“I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee”*



(Image courtesy of Discogs.)

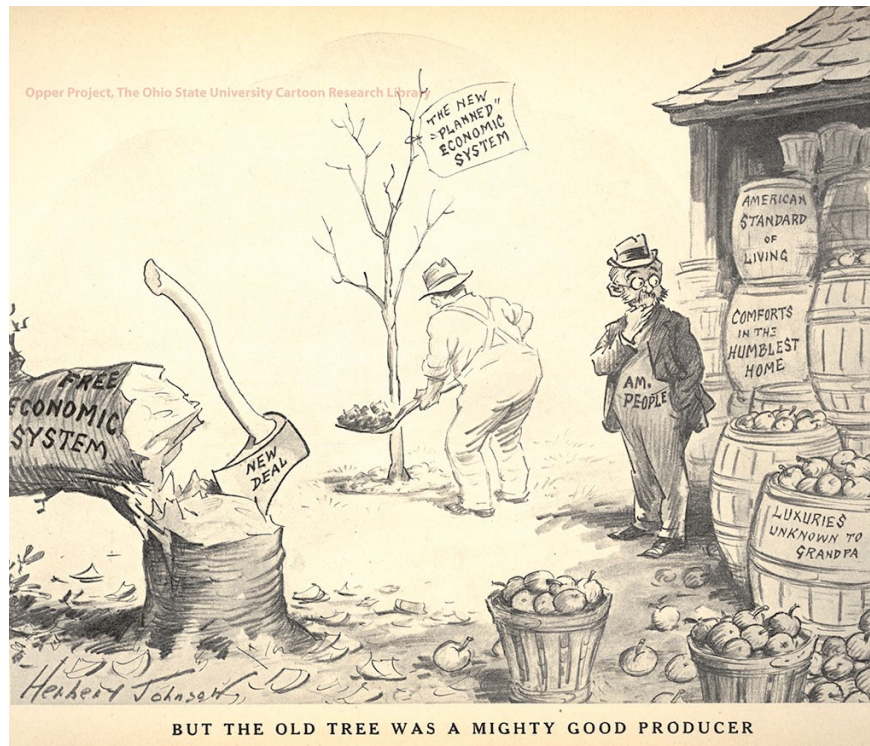


(Image courtesy of *Oklahoma Today*.)

### Okie Today

Today, the term “Okie” is celebrated in many ways. You can find the word on shirts, bumper stickers, and signs across the state. It is now a term many Oklahomans use to express love and pride for their state, and the hard times our state survived.

## How Did the Great Depression Come to an End?



(Image courtesy of Ohio State University.)

Although the New Deal brought hope to many suffering from homelessness, hunger, and lack of jobs, President Roosevelt's relief, recovery, and reform did not end the Depression like many had hoped. It was not until the United States' involvement in World War II that the American and world economies saw real change for the better. With World War II came a revival of trade with America's allies. The US government also made huge investments in war-related businesses, which fueled a powerful post-war boom. When the war officially ended in 1945, the Great Depression was long gone and the middle class experienced a surge in growth.



## Biographies

### Woody Guthrie



Woody Guthrie, 1943 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma, in 1912. His father was a prominent businessman and politician. His mother passed away when he was fourteen while his father was working in Pampa, Texas. Woody and his siblings lived on their own in Okemah until his father sent for them to join him four years later. During this time, Woody worked odd jobs around Okemah and began learning to play music. He had a natural ability to learn songs by ear and often played around town for money or food.

In Pampa, Texas, Woody married his first wife, with whom he had three children. When the Great Depression began, Woody left to find work in California. While traveling, Woody wrote many songs about his experiences during the hard times of the Depression. When he got to California, Woody played songs on the radio for a little money and was known as the “Oklahoma Dust Bowl Balladeer.” When he had made enough money, he sent for his wife and children to join him.

Eventually, Woody left for New York City to try to make it as a singer. This is where he wrote his most famous songs, like

“This Land is Your Land.” During World War II, Woody worked as a merchant marine and was on three boats torpedoed by the Germans. After the war, he returned to writing and recording music. In the 1950s, Woody Guthrie was diagnosed with Huntington’s disease and lived in a hospital for the last thirteen years of his life. He continued to write and help others write folk music, though. He was friends with famous folk singers like Bob Dylan. Today, Woody Guthrie is considered one of the most influential songwriters in the twentieth century.

[Visit the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa!](#)

## Caroline Henderson



Caroline Henderson and her husband on their homestead in the 1920s (image courtesy of PBS).

Caroline Henderson was born in Iowa in 1877. After graduating from Mount Holyoke College, she claimed a homestead plot in Texas County, Oklahoma, and taught school. A year later, she married Will Henderson, and they had a daughter named Eleanor. In time, they managed to buy a whole section of land, 640 acres, and made a lot of money during the wheat boom.

By the time the Dust Bowl began, Caroline and her family had been farming on her homestead for twenty-eight years. She and her family had lost everything but their land during the Great Depression. Instead of leaving, they

stubbornly stayed behind throughout the whole Dust Bowl. She spent her time during the Dust Bowl writing letters and essays that a friend had published in a magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*. She wrote about life in the southern plains and how the Depression and the Dust Bowl were changing the way people farmed. Her letters and columns are a great source of information on life in the Oklahoma panhandle during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. She and her husband died in 1966, and their farmland is held in trust to this day, on the condition that it is never plowed again.

Our recent transition from rain-soaked eastern Kansas with its green pastures, luxuriant foliage, abundance of flowers, and promise of a generous harvest, to the dust-covered desolation of No Man's Land was a difficult change to crowd into one short day's travel. Eleanor has laid aside the medical books for a time. Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and Vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is an almost hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. 'Visibility' approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor. I keep oiled cloths on the window sills and between the upper and lower sashes. They help just a little to retard or collect the dust. Some seal the windows with the gummed-paper strips used in wrapping parcels, but no method is fully effective. We buy what appears to be red cedar sawdust with oil added to use in sweeping our floors, and do our best to avoid inhaling the irritating dust.

—Caroline B. Henderson, June 30, 1935

## Hugh S. Johnson



Governor Hugh S. Johnson at a parade in Boston in 1933 (image courtesy of the Boston Public Library).

Hugh S. Johnson was born in Kansas in 1882. In 1893, Johnson’s father left for the Cherokee Outlet, receiving an appointment as postmaster for the new town of Alva, Oklahoma. Johnson’s father also helped to organize the Alva public schools and in 1898, the first graduating class from Alva High School included a sixteen-year-old Hugh Johnson. He then prepared for the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point while attending Northwest University. After finishing at The USMA, he served with General John Pershing in the Punitive Expedition against Poncho Villa and ran the draft during World War I.

In 1932 he joined Franklin D. Roosevelt to help him run for president. Johnson was a close advisor to President Roosevelt. He wrote many of his speeches and helped to develop the New Deal programs that

President Roosevelt began in his first term. He even helped to write the National Industrial Recovery Act. President Roosevelt named him head of the National Recovery Administration in 1933. Johnson was so influential in making the New Deal that *Time Magazine* named him “Man of the Year” in 1933. Many people did not like the National Recovery Administration, and they blamed Johnson for its unpopular actions, so he resigned from his position in 1934.

Hugh Johnson spent the rest of his life as a writer and political commentator in newspapers. He died in 1942 from pneumonia and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC.



## Russell Lee



Russell Lee, 1942 (image courtesy of the Library of Congress).

Russell Lee was born in Ottawa, Illinois, in 1903. His first career was as a chemist, but he decided to quit that job and become an artist. He was originally interested in painting but found that he preferred photography.

In 1936, he took a job with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) as a photographer. His job was to document the lives of people across the United States. He traveled all over the country, taking pictures in California, New Mexico, Texas, and even Oklahoma. Many people consider his photographs to be iconic images of the Great Depression. In Oklahoma, Lee documented the lives of the people living in the migrant camp on May Avenue, south of the North Canadian River and west of the meat-packing district. His pictures showed the people of the United States, and the world, the conditions that many families lived in during these hard times. More than half of the tenants in the migrant camps in Oklahoma City were tenant farmers and sharecroppers from rural Oklahoma that came to the city to find work.

Lee worked for the government as a photographer until 1947, when he became the first professor of photography at the University of Texas at Austin. He worked there until he retired, and passed away in Austin in 1986 at the age of 83.

The collection of Russell Lee's photographs from his time at the FSA, as well as those of his fellow photographers at the FSA, are public domain and viewable on the Library of Congress website. There are around 175,000 photographs, both as prints and negatives, in the Library's collection of FSA photographs.

[View Russell Lee's FSA Photos](#)

## Glossary

**buying on credit:** Taking out loans to purchase goods instead of using money.

**conservation:** Using natural resources with care.

**deposit:** Adding money to an account.

**depression:** A longer and worse period of economic hardship compared to a recession.

**drought:** A long absence of rainfall.

**economist:** A person who studies the movement of money and goods.

**Hoovervilles** Shanty towns where people who lost their homes congregated in tents and shacks.

**interest:** Money charged on borrowed money.

**labor:** Work.

**loan:** Money borrowed that someone promises to pay back.

**migration:** Moving away from somewhere.

**New Deal:** The fiscal policy of President Roosevelt to alleviate poverty and provide assistance and jobs to Americans during the Great Depression.

**oral history:** An interview of a person who gives a verbal account of the past.

**poverty:** A state of financial distress.

**recession:** A period of time when many people lose money, jobs, homes, farms, and businesses.

**sharecroppers:** Farmers who receive a share of the money raised from growing crops for a different person who owns the crops.

**stock:** A share or a piece of ownership in a company.

**tenant farmers:** Farmers who do not own the land where they live and farm.

**unemployment:** Measurement of the number of people without jobs.

## Activities

### The New Deal Near You



Wewoka, Oklahoma, pool built by the WPA, picture taken June 16, 1940 (21201.OGP.17, Works Progress Administration Collection, OHS).

<https://livingnewdeal.org/>

Use the website above to search for New Deal projects by city and state. Search for a project in your town or in a city near your town.

Find out the following:

1. What is it?
2. Who built it?
3. When?
4. Where is it?
5. How did people use it?

Go to your local library or use the internet. Find the Oklahoma Historical Society's archives catalog ([www.okhistory.org/catalog](http://www.okhistory.org/catalog)) to research more about the site. Create a poster on your findings and report it to your class. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Find out about a about the CCC camp or a particular person who worked on the project.
2. Visit the site and take pictures.
3. Does it look like people need to take better care of it? Is it falling apart or is it well preserved? If the site needs work, write a letter to the city mayor or local historic preservation committee about why the site is important to the community and should be preserved. Be sure to talk about the history of the New Deal, and the benefits it had in the community.



## WPA Artists



An art class being held at the Oklahoma City Civic Center (image courtesy of the National Archives).

Woody Crumbo and Allan Houser are two examples of artists from Oklahoma who worked for the WPA. Use this site to research an artist from Oklahoma or a piece of artwork created in Oklahoma. Present your findings by creating your own art project or poster to report what you found.

<http://www.newdealartregistry.org/>

## Primary Source Photograph Activity

Choose one of the two photographs below. Use the picture and your imagination to write a short story about the people in the photograph. Be sure to write about what their life might be like and how they might feel about it. Here are some discussion questions to consider:

Did the Great Depression forever change American economics, or the way we think about money?

What is the role of the government in preventing (or solving) economic downturns?



Sam Gillispie's "Run-down farmstead," Roger Mills County, Oklahoma. Photo by E. W. Jenkins, USDA Soil Conservation Service, April 17, 1941 (OHS Collections).



Farm family living in temporary quarters in the windbreak of a gully, 25 miles northeast of Cheyenne, Oklahoma. Photo by E. W. Jenkins, USDA Soil Conservation Service, April 17, 1941 (OHS Collections).

## Woody Guthrie Lyric Activity

Listen to Woody Guthrie's "Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues" or read the lyrics below. Think about the topics and issues discussed earlier and consider the following questions:

1. What is the song about?
2. How does Woody Guthrie represent migration and Okies?
3. Who is he blaming for all of the poverty and starvation?
4. What does he mean by "and the black ol' dust storm filled the sky?"
5. How does this song make you feel?

Trying writing your own Dust Bowl ballad based on what you learned about the Great Depression and Oklahoma!

Listen to the song here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOpsGkC5-tE>

Back in Nineteen Twenty-Seven,  
I had a little farm and I called that heaven.  
Well, the prices up and the rain come down,  
And I hauled my crops all into town --  
I got the money, bought clothes and groceries,  
Fed the kids, and raised a family.

Rain quit and the wind got high,  
And the black ol' dust storm filled the sky.  
And I swapped my farm for a Ford machine,  
And I poured it full of this gas-I-line --  
And I started, rockin' an' a-rollin',  
Over the mountains, out towards the old Peach Bowl.

Way up yonder on a mountain road,  
I had a hot motor and a heavy load,  
I's a-goin' pretty fast, there wasn't even stoppin',  
A-bouncin' up and down, like popcorn poppin' --  
Had a breakdown, sort of a nervous bustdown of some kind,  
There was a feller there, a mechanic feller,  
Said it was en-gine trouble.



Way up yonder on a mountain curve,  
It's way up yonder in the piney wood,  
An' I give that rollin' Ford a shove,  
An' I's a-gonna coast as far as I could --  
Commence coastin', pickin' up speed,  
Was a hairpin turn, I didn't make it.

Man alive, I'm a-tellin' you,  
The fiddles and the guitars really flew.  
That Ford took off like a flying squirrel  
An' it flew halfway around the world --  
Scattered wives and childrens  
All over the side of that mountain.

We got out to the West Coast broke,  
So dad-gum hungry I thought I'd croak,  
An' I bummed up a spud or two,  
An' my wife fixed up a tater stew --  
We poured the kids full of it,  
Mighty thin stew, though,  
You could read a magazine right through it.  
Always have figured  
That if it'd been just a little bit thinner,  
Some of these here politicians  
Coulda seen through it.



Herbert Clark Hoover

Born August 10, 1874

31<sup>st</sup> President of the United States (1929-1933)

Herbert Hoover (August 10, 1874 - October 20, 1964) was the 31st President of the United States. Herbert Hoover became president at the beginning of the Great Depression. Many people blamed Hoover for the depression. Homeless people lived in Hoovervilles, which were villages of cardboard shacks. Hoover was reluctant to interfere with the economy; however, in 1932, he supported many programs to create jobs, including the construction of the Hoover Dam.

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Image courtesy of [www.whitehousekids.gov](http://www.whitehousekids.gov)

<http://homeschooling.about.com>



Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Born January 30, 1882  
32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States (1933-1945)

Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was the 32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States. FDR was the only President to serve 4 terms. While he was in office, he introduced the New Deal, Social Security, heavier taxes on the wealthy and controls over banks and public utilities and a relief program for the unemployed. On December 7, 1941, he directed organization of the Nation's manpower and resources for global war. He devoted much time and work planning the United Nations. Franklin D. Roosevelt died in office from a cerebral hemorrhage on April 12, 1945.

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Image courtesy of [www.whitehousekids.gov](http://www.whitehousekids.gov)

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## Online Resources:

The 1930s: Teacher's Guide

[http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/media/uploads/special\\_features/download\\_files/1930s\\_tg.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/media/uploads/special_features/download_files/1930s_tg.pdf)

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>

The Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>

The FDR Library and Museum

<https://fdrlibrary.org/>

The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum

<https://hoover.archives.gov/>

The New Deal: A Teacher's Guide

[http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/new-deal/pdf/teacher\\_guide.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/new-deal/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf)

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