



SIRS Discoverer® on the Web

Copyright © 2013 ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights reserved.

CRINKLES

Nov./Dec. 2000, pp. 46-49

Copyright (c) 2000, CRINKLES. Published by LMS Associates LLC.

November/December 2000, pp. 46-49. <http://www.crinkles.com>.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE DUSTY THIRTIES

Do you know that you are very lucky? No doubt, most of you have a good place to live, enough food, clothes to wear, and own many personal belongings. At least one person in your family probably has a job, you attend school, and are able to go on outings and celebrate special occasions with family and friends.

Now imagine you have traveled back in time about sixty-five years. Your father and mother are among several million persons who have lost their jobs. Your family has no money to buy food. Your clothes are tattered and worn, and you are unable to attend school because you haven't any clothes to wear. Several thousand banks have closed. Your family has lost all of its savings.

This was a common scene in the United States for millions of people during the 1930s--the gloomy years of "The Great Depression."



THE CRASH OF 1929

The 1920s were a time of prosperity for many people in the United States. More people than ever before owned houses, radios, cars, and telephones. As people gained confidence in the prospering economy, more people began to buy stock or shares in businesses. They took chances that the stock they purchased would earn them big profits. When stock prices rose, people sold their stocks and made money. Ordinary people such as housewives, clerks, and elevator operators were buying stocks. Stock prices reached an all-time high on September 3, 1929. Everyone was happy.

Then the unthinkable happened. On October 29, 1929, known as "Black Tuesday," the stock market crashed! Stock prices plunged downward. People began losing money, and were forced to sell their stocks at much lower prices. Stock values fell more than 8 billion dollars in one day. Within three weeks of the stock market crash, 30 billion American dollars had been lost! This event started the Great Depression.

THE DEPRESSION YEARS

The Great Depression in America lasted from 1929 until 1941. The worst year was 1932. By this time, more than 14 million Americans had no jobs. Millions of people lost all their savings when many banks ran out of funds and closed. People who had always put a roof over their families' heads suddenly had no money. Thousands of families were forced to put all of their worldly belongings in their cars or on their backs as they hit the roads looking for work.



People waited outside banks to get their money only to learn the bank had closed.

Homeless living soon became a way of life for many Americans as they struggled just to stay alive. Across the country, a new sight dotted landscapes. Homeless people began building places to live out of cardboard, wooden boxes, and newspapers. These communities were named "Hoovervilles" after Herbert Hoover, the U.S. President at the time. Herbert Hoover became the thirty-first President just eight months before the stock market tumbled. People blamed him for the Great Depression.

Because of the Depression, President Hoover was never popular during his presidency. When he ran for re-election in 1932, he lost by a landslide to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The American people were suffering and voted for a change.

Catastrophe also struck the Midwest. In 1931, the "black blizzards" began and the rains stopped. Heavy winds swirled millions of tons of black dirt across the Southern Plains of the United States. Farmers watched as their farms blew away in the wind. Without the profits from their crops, farmers could not pay their bank mortgages. Thousands of farming families lost their homes during the eight years of drought and dust storms known as the "Dust Bowl."

Depression hit hard for families living in the Dust Bowl states. Kansas, the panhandle of northern Oklahoma, northern Texas, eastern New Mexico, and southern Colorado suffered for nearly a decade. What was life like back then? How did people survive? The Dust Bowl era is filled with remarkable stories of people who endured drought, dust, disease, and even death of loved ones.

THE DROUGHT

In the summer of 1931, a severe drought hit the Midwest and Southern Plains. With no rain, crops began to wither and die. Farmers kept plowing and planting, but nothing would grow. The ground vegetation that once kept the soil in place was gone. The land soon became parched. Winds picked up and the dust storms began.

The drought lasted until 1939. A roving reporter named Ernie Pyle described the Dust Bowl in 1936 with these words:

"If you would like to have your heart broken, just come out here....This is the dust storm country. It is the saddest land I have ever seen."

SURVIVING THE DUST

In 1932, fourteen dust storms were reported by the weather bureau. In 1933, there were thirty-eight. How did people protect themselves from all the dust? To filter away the dirt, people tried hanging wet sheets in front of doorways and windows. They stuffed window frames with rags and gummed tape. However, the dust was everywhere, sneaking into the tiniest cracks. Clothes in closets were covered with dust. Towels and curtains were black with dust.

At night, the dust came in silently, covering sleeping faces with sandy grit. When people awoke in the morning, their pillows would be brown except for spots where their heads had rested. At meal times, to avoid dust, people would set their tables with plates and cups turned upside down and silverware placed under napkins until the moment the food was served on the table.

Milton Meltzer, in his book *DRIVEN FROM THE LAND*, relates part of a letter that an Oklahoma woman wrote to her friends describing the dust storms:

"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 wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is an almost hopeless task...everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor."

- Try this: Check out your house to see where dust might enter.

BLACK SUNDAY

In May of 1934, a big storm blew for thirty-six hours! The dust cloud covered 1,500 miles. It stretched from the western Rocky Mountains east to the Great Lakes. It stretched north from Canada south to Oklahoma. Millions of tons of soil were picked up and blown half way across the country. Dust even fell on ships as far as 500 miles out to sea in the Atlantic Ocean!

An even worse storm occurred on April 14, 1935. On this date, known as "Black Sunday," the worst "black blizzard" of the Dust Bowl swept over the Great Plains. It completely blocked out the sun. Within only a few hours, temperatures dropped by nearly fifty degrees. Roofs and ceilings of some homes even collapsed from the weight of the dust!

DUST BOWL EXIT: THIS WAY

During the worst years of the Depression, about one million people left their homes. They packed up everything they owned into their cars and trucks and headed west toward California. One fourth of the people living in the states of the Dust Bowl left. The Dust Bowl migration was the largest in American history. By 1940, two and one half million people had moved out of the Plains states.

- Try this: How many states in the U.S. today have populations of approximately two and one-half million people or less? Can you name the states? The answers may just surprise you! (Hint: Visit your local library to find the answers in the latest *WORLD ALMANAC*, or visit the website www.infoplease.com and begin your search by clicking the United States link on the home page.)

ANSWER: 17 states: Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

OKIES

"Okie" was a nickname given to migrants forced to leave their homes after losing their land, homes, or jobs. Okies came mainly from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. These migrants headed to California looking for work, hoping for a chance for a better life. California! California! California! This word was magic to Okies.

When Okie families finally reached California, they gazed upon vast stretches of orchards, grape fields, cotton fields, tomato fields, and green that seemed to reach as far as the eye could see. They truly believed they had found their paradise. They quickly found, however, that life in California was almost as hard as the life they had left behind.

Californians didn't want Okies in their state. Okies were poor, uneducated, and dressed in raggedy clothes. Californians called them "dumb Okies." As they neared California towns, signs began appearing: NO JOBS HERE! IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR WORK--KEEP OUT! 10 MEN FOR EVERY JOB.

Many Okies took jobs held by former Mexican migrant workers. The work was hard and pay was low. Earnings were from 75 cents to \$1.25 per day for those lucky enough just to find work. There were too many workers and not enough jobs. Here are wages for some farm jobs migrants found:

Picking Cotton: 25 cents per hour

Picking Plums and Nectarines: 35 cents per hour

Picking Potatoes and Lettuce: 20 cents per hour

Picking Peaches: \$1.00 per ton of peaches (a ton equals 2000 pounds!)

- Try this: How long would you have to work to pay for soup at 5 cents a bowl twice a day for a week?

OKIEVILLES

Many Okies lived in tents and shacks made out of cardboard and tin. These communities became known as "Okieville." The people living in Okieville had no work and very little to eat. California was rich, yet Okie children were starving. Many migrant children suffered from poor nutrition. Their diets usually consisted of beans, rice, fried dough, and almost no milk, fruit, or vegetables. Because they had so little to eat, many died from hunger, accidents, or sickness and disease.

Finally in 1936, a United States agency called the Farm Security Administration began building several farm-labor camps for Okies. These camps were built to make living conditions better. One of these camps in California was named Weedpatch Camp.

WEEDPATCH CAMP

Weedpatch Camp was a big improvement over the bad conditions at an Okieville. It cost one dollar per week to live there, and had hot showers, flush toilets, and breakfast for children for a penny a day. Life at Weedpatch Camp was still hard, but as one woman at the camp said, "Every cloud has a silver lining." One day a "silver lining" floated into camp named Leo Hart.

Mr. Hart was a head counselor at a local high school. Many times after work he would visit and talk with the children of Weedpatch Camp. He discovered how tough life was for the children. He learned how they were teased and ridiculed in public schools for being "dumb Okies." Bothered by the treatment of Okie children, he decided to do something for them, because, he said later, no one cared about them.

In 1940, Leo and his wife organized the Okies to build their own school. It became a fine school that taught kids many life skills. Besides regular academic subjects, the children learned about raising livestock, gardening, sewing, carpentry, plumbing, electronics, and even aircraft mechanics! The school became so popular that later the nearby residents wanted their children transferred to "the Okie school!"

Weedpatch School had a happy ending. Weedpatch was only permitted to operate five years as an "emergency Okie school." However, it later became part of a local public school district. Today it is still operating as a school called Sunset School.

What happened to the children of the Weedpatch School? College professors, a high school teacher, a principal, business and restaurant owners, a marketing manager, and a judge are just a few of the success stories of these ragamuffin migrant children of the dusty thirties. For the Okie children at Weedpatch, it was the worst of times and the best of times.

AND FINALLY...

The Dust Bowl years of the Great Depression were especially tough times for the people living in the Plains. However, in 1939 the rains finally came, and the drought slowly disappeared. Farmers learned new plowing practices to keep the soil from blowing away. With the coming of World War II, the country finally was pulled out of the Depression. That...is another story.

* * *

DUSTY HUMOR

Despite the hardships of Dust Bowl life, residents of the southern plains kept up their sense of humor. Here is a popular Dust Bowl joke from the 1930s:

A traveler noticed a nice new hat by the side of the road, and he stopped to pick it up. Under the hat was a man, buried up to his neck in the dust! As he dug the poor fellow out, the traveler asked if he wanted a ride into town. "No, I'll get there myself," the man replied, "I'm on a horse." (Excerpt from THE DUST BOWL by Tricia Andryszewski, p. 33.)

* * *

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AFFECTS THE WORLD

The Great Depression began in the United States but quickly turned into a worldwide economic slump. The U.S. had loaned money to European nations whose economies were weak from World War I. When the U.S. had no more dollars to loan, prosperity in Europe soon ended. The nations hit hardest by the U.S. Depression were Germany and Great Britain. By early 1932, twenty-five percent of all German workers were unemployed. Unfortunately, the economic slump in Germany was a direct cause of Adolf Hitler's rise to German power in 1933.

As Hitler became more powerful, he began terrorizing and invading other nations. He invaded Austria in 1938. In 1939, he teamed up with Russia to invade Poland. In the same year, Britain and France declared war on Germany and Italy. Japan and China also were fighting wars at this time. Tensions between Japan and the U.S. became strained when war "accidents" killed Americans in Asia.

As wars raged in both Asia and Europe, the U.S. faced the possibility of getting involved in these foreign conflicts. After being attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States had no choice. On December 8, 1941, the U.S. declared war on Japan. Two days later the United States declared war on Germany and Italy. The Great Depression was ending, as World War II was beginning....

BOOKS TO EXPLORE THE U.S. DEPRESSION:

Brown, Gene. CONFLICT IN EUROPE AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION. Twenty-First Century, 1993. 64p.

Fremon, David K. THE GREAT DEPRESSION IN AMERICAN HISTORY. Enslow, 1997. 128p.

Hall, Floriana. SMALL CHANGE: A TRUE STORY OF A YOUNG CHILD'S LIFE DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION. Dodds, 1999.

Holford, David M. HERBERT HOOVER. Enslow, 1999. 128p.

Katz, William Loren. AN ALBUM OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION. F. Watts, 1981. 96p.

Morris, Jeffrey. THE FDR WAY. Scholastic, 1996. 136p.

Nishi, Dennis. LIFE DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION (THE WAY PEOPLE LIVE). Lucent, 1998. 96p.

Spies, Karen Bornemann. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT. Enslow, 1999. 128p.

EXPLORE THESE GREAT DEPRESSION WEBSITES:

AMERICA FROM THE GREAT DEPRESSION TO WORLD WAR II.
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammen/fsowhome.html> Library of Congress site--a collection of over 56,000 famous photographs showing Americans during the Great Depression.

BLACK THURSDAY: THE 1929 STOCK MARKET CRASH.
<http://www.letsfindout.com/subjects/america/stock.html>

THE GREAT DEPRESSION. <http://www.letsfindout.com/subjects/america/depressi.html>

"A NEW DEAL FOR THE ARTS" (NATIONAL ARCHIVES & RECORDS ADMINISTRATION).
<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/newdeal/newdeal.html> Features Depression era artwork, photographs, interviews, etc.

TIMELINE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION: 1929-1940.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rails/timeline/index.html>

* * *

READ MORE ABOUT THE DUST BOWL IN THESE NONFICTION BOOKS:

Andryszewski, Tricia. THE DUST BOWL: DISASTER ON THE PLAINS. Millbrook, 1993. 64p. Explore the human and natural causes and devastation of the severe dust storms that turned much of the Great Plains into a "Dust Bowl" in the 1930s.

Coombs, Karen Mueller. CHILDREN OF THE DUST DAYS. Carolrhoda, 2000. 48p. Focuses on children's experiences during the Dust Bowl 1930s, such as "Black Blizzards," ruined crops, and journeys to find a better life in California.

Farris, John. THE DUST BOWL. Lucent, 1989. 124p. Read and discuss the disastrous Dust Bowl drought of the 1930s in the Great Plains.

Meltzer, Milton. DRIVEN FROM THE LAND: THE STORY OF THE DUST BOWL. Benchmark, 2000. 111p. Read about the conditions that led to the Great Depression and the horrible dust storms that drove people from their homes westward during the 1930s.

Stanley, Jerry. CHILDREN OF THE DUST BOWL: THE TRUE STORY OF THE SCHOOL AT WEEDPATCH CAMP. Crown, 1992. 85p. Descriptions of hardships of migrant workers who traveled from the Dust Bowl to California during the Depression make this thoughtful reading. Learn about life in a federal labor camp and the wonderful school that was built for migrant children.

EXPERIENCE THE STRUGGLES OF DUST BOWLERS IN THESE FASCINATING FICTION BOOKS:

Booth, David. THE DUST BOWL. Kids Can Press, 1996. 32p. Mathew's grandfather tells him about farm life during the great drought and Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Hamilton, Virginia. DRYSO LONGSO. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Harcourt, 1997. 54p. Drysolongo comes to bring life to a family strained from the dust storms that blow across their farmland.

Hess, Karen. OUT OF THE DUST. Scholastic, 1997. 227p. Through a series of poems, fifteen-year-old Billie Jo portrays the hardships of living on her family's wheat farm in Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl years of the Depression.

Myers, Anna. RED-DIRT JESSIE. Walker, 1992. 107p. Living in Oklahoma Dust Bowl during the Depression, Jessie tries to tame a wild dog to help her father recover from a nervous breakdown.

Porter, Tracy. TREASURES IN THE DUST. HarperTrophy, 1999. 148p. Annie and Violet share the terrible dust storms that plague rural Oklahoma.

Raven, Marto Theis. ANGELS IN THE DUST. Bridge Water, 1997. 32p. Great Grandma Annie tells about life on her family's Oklahoma farm during the Dust Bowl 1930s.

Rossiter, Phyllis. MOXIE. Four Winds, 1990. 195p. Thirteen-year-old Drew, determined to help his family hold onto their farm in the Dust Bowl of 1934, stubbornly tends his livestock and refuses to give up hope.

Snyder, Zilpha Keatley. CAT RUNNING. Delacorte, 1994. 168p. Cat joins a barefoot Zane Perkins, an Okie who is shunned by others, to run for help when his little sister, Samantha, is sick with pneumonia.

Turner, Ann. DUST FOR DINNER. HarperCollins, 1995. 64p. Set during the Great Depression, Jake tells the story of how his family was forced to sell their Oklahoma farm and move to California after terrible dust storms ruined their farmland.

LISTEN TO DUST BOWL SONGS ON A CD:

Guthrie, Woody. DUST BOWL BALLADS. Rounder Records, 1988. Includes songs such as "The Great Dust Storm," "Dust Pneumonia Blues," "I Ain't Got No Home," and "Dusty Old Dust."

WATCH A VIDEOTAPE:

SURVIVING THE DUST BOWL. PBS Video, 1998. 60 min. Vividly describes the story of people who endured many hardships during the Dust Bowl years, such as drought, famine, a jackrabbit plague, and more.

EXPLORE DUST BOWL WEBSITES:

THE DUST BOWL. <http://www.usd.edu/anth/epa/dust.html> Includes a movie of a dust storm during the Dust Bowl.

THE DUST BOWL. <http://www.nasm.edu/ceps/drylands/bowl.html> Brief Dust Bowl information and photos.

DUST STORMS AND THEIR DAMAGE. http://www.weru.ksu.edu/pics/dust_storms

ROOSEVELT'S FIRESIDE CHATS: ON DROUGHT CONDITIONS. <http://newdeal.feri.org/chat/chat08.htm>
Read a Fireside Chat speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt dated Sept. 6, 1936 describing the devastating drought conditions in nine states during the Dust Bowl.

SURVIVING THE DUST BOWL. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl> A great site to learn about people and events of the Dust Bowl, view maps, a timeline, special features, and more.

MLA Citation:

You can copy and paste this information into your documents

"The Great Depression and the Dusty Thirties." Crinkles. Nov./Dec. 2000: 46-49. SIRS Discoverer. Web. 17 May 2013.