

The stock market crash of October 29, 1929, started the longest lasting and most severe economic catastrophe that the United States had ever experienced. It did not end until the entry of the country into World War II in 1941. The poverty that resulted from the loss of jobs, savings, and homes devastated millions of Americans. Some died from hunger and others from lack of medical care. Others—especially young men—left home, to wander the country looking for work. Life was hard.

### Looking for a Better Life

The woman shown in this picture was named Florence Thompson. A mother of seven, she and her children were living in a pea-pickers' camp by the side of the road along with more than a thousand people. Rain fell on the impoverished camp, which was full of simple tents and lean-tos. For Florence and her children, life was difficult, and they were often hungry. Her husband had recently died. The family lived on vegetables from the nearby fields. The children also killed birds to eat when they could. They—and what little they had—were constantly exposed to the cold, wind, and rain. Life was a delicate balancing act, and it became increasingly difficult to make ends meet. For example, Florence made the tough decision to sell the tires of her car in order to buy food.

Florence and her children were one family among many who had left their homes and traveled to California to find work.

Typically from Oklahoma, these farm laborers—known as “Okies”—lived poor, difficult lives. Drought in the Great Plains had caused crops to fail, and the poor economy forced a low price on what food did grow. Many of the farmers had lived on small farms that they rented. These farmers were used to migrating from place to place to work the fields. When they found that there was no work in the Great Plains, they packed up their families and the few possessions they had and headed to California and Arizona, where they had heard they could find work.



This photo of a migrant worker and her children in Nipomo, California, 1936, is one of the most famous images of the Great Depression.



These Okies camped in Imperial Valley, California, in 1937.

During the Great Depression, nearly 440,000 people left Oklahoma; overall, over two million left the Great Plains states. So many people moved West, however, that authorities there became overwhelmed. The local officials set up blockades, which they called “bum blockades,” to keep out the Okies. Most of the migrants found that life in California was not much better than in the Dust Bowl region.

### City Life

During his second inaugural address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke about the impact that the Great Depression was having on the nation. He said that one-third of the country had inadequate housing, not enough food, and few clothes.

Roosevelt had entered office in 1933 during the midst of the Depression. Businesses had closed. Farms did not produce crops. Homes were empty. Many banks had failed. People with money in those banks were left with nothing. Nearly one quarter of the population had no income.

Many families were left hungry. Even those who found temporary work struggled to save money, and many families had no extra money for food. Lines of men stood on city sidewalks, waiting for a bowl of soup, which cost 5 cents. The Secretary of Labor estimated that 20 percent of all schoolchildren suffered from malnutrition.

Poor people—many city dwellers and most farm families—did not have heat in their homes. Almost a third had no running water or a bathroom with a tub or shower. African Americans were especially hard hit. Usually they were the first workers to be laid off.

Hundreds of people who had been evicted from their homes used scraps of wood and leftover garbage to build shantytowns at the edges of the big cities, where they could live without paying rent. These areas were called “Hoovervilles,” named after Herbert Hoover, who was president at the start of the Great Depression and whom many people accused of doing little to help the worsening economy.



This soup line in New York City was filled with hungry men who were unemployed.



Many children suffered from malnutrition during the Great Depression.

### Life on the Rails

A number of people who were left homeless and jobless by the Great Depression took to the railroads, hoping to find work in another part of the country. By 1932, nearly 250,000 of these wanderers were teenagers. Most were young men, but some young women joined them as well. A life spent illegally traveling by train was dangerous. In 1932, officials with the Southern Pacific Railroad estimated that more than

683,000 people were thrown off trains by guards, which sometimes resulted in death. People who were not careful climbing on the railroad cars could stumble and fall beneath the wheels, or a person could become injured jumping off the train while it was moving. Many young people got hurt while boarding or getting off trains—some even lost arms or legs. The young people living on the trains faced a constant struggle to find food. Many people would hop off in small towns or at farmhouses along the tracks and beg for food. Train riders would place a mark near friendly houses so other train riders would be able to locate good places to ask for food. It was common for the train riders to share food and help each other survive.

During the Great Depression, some people found temporary work with government projects championed by President Roosevelt's New Deal. Other people eventually made their ways home after wandering the country in search of work. The Great Depression left lasting memories of hardships and trouble, and the country struggled until the massive wartime efforts during World War II eliminated the problem of unemployment.



A poor family resting next to a railroad car in Washington

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Who were the “Okies”?
  - A.** hungry schoolchildren
  - B.** people who planted okra
  - C.** men who worked in the Great Plains
  - D.** migrant workers from the Great Plains
  
- 2.** Where were the shantytowns called “Hoovervilles” built?
  - A.** in army camps
  - B.** outside big cities
  - C.** along railroad tracks
  - D.** near the White House
  
- 3.** Which statement best summarizes life for Okies during the Great Depression?
  - A.** Okies always traveled by train.
  - B.** Life was difficult, and hunger was a common problem.
  - C.** Government jobs saved many Okies from starvation.
  - D.** Once they arrived in Oklahoma, most Okies found work.
  
- 4.** Describe the challenges faced by those who traveled illegally on the rails during the Great Depression. Provide at least two examples, using details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.