# DEFINING MOMENTS
# THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE NEW DEAL

**Kevin Hillstrom**

Omnigraphics

P.O. Box 31-1640
Detroit, MI 48231

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .vii
How to Use This Book . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .xi

**NARRATIVE OVERVIEW**

Prologue . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .3
Chapter One: The Roaring Twenties and the Great Crash . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .7
Chapter Two: The Hoover Years . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .23
Chapter Three: Roosevelt and the First New Deal . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .41
Chapter Four: The Dust Bowl . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .59
Chapter Five: The Second New Deal . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .75
Chapter Six: Wartime Prosperity . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .95
Chapter Seven: Legacy of the Great Depression and the New Deal . . . . . .109

**BIOGRAPHIES**

Herbert Hoover (1874-1964) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .121
*U.S. President during the Early Years of the Great Depression*

Harry Lloyd Hopkins (1890-1946) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .125
*New Deal Administrator and Presidential Advisor*

Hugh S. Johnson (1882-1942) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .129
*Director of the New Deal's National Recovery Administration*

Frances Perkins (1880-1965) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .133
*Progressive Activist and Secretary of Labor during the Great Depression*

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .137
*First Lady of the United States of America during the Great Depression*

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .142
*U.S. President during the Later Years of the Great Depression and World War II*

Henry A. Wallace (1888-1965) . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .148
*Secretary of Agriculture during the Great Depression and Vice President during World War II*

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Remembering a Depression Childhood . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .155

Herbert Hoover Predicts a Quick Recovery . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .158

Franklin D. Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .162

Praise for the Civilian Conservation Corps . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .167

An Excerpt from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .170

Woody Guthrie Describes the Dust Bowl . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .176

Remembering "Black Sunday" . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .179

Battling the Dust Bowl and Rural Poverty . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .181

Roosevelt Unveils the Second New Deal . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .189

The *Saturday Evening Post* Condemns Roosevelt and the New Deal . . . . .197

A Rabbi's Letter of Thanks to Roosevelt . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .202

Important People, Places, and Terms . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .205
Chronology . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .211
Sources for Further Study . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .215
Bibliography . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .217
Photo and Illustration Credits . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .219
Index . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .221

# Chapter Four

# THE DUST BOWL

The land just blew away. We had to go somewhere.

—Kansas minister on the road to California, June 1936

When the Roosevelt administration unleashed its initial flurry of New Deal programs in 1933 and 1934, it knew that it faced an enormous challenge. It had to simultaneously save victims of the Great Depression from hunger, poverty, and hopelessness; help unemployed Americans return to work; aid cash-starved businesses in their quest to regain profitability; and restore shaken public faith in American-style capitalism. But even as Roosevelt was setting his New Deal in motion, yet another threat to the nation emerged on the Great Plains. This threat—popularly known as the Dust Bowl—had the potential to turn much of the country's agricultural heartland into a bleak desert. It also complicated Roosevelt's entire strategy for battling the Great Depression.

## The Farming Boom

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, American farmers on the Great Plains—a broad cross-section of the central United States that includes parts of Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, North Dakota, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming—had enjoyed steadily rising levels of prosperity. They had endured occasional years of poor production or sagging prices, but most of the years had been good ones. Conditions in the post-World War I era, in particular, lifted many farmers to new heights of success. There were two main reasons for this growth. First, by the time the war concluded in 1918, European agri-

culture was in ruins. This forced European nations to look overseas for their food. Second, U.S. consumers dramatically increased their consumption of wheat, corn, meat, and other agricultural products during the economic expansion of the 1920s.

American farmers and ranchers expanded their operations and production to meet the soaring demand. The Great Plains even received an infusion of new farmers eager to take advantage of the high prices for various commodities. Wheat was the single most important economic crop during this time, but other commodities surged in commercial value as well.

During the late 1920s, though, the picture changed. Heartland producers of wheat, cotton, corn, and pigs found themselves in deepening financial straits. They watched helplessly as prices for farm commodities steadily fell in response to the recovery of European farming. This recovery, combined with the record output of American growers, created a glut of wheat and other crops on the world market. Prices continued to fall, and many farmers who had taken out big loans to buy new machinery or land during the early 1920s fell deeper and deeper into debt. Commodity prices further plummeted after the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which ushered in the Great Depression.

The position of farmers and ranchers of the Great Plains further eroded in the early 1930s, when the weather turned against them. In 1933 and 1934, many parts of the Great Plains received record-low levels of rainfall. Drought conditions became so bad that some reservoirs, creeks, and ponds disappeared entirely, while lakes, marshes, and rivers shriveled to a fraction of their former sizes. The drought decimated regional populations of fish, amphibian, and bird species—but created ideal conditions for grasshoppers, which hatched in plague-like numbers and devoured the meager crops that farmers could coax from the ground.

The impact of the drought years was made worse by the fact that day after day, the sun was blazing down on fields and rangelands that had been treated very poorly for decades. By 1930, overgrazing by cattle and sheep had transformed many rangelands into fields of stubbled dirt. Land cultivated for crop production was in even worse condition. Millions of acres of Great Plains grasslands had been repeatedly plowed up to plant wheat and other crops. Ignoring farming principles that would have allowed these soils to recover, farmers instead used the fields so intensively that soil nutrients were exhausted and topsoil became intensely vulnerable to erosion. “At the end of

1931, the Agriculture College of Oklahoma did a survey of all the land that had been torn up in their state during the wheat bonanza," said one historian. "They were astonished by what they found: of sixteen million acres in cultivation in the state, thirteen million were seriously eroded. And this was before the drought had calcified most of the ground."[1]

## Era of the Dusters

The stage was thus set for the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. In the early 1930s the steady winds that were a regular feature of life on the Great Plains began picking up the shattered, sun-baked topsoil and carrying it miles away. Huge dust storms rolled across parts of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and the Oklahoma panhandle. These "dusters" blotted out the mid-day sun and heaved massive dunes of dirt against the sides of homes, barns, and silos. "It seemed on many days as if a curtain was being drawn across a vast stage at world's end," wrote one historian:

The Dust Bowl spread across portions of five states, and was felt to a lesser degree in several other states across the Great Plains.

> The land convulsed in a way that had never been seen before, and it did so at a time when one out of every four adults was out of work.… Cattle went blind and suffocated. When farmers cut them open, they found stomachs stuffed with fine sand. Horses ran madly against the storms. Children coughed and gagged, dying of something the doctors called "dust pneumonia." In desperation, some families gave away their children. The instinctive act of hugging a loved one or shaking someone's hand could knock two people down, for the static electricity from the dusters was so strong.[2]

People who lived through the Dust Bowl recalled that farming families were completely at the mercy of the dust and wind. "The fields were just blowing away," recalled one Kansan. "I know my dad used a harrow, just to turn the ground over so it wouldn't blow so hard. And, he didn't always shave everyday and he'd come in with that dust just hanging on those short whiskers, his face was just covered in dirt.… A few years later, a lot of farmers died with emphysema and there was just plain dust in their lungs."[3]

Farmhouses and schools did not provide any refuge from the maddening dust, either. People caked their nostrils with Vaseline to catch the dust as they inhaled, and many elementary schools received boxes of respiratory masks from the Red Cross. Families draped damp bed sheets across closed windows overnight, only to awake in the morning to find them caked in a brown paste.

Even the simple act of eating turned into a test of resolve and ingenuity during the Dust Bowl years. "Women learned to put up water and milk in tightly sealed Mason jars at the first sign of a storm so that the liquids would not become an undrinkable sludge," reported one historian. "When the time came to use the jars, holes were punched in the tops and the drinks were sucked up through straws.… Everything was eaten the instant it left the stove in the few precious moments before grime covered it. Even so, dust was ingested like a condiment with every meal."[4]

As drought conditions persisted, crops withered, and the dusters rolled on, many of the people trapped in the Dust Bowl became demoralized. "The area seems doomed to become in dreary reality the Great American Desert shown on early maps," wrote one desperate Kansas wheat farmer. "This was something new and different from anything I had ever experienced before—a

Dusters turned many American farms into desert landscapes in the space of a few short years.

destroying force beyond my wildest imagination." And over time, the conditions took a physical as well as psychological toll. "The dust I … labored in all day began to show its effects on my system," he continued. "My head ached, my stomach was upset, and my lungs were oppressed and felt as if they must contain a ton of fine dirt."[5]

## Black Sunday

On a number of occasions from 1933 through 1936, the daily gusts of wind-blown dust built up into full-fledged dust storms that blackened the

The worst of the dust storms that smothered America's Great Plains during the Depression was the Black Sunday storm of April 14, 1935.

skies over the Great Plains. A few of these storms were so gigantic that they deposited dirt from the Dakotas and Kansas and Oklahoma on windshields in New York City. Even ships hundreds of miles out in the Atlantic Ocean were coated with dust from the Great Plains.

But one of these storms was more fearsome than all the rest. This storm took place on April 14, 1935, and terrorized residents of five states—Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma—before blowing out into the Gulf of Mexico. The storm was so spectacular in its fury that the day in which it hit became forever known as "Black Sunday" in the folklore of the Great Plains (see "Remembering 'Black Sunday,'" p. 179).

The Black Sunday dust storm began in the drought-stricken Dakotas in the early morning hours and gathered strength with each passing mile. In

county after county, a great wall of black blotted out the northern horizon, carrying tens of thousands of tons of topsoil lifted from the pulverized farmlands over which it passed. By the time the storm reached the northern borders of Colorado and Kansas, it was a vast and roiling black curtain that measured hundreds of miles across.

As the duster enveloped each town and farmhouse in its path, sunlight was extinguished so totally that people caught in the storm could not even see their hands. Radios and car ignitions shorted out in the static-charged storm, and roads vanished under waves of sand and dirt. Livestock caught out in the open choked to death on the flying dust, and barbed wire fences glowed with electricity. Frightened people gathered together in darkened churches and living rooms and openly debated whether the end of the world was at hand. And in a small town in Texas, a young folk singer named Woody Guthrie composed the opening lines of one of his most famous songs—"So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh"—as the Black Sunday storm roared over his head.[6] (See "Woody Guthrie Describes the Dust Bowl," p. 176).

***"This was something new and different from anything I had ever experienced before—a destroying force beyond my wildest imagination," recalled one farmer. "My head ached, my stomach was upset, and my lungs were oppressed and felt as if they must contain a ton of fine dirt."***

### To Stay or Go

For some residents of the Great Plains, the nightmarish events of Black Sunday convinced them to follow neighbors that had already fled the region. For these unfortunate souls, the poverty and hopelessness simply became too much for them to bear. Visitors to the Dust Bowl did not blame them for leaving. One observer passing through Kansas expressed shock that "in America it should take just one generation to reduce its prolific nature to a condition like the Gobi Desert, which was a million years in the making."[7] The famous journalist Ernie Pyle offered a similar assessment of conditions when he toured the Dust Bowl in 1935. He reported that in many parts of the countryside he "saw not a solitary thing but bare earth and a few lonely, empty farmhouses… There was not a tree or a blade of grass, or a dog or a cow or a human being—nothing whatsoever, nothing at all but gray raw earth and a few farmhouses and barns, sticking up from the dark gray sea like white cattle skeletons on the desert.… [It was] the saddest land I have ever seen."[8]

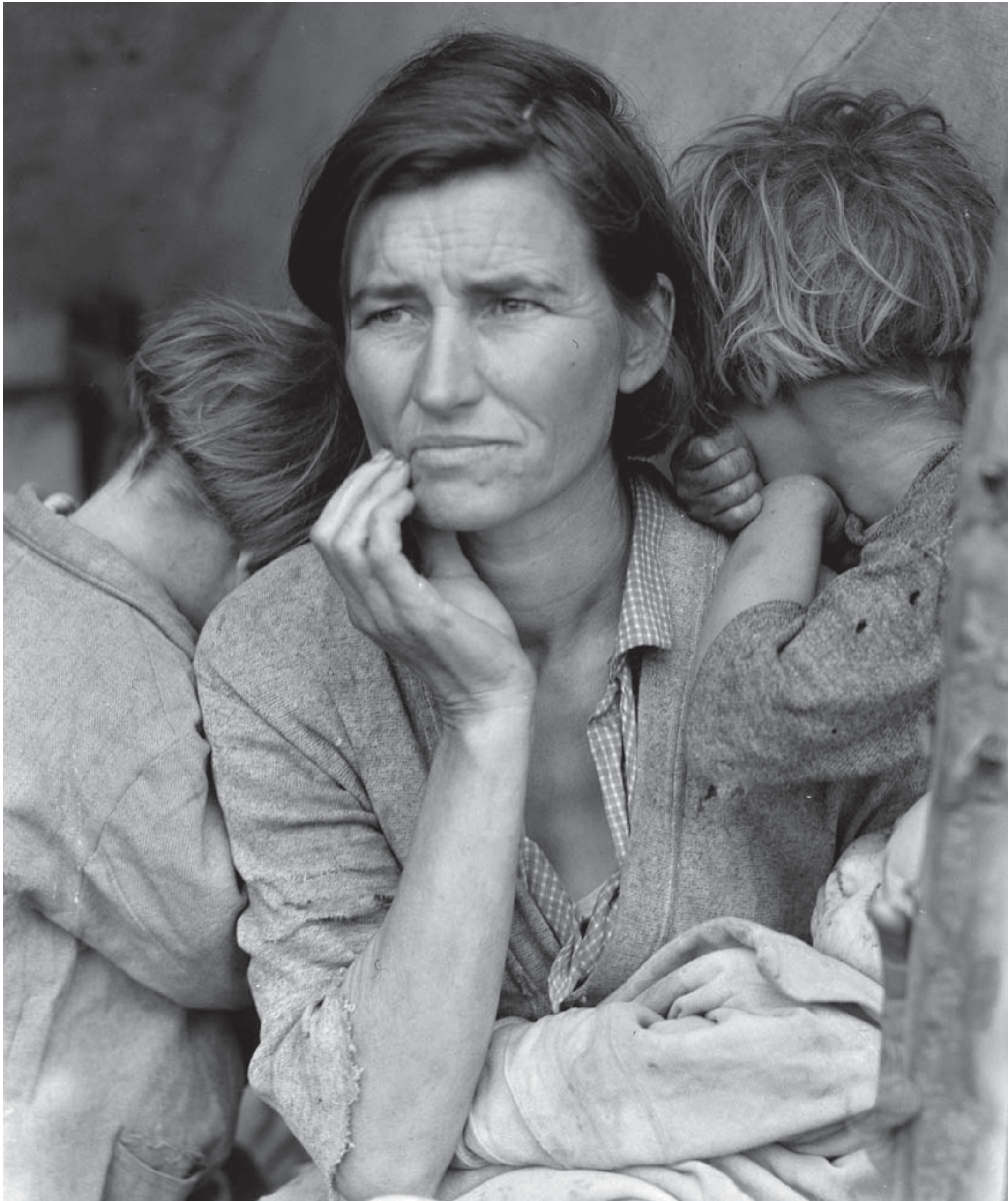
Yet the majority of people who lived in the Dust Bowl never left. Instead, they endured with the help of friends and family—and by nurturing their flickering confidence that the rain would someday return. Many of them also stayed because they knew that the people who lived in the big cities had their own problems. "They saw the newsreels in the Mission Theater in Dalhart [Texas] and the Palace in Boise City [Idaho], showing those breadlines in the big cities, the apple vendors on every street corner, the millions crying for relief," explained historian Timothy Egan. "At least here, in a cashless economy, people could squeeze a dozen eggs every day from a house of hens, or get a pail of milk from an old cow, or spread waters from the windmill onto the ground to grow vegetables, or fatten up a pig, then smoke a winter's supply of bacon."[9]

## California-Bound

The people who did decide to leave the Dust Bowl set their sights on many different parts of the country. Some drifted to the homes of family members back east or in the Deep South. Most African-American refugees from the Dust Bowl set their sights on Chicago, Detroit, Boston, New York, and other northern cities, where discrimination and anti-black violence was not as pervasive as it was in the Jim Crow South. For the majority of people who left the Dust Bowl, though, the destination was California.

As many as 400,000 Oklahomans, Texans, Arkansans, and Missourians moved to California during the 1930s.[10] Some of them made a fairly painless transition to life in California. People who had previously lived in towns or small cities and supported themselves through factory work or white-collar occupations were better equipped financially to make the move, and they also had skills that were in greater demand. But relocating farm families faced a much different set of circumstances. Their stories, documented in the photographs of Dorothea Lange and dramatized in the John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* are the ones that became most closely associated with the Dust Bowl exodus. In fact, the refugees' desperate flight to California came to symbolize the entire Great Depression era in the minds of future generations of Americans (see "An Excerpt from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,*" p. 170).

The attraction of California to these refugees was clear. For one thing, California had a unique reputation among most Americans as a virtual Eden—blessed with a pleasing climate, beautiful country, and a wealth of nat-



This 1936 Dorothea Lange photograph of a Dust Bowl victim with three small children became one of the most famous images of the entire Great Depression era.

ural riches. "Born amidst the frenzy of the [1849] Gold Rush, the state had ever since sustained a reputation as a place where fortunes were made, where opportunities abounded," wrote one Dust Bowl historian. "Come to California to find the 'good life,' Americans were told. And come they did."[11]

The other aspect of California that drew refugees from the farms of Oklahoma and other Dust Bowl states was its ranking as the nation's leading producer of agricultural products. In the 1930s California contained more than 40 percent of the nation's large-scale dairy farms and more than half of its large poultry farms. In addition, the state's San Joaquin, San Bernardino, and Sacramento valleys raised huge volumes of cotton, oranges, grapes, and other crops. The existence of these massive farms was tremendously reassuring to migrant families who were unfamiliar with any other kind of life but one that was based on agriculture.

The journey to the promised land of California, though, was a brutal one for many. Thousands of individuals and families were completely impoverished by the time they departed the Dust Bowl. They piled all of their worldly belongings into old automobiles and trucks that labored mightily as they crawled westward. At night they huddled off Route 66 and other highways in makeshift camps, where they sometimes combined their meager meals with those of other refugee families. The loneliness and uncertainty that accompanied these journeys was heightened by the hostile reception that the refugees sometimes received at towns and homesteads along the way. Many Americans were anxious about keeping their jobs and about conserving their own limited resources, and they saw the Dust Bowl refugees as potential threats to both of those things.

Still, the refugees pressed onward to California with grit and determination—and the occasional helpful hand from strangers. Flossie Haggard, mother of country music singer Merle Haggard, was one of many who left the Dust Bowl for California. Years later, she recalled the desperation she felt when her family's old car broke down in the desert. "We were out of water, and just when I thought we weren't going to make it, I saw this boy coming down the highway on a bicycle. He was going all the way from Kentucky to Fresno. He shared a quart of water with us and helped us fix the car. Everybody's been treating us like trash, and I told this boy, 'I'm glad to see there's still some decent folks left in this world.'"[12] Other travelers survived by clinging to a stubborn optimism about the future that awaited them. "To most of the refugees hope is greater than obstacles," wrote a journalist in a 1935 issue of *Survey Graphic.* "With

Miserable tent shelters such as this one often provided the only protection from the elements for migrant agricultural workers and their families.

bedding drenched by rain while he slept in the open, with topless car and a tire gone flat, an Oklahoman with the usual numerous dependents could say, 'Pretty hard on us now. Sun'll come out pretty soon and we'll be all right.'"[13]

## A Cold Reception

The Dust Bowl refugees who straggled into California came to be collectively known as "Okies"—an abbreviation for the word Oklahomans. It did not take long for the term to take on an insulting meaning among Californians. They resented the intrusion of these poor white migrants into their state, which was already struggling with the economic tumult of the Depression. One columnist in the *Los Angeles Times* was so upset about the influx of Okies that he expressed bitterness about the high quality of southern California's

highways: "The Chinese, wiser than we, have delayed building a great system of highways for that very reason—to head off these dangerous migrations—indigent people stampeding from the farms into cities to live on charity."[14]

The arrival of the refugees was greeted with particular hostility by the agricultural laborers already working in the state. They knew that the migrants from the Great Plains would make it harder for them to find jobs—and easier for the big farms to cut wages for field work. In addition, Mexican Americans and other minorities within the agricultural labor force feared that the increased competition for jobs would set off new waves of racist violence against them. This fear proved well-founded. As the Depression dragged on, whites in several California communities attacked minority workers with guns, clubs, and dynamite to keep them away from even poor-paying jobs.

The Okies also received the cold shoulder from members of California's middle class and upper class. City leaders feared that if migrant laborers stayed too long, their communities would be forced to add them to their already overtaxed relief programs. This concern led some towns and cities to mount organized campaigns against the "intruders." In 1936, for example, the Los Angeles police department established a border patrol that came to be known as the "bum blockade." These officers set up checkpoints at major road and rail crossings and refused to let people into the city if they could not show evidence that they had money or a job.

California legislators also passed the 1933 Indigent Act, which made it a crime to bring needy and jobless people into the state (other states passed similar laws during the Depression in an effort to keep the poor and homeless from crossing their borders). In the late 1930s this law was used to prosecute several Californians who helped Dust Bowl relatives move into the state. It remained on the books until 1941, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Edwards v. California* that states had no right to restrict interstate migration by poor people or any other Americans.

Despite all these hurdles, however, most Dust Bowl refugees eventually managed to carve out lives for themselves in the unfamiliar valleys and towns of California. Working in orchards, canneries, factories, offices, and cotton fields, they gradually managed to get back on their economic feet. Federal relief programs helped individuals and families as well. Their fortunes further improved in the early 1940s, when American involvement in World War II triggered economic growth throughout the country. This economic expan-

sion enabled many migrants from the Great Plains to obtain better-paying jobs in a wide assortment of industries.

## Restoring a Broken Land

Back on the Great Plains, meanwhile, the federal government launched a frantic campaign to restore the shattered region. One of the weapons the Roosevelt administration used was the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, which placed new restrictions on grazing on some public lands in the West. One year later, Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration, which provided loans and other assistance to Great Plains farming families that wanted to relocate. He also signed an executive order granting the federal government powers to buy western land back from homesteaders.

The leading force in the effort to save the Great Plains, though, was the Soil Conservation Service. This was an agency within the Department of Agriculture that was created in 1935 by Congressional passage of the Soil Conservation Act. The Soil Conservation Service was led by Hugh Hammond Bennett, a scientist with the Department of Agriculture. Bennett had issued strong warnings about the farming practices used on the Great Plains as far back as the 1920s. In 1928, for example, Bennett and W.R. Chapline co-authored a study called *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*. In this report, Bennett bluntly predicted that "an era of land wreckage destined to weigh heavily upon the welfare of the next generation is at hand."[15]

Bennett benefited greatly from the support of Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, who also believed that Americans had become wasteful, irresponsible users of farmland and other natural resources (see Wallace biography, p. 148). Wallace, for example, reassigned more than 500 units of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to Bennett's agency to serve as foot soldiers in the battle to restore the vitality of the Great Plains.

When Bennett took command of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935, he funneled most of the agency's resources into two areas. The first was to restore sections of ruined land by planting natural grasses, establishing "greenbelts" of new trees to break up the momentum of Plains winds, and acquiring farmlands that would be left alone so they could replenish themselves. Bennett was greatly aided in these efforts by CCC volunteers. The second area of focus was to educate farmers about sustainable agriculture practices and organize them into cooperative "conservation districts." More than

## John Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath*

John Ernst Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. The son of a county administrator and a school teacher, Steinbeck spent much of his childhood and teen years reading literature and working on area ranches. He attended college at Stanford University, but left in the mid-1920s without a degree in order to pursue a writing career in New York City. He returned to California a few years later and lived there for most of the rest of his life.

Steinbeck published a number of novels in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Of Mice and Men* (1936) were the first to attract significant critical acclaim. In 1936 Steinbeck's attention was drawn to the struggles of Dust Bowl refugees who were pouring into California at that time. After penning several newspaper articles on their plight, Steinbeck

2,000 of these districts were eventually established encompassing more than 200 million acres. District members implemented new, more environmentally sustainable methods of plowing, planting, and irrigating. Bennett also convinced members of these districts to stop looking at the regions they worked as checkerboards of adjoining lands with no relationship to one another. Bennett's crusade received an additional boost with the 1936 creation of the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP). This program paid farmers to replace seven soil-depleting crops, including corn, cotton, and wheat, with soil-conserving grasses and cover crops.

All of these strategies had the ultimate goal of convincing farmers of the wisdom of managing their lands together as a single large ecological unit. "Ours was a new type of program in which success depended on making use of all available and effective measures of control, singly or in combination, as needed in order to establish durable conservation on all the land," Bennett

decided to devote an entire novel to their struggles. *The Grapes of Wrath* was published three years later, and it was an immediate sensation with readers from coast to coast.

*The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of Tom Joad and his family. As the novel progresses, the Joads lose their Oklahoma farm in the Dust Bowl, fight to reach California, and then confront numerous hardships in their newly adopted homeland. Steinbeck's novel was immediately hailed as a masterpiece of American literature, and it has shaped perceptions of the entire Depression era for multiple generations of readers. In 1940 director John Ford released a film version of the Steinbeck novel. This movie, also called *The Grapes of Wrath,* starred Henry Fonda as Tom Joad and was a huge critical and popular success.

After *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck published several other popular, highly-praised literary works, including *The Pearl* (1947) and *East of Eden* (1952). During World War II Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune.*

He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died six years later in New York City, on December 20, 1968.

later wrote. "I consider the soil conservation districts movement one of the most important developments in the whole history of agriculture."[16]

Historians agree that the programs implemented by the Soil Conservation Service in the 1930s played a hugely important role in the gradual recovery of large tracts of Great Plains farmland. Another big factor was a return to more normal rainfall levels in the late 1930s. In addition, farmers became less vulnerable to drought as advances in scientific knowledge and new well-drilling technology gave them increased access to vast underground aquifers.

Still, some scholars believe that Great Plains farmers and government agencies never fully embraced the land conservation ideals for which Bennett and Wallace fought. Historians point out that although the Roosevelt administration originally intended to take 75 million acres of Great Plains farmland out of production, only 11 million acres were ever purchased. And although

some of this acreage was eventually designated as National Grasslands and allowed to revert to a wild state, other parts of the former Dust Bowl remained intensely vulnerable to exploitative, destructive farming practices in post-World War II America.

---

**Notes:**

1 Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, p. 111.
2 Egan, pp. 2, 5.
3 Crum, Lola Adams, Interview with Brandon Case, June 23, 1998. *Ford County Dust Bowl Oral History Project,* Ford County Historical Society, Dodge City, KS, http://skyways.lib.ks.us/orgs/fordco/dustbowl.
4 Watkins, T.H. *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America.* New York: Owl Books, 2000, p. 428.
5 Svobida, Lawrence. *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas.* Reprint. Originally published as *An Empire of Dust,* 1940. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986, pp. 59, 195.
6 Egan, pp. 220-21.
7 Quoted in Lowitt, Richard. *The New Deal and the West.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 35.
8 Quoted in Egan, p. 256.
9 Egan, p. 111.
10 Gregory, James N. “The Dust Bowl Migration: Poverty Stories, Race Stories.” In *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California,* [companion website], available online at http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/exodus/.
11 Quoted in Gregory, James, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 7, 8.
12 Quoted in Gregory, *American Exodus,* p. 34.
13 Taylor, Paul, “Again the Covered Wagon,” *Survey Graphic,* July 1935, p. 348.
14 Taylor, p. 348.
15 Bennett, Hugh Hammond, and W.R. Chapline. *Soil Erosion: A National Menace.* U.S. Department of Agriculture Circular No. 33. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928, p. 22.
16 Bennett, Hugh Hammond. *The Hugh Bennett Lectures.* Raleigh, NC: The Agricultural Foundation, North Carolina State College, June 1959, pp. 25, 28.

**Frances Perkins (1880-1965)**
*Progressive Activist and Secretary of Labor during the Great Depression*

Fannie Coralie Perkins (who adopted the name of "Frances" as an adult) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 10, 1880. She grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts, in a prosperous family that encouraged her to pursue her education. As a student at the all-female Mount Holyoke College, she displayed both an impressive intellect and natural leadership abilities; she was elected president of her 1902 graduating class. That same year, she attended a campus lecture by Florence Kelley, the secretary of the National Consumers League. The league was a progressive organization devoted to improving working conditions for industrial laborers, and Kelley's presentation inspired Perkins to pursue a career in the field of social work.

After graduation Perkins went to Chicago, where she worked as a teacher and social worker. In 1909 she moved to New York City to conduct research on slum conditions for the New York School of Philanthropy and to complete graduate studies at Columbia University. Shortly after celebrating her 30th birthday in 1910, she found herself working alongside her role model, Florence Kelley, after being hired as the secretary of the New York City Consumers League.

## Advocate for Workplace Reform

Devoting herself to the organization's legislative lobbying efforts, Perkins scored a major victory in 1912 when she helped obtain passage of the so-called 54-Hour Bill. This legislation placed new limits on the working hours of women and children in the state of New York. She also established herself as an authority on hazardous workplace conditions in unregulated factories and other businesses. The danger of some of these factories became tragically clear on the afternoon of March 25, 1911, when the Triangle Waist Company, a garment factory in Manhattan, went up in flames, killing more than 140

people. Perkins was among the horrified onlookers who watched workers leap from the windows of the blazing building to escape the flames.

After the Triangle tragedy, a group of concerned citizens formed the Committee on Safety of the City of New York, and Perkins was named its executive secretary. In that capacity, she became deeply involved in the work of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, which conducted one of the nation's most thorough studies of occupational conditions. Its findings led to the passage of 36 new statutes, and Perkins later commented that "I wrote with [my] own hands most of the New York State labor law that was finally passed."[1]

Perkins's personal life during this time was turbulent. She married Paul C. Wilson in 1913, though she opted to retain her own name because of her feminist beliefs. After giving birth to a daughter in 1916, she intended to focus on her family. In 1918, however, her husband showed increased signs of mental illness (he spent the rest of his life in and out of mental institutions). Wilson's health problems forced Perkins to return to full-time employment to provide for her family.

## Joining the Cabinet

In 1918 Perkins was named to the New York State Industrial Commission. She served on the commission for most of the 1920s, but in 1929 she was promoted to industrial commissioner by New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. Perkins also took a leading role in overseeing the relief programs that Roosevelt organized across the state after the Great Depression struck in 1929.

By the time that Roosevelt decided to run for president in 1932, Perkins had become one of his most valuable and trusted lieutenants. She helped him hone the economic message that was at the heart of his campaign, and when he won the presidential election in November 1932, she was frequently mentioned as a candidate for a cabinet post in the Roosevelt administration. The speculation proved true, for Roosevelt offered her the position of secretary of labor. "I had more sense of obligation to [accept the nomination] for the sake of other women than I did for any other one thing," she said.[2]

Perkins wasted little time in making her presence felt in the Roosevelt administration. Within a few weeks, she unveiled an ambitious slate of programs addressing everything from public works proposals to unemployment relief and new wage and hour regulations. Many of these proposals would become centerpieces of Roosevelt's so-called New Deal social reform initiatives.

Over the next few years, Perkins helped shepherd many of these proposals into law. In many cases, she served as an arbitrator who created unified plans from the swirl of competing proposals generated by Roosevelt's advisors. She was especially important in shaping and passing important New Deal reforms such as the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), the 1935 Social Security Act, and the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. Perkins was proud of her work on all of these laws, but she was especially thrilled by the passage of the Social Security Act. She proclaimed it to be one of the wisest and most compassionate acts of legislation ever to be passed in the United States.

## Labor Unrest and Controversy

As labor secretary throughout the Great Depression, Perkins became personally involved in many of the strikes and labor disturbances that took place during the 1930s. In most of these labor-management disputes, she remained resolutely neutral. She also opposed using federal and state troops to break up strikes because she felt that such a move would signal support for management—and possibly trigger violence. In 1934, for example, she refused to order troops into San Francisco to end a general strike called by city unions. She maintained a similar stance during the famous 1936-1937 sit-down strike by workers at General Motors in Flint, Michigan. Throughout this tense period, Perkins refused to condemn the work stoppage or the United Auto Workers leadership. Instead, she patiently promoted a negotiated settlement between the strikers and management.

Perkins's moderate stance made her deeply unpopular with some conservatives. These critics—who also loathed Roosevelt and the New Deal programs he championed—accused Perkins of being sympathetic to radicals who were determined to destroy America's economic system. These criticisms reached their peak in the late 1930s, when a labor organizer named Harry Bridges, who was not a U.S. citizen, was accused of being a Communist. Many people wanted Bridges to be deported immediately. Perkins, who oversaw the Immigration Service as part of her duties, ignored these heated demands. Instead, she followed the standard legal and judicial procedures in the matter and refused to rush to judgement on the deportation. Her stance drew the wrath of members of the House Un-American Activities Committee, who threatened Perkins with impeachment on the charge that she was obstructing justice. She was quickly vindicated in Judicial Committee hearings, however (the case against Bridges

also fell apart around this time, though he would battle the U.S. government in court on multiple occasions over the next few decades).

Nonetheless, rumors and smear campaigns continued to focus on Perkins. Opponents often claimed that she was a Communist. Others sought to take advantage of deep levels of anti-Semitism in some parts of the country by charging that she was actually a Jew who had been born in Russia. Perkins calmly recited evidence that she had been born in the United States, and she declared at one point that "if I were a Jew, I would make no secret of it." Defenders also insisted that critics distorted her record. They observed that although Perkins championed many progressive reforms for workers, she often publicly disagreed with organized labor leaders on various subjects. She even opposed the 1935 National Labor Relations Act—a huge milestone in the advance of labor rights—on the grounds that some of its provisions were unfair to business.

By the late 1930s, Perkins had grown weary of the nasty political fighting and long hours of work that her position required. She expressed a desire to leave her post at the end of Roosevelt's second and third terms, but in both cases, the president convinced her to stay on. She did not leave the Department of Labor until May 1945, a few months after Roosevelt's death. The following year, President Harry S. Truman appointed her to the Civil Service Commission, where she served for seven years.

In 1952 Perkins's husband passed away. A short time later she returned to her first occupation—teaching. She became a visiting professor at Cornell University and later came to reside on the campus. Perkins continued her classroom activities until just weeks before her death on May 14, 1965, at the age of 85.

**Sources:**

Martin, George. *Madam Secretary, Frances Perkins*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Mohr, Lillian Holman. *Frances Perkins: "That Woman in FDR's Cabinet!"* Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.: North River Press, 1979.

Pasachoff, Naomi. *Frances Perkins: Champion of the New Deal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Severn, Bill. *Frances Perkins: A Member of the Cabinet*. New York: Hawthorn, 1976.

---

**Notes:**

1 Quoted in Pasachoff, Naomi. *Frances Perkins: Champion of the New Deal.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 34.

2 Quoted in Pasachoff, p. 73.

## Remembering "Black Sunday"

*In 1931 an extended drought settled over America's Great Plains. This drought, combined with years of careless farming practices, created terrible dust storms in subsequent years. By 1934 and 1935 conditions had become so dreadful in parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas, and New Mexico that thousands of farming families simply fled the region, which became known as the Dust Bowl. The worst of the storms of this grim period in American history took place on April 14, 1935. This "Black Sunday" storm terrorized towns and farms across a large swath of the Great Plains. The following is an account of the Black Sunday storm from Harley Holladay, who was thirteen years old when the storm rolled over his family's farm outside of Dodge City, Kansas.*

It was such a nice clear Sunday. We had hung the laundry out on the line that morning, and mother had washed the upholstered chairs and set them out to dry. I walked up to our horse pond and had picked up a stone to skip across the water. While I was throwing I happened to look up and noticed this long gray line on the horizon. It looked like a thunderhead, but it was too long and flat and it was rolling toward me way too fast. I sprinted to the house to tell my parents that the dust was coming but they wouldn't believe it until they went outside and looked for themselves. Then we started hauling in clothes as fast as we could, just snatching them in armloads and running. The cloud caught me outside with a load of clothes. I couldn't see anything at all. It was black as night. I got down on my hands and knees and tried to crawl toward the house. I finally felt the porch, and reached up and opened the screen door and crawled inside.

For a long time it was total blackness inside, except for one thing. When I looked out the window I could see our radio antenna outlined in static electricity. There were little balls of fire all over it caused by dirt particles rubbing together. It was spooky. Finally the sun began to shine as a faint glow of orange light coming in through the windows. As it got lighter, I could see baskets and brush sailing past us. It felt like we were flying through space.

[When the storm was over they stepped outside. Dust was heaped in the yard like sand dunes in a desert. Cattle and farm equipment were buried. Jackrabbits loped through the dunes. As always, Harley and his family cleared their throats and dug out.]

---

"Harley Holladay: Black Sunday" from *We Were There Too! Young People in U.S. History* by Phillip Hoose. Copyright © 2001 Phillip Hoose. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, LLC.

I guess we had gotten used to it, because it had been that way for a long time. Our windows were taped up and the cracks in our walls were stuffed but nothing kept the dust out. Whenever we ate a meal we had to turn our plates and cups and glasses over until the exact time the meal was served. Even then, you could write your name in dust on your glass by the time the meal was done. Every night before we went to bed we scooped a little water into our noses and blew out the dirt. We put covers over our faces and a sheet over my little sister's crib. Some people slept with masks on.

You didn't want to get caught out in a storm, either. Some families strung clothesline between the house and the barn so that they could always find their way back to the house. We always made sure we had food and water with us when we left the house. When the dust started flying and I was away from the home I tried to find a fenceline to follow. My father used my brother and I as guides when he was plowing with the tractor in the fields. I'd stand at one end of the field with a kerosene light and my brother would shine a light at the other end. My dad would try to drive straight between us. The dust came so fast that it would cover up the tractor's tracks.

I was in World War II when the rain came back to Kansas, but I was still thinking a lot about the farm. One night in Italy I had the most wonderful dream. I was back on the farm in Kansas and we were having a rainshower at last. It was a big, loud thunderstorm, with buckets of rain just soaking the ground. I was so happy. And then someone was shaking me awake and there were tracer bullets and anti-aircraft fire all around. We were under attack. But in my dream the thunder of gunfire was a great blessing. That's how much rain meant to a Dust Bowl boy.

**Source:** Holladay, Harley, interview with Phillip Hoose. *We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History.* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001.

# IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

**Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA)**
New Deal program passed in 1933 that sought to boost farm prices by reducing production of key crops.

**America First Committee**
Influential isolationist group in the United States that argued against America's entry into World War II.

**Antitrust**
Laws and legislative measures concerned with regulating business to protect against monopolies.

**Bank Holiday**
Temporary bank closures used to protect banks from massive depositor withdrawals.

**Banking Act of 1933**
Also known as the Glass-Steagall Act, this law instituted major reforms designed to shore up banks and protect the savings of depositors.

**Bennett, Hugh Hammond (1881-1960)**
Chief of the Soil Conservation Service during the Great Depression.

**Capitalism**
Economic system based on private ownership of manufacturing, goods, and services, with limited regulation of business practices.

**Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)**
New Deal agency founded in 1933 that put millions of young Americans to work on conservation and land development projects.

**Commodities**
Goods such as farm crops or minerals that can be traded or bought and sold.

# CHRONOLOGY

### 1929

March—Herbert Hoover succeeds fellow Republican Calvin Coolidge as president of the United States. *See p. 16.*

October—The Stock Market Crash of 1929 begins on October 21; it wipes out the savings of millions of Americans and shatters the U.S. economy over the course of the ensuing eight days. *See p. 18.*

### 1930

March—President Herbert Hoover assures Americans that the nation's economy is back on the upswing and fundamentally sound. *See p. 24.*

June—The disastrous Hawley-Smoot Act is passed, imposing steep tariffs on a wide range of imported goods and materials. *See p. 26.*

More than 1,300 banks close their doors across the United States. *See p. 27.*

### 1931

February—Food riots break out in several cities across the United States. *See p. 29.*

Unemployment and foreclosures on homes and businesses soar to record levels.

### 1932

January—The Reconstruction Finance Corporation is created to provide loans to banks, insurance companies, railroads, and other lending institutions. *See p. 27.*

March—Unemployed auto workers clash with police and company security forces at the Ford Motor Company's plant in River Rouge, Michigan. *See p. 30.*

May—The Bonus March of World War I veterans begins in Portland, Oregon; the march ultimately brings thousands of veterans to Washington, D.C., in a failed attempt to collect "bonus" pay for their military service. *See p. 37.*

June—The Revenue Act of 1932 is passed, raising tax rates on individuals and corporations alike. *See p. 37.*

November—Democratic nominee Franklin D. Roosevelt easily defeats Herbert Hoover to claim the presidency of the United States. *See p. 38.*

### 1933

January—Adolf Hitler is appointed chancellor of Germany.

# SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. 1931. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000. This is a reprint of a book written in the early stages of the Depression by a top journalist of the era. Regarded as a classic of American history, it describes the Roaring Twenties and the Crash of 1929 in vivid color.

Cohen, Robert, ed. *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. This sampling of letters received by the First Lady during the Depression shows the deep impact that the Depression had on America's children.

Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. A bestseller, this book describes life on the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl for those farmers and storeowners that decided to stay and try to survive.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. Available online at www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu. This World Wide Web site provides online access to a large selection of public papers, audio and video materials, and photographs covering various aspects of the Roosevelt presidency.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. A fascinating account of the Roosevelt marriage and its ups and downs by one of the country's most famous historians.

Leuchtenberg, William E. *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. This work provides an excellent overview of Roosevelt's performance as president, his New Deal agenda, and the beliefs that led him to pursue his reform policies.

New Deal Network. Available online at www.newdeal.feri.org. This research and teaching resource is devoted to the public works and art projects of the New Deal. It includes a wide range of materials, from Dust Bowl oral histories to art works sponsored by the Works Progress Administration and other New Deal agencies.

Watkins, T.H. *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America*. New York: Owl Books, 2000. This wide-ranging popular history discusses all major events of the Depression in a colorful, informative manner.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY


## Books

Allen, Frederick Lewis. *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. 1931. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.

Badger, Anthony J. *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.

Blum, John M. *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976.

Brands, H.W. *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

Collier, Peter. *The Roosevelts: An American Saga*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.

Davis, Kenneth S. *FDR: The New Deal Years, 1933-1937*. New York: Random House, 1986.

Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Great Crash, 1929*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.

Garraty, John. *The Great Depression*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Gregory, James, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Hunt, John G., ed. *The Essential Franklin D. Roosevelt*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1995.

Leuchtenberg, William E. *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Parrish, Michael. *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression*. New York: Norton, 1992.

Polenberg, Richard. *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000.

Rauchway, Eric. *The Great Depression and the New Deal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Sitkoff, Harvard. *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue. Vol. 1: The Depression Years*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Svobida, Lawrence. *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas*. Reprint. Originally published as *An Empire of Dust*, 1940. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986.

# INDEX


## A

AAA. *See* Agricultural Adjustment Act
ACP. *See* Agricultural Conservation Program
ACWA. *See* Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America
AFL. *See* American Federation of Labor
African Americans, 25, 31, 82, 111
relationship to Roosevelt, 88, 138, 139
Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), 46-48
Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), 72
*A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States,* 52
Allen, Frederick Lewis, 9, 12, 24
Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), 87
America First Committee, 96-97
American Federation of Labor (AFL), 86
American Liberty League, 90
Anderson, Sherwood, 117
Armstrong, Louise, 32
automobile industry, 9-11, 86-87

## B

Babson, Roger, 18
Banking Act of 1933, 44, 45
banking industry, 15-16, 21, 27-29, 33, 39, 43-45, 170-73, 195-96
Barnes, Julius H., 24
Baruch, Bernard M., 129
Bennett, Hugh Hammond, 71-74
senate testimony, 181-88
Berle, Adolf A., 45
Bethune, Mary McLeod, 88
Black Sunday storm, 63-65, 176-77, 179-80
Black Tuesday, 20-21
Blue Eagle, 52, 131
Bonus March, 36 (ill.), 37-38, 123
Bridges, Harry, 135-36
Byrne, James, 103

## C

CCC. *See* Civilian Conservation Corps
Chapline, W.R., 71
Childs, Marquis W., 109
Chrysler Corporation, 26, 86
Churchill, Winston, 96, 107, 128
CIO. *See* Congress of Industrial Organizations
Civil Works Aministration (CWA), 126
Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), 54-56, 55 (ill.), 111
Dust Bowl work, 71-72, 186
testimonial, 167-69
Cohen, Simon, 202-04
Committee for Industrial Organizations. *See* Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)
Communications Workers of America (CWA), 87
Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), 87