

Surviving the Great Depression

READING FOCUS

- In what ways did Americans pull together to survive the Great Depression?
- What signs of change did Americans begin to notice in the early 1930s?

MAIN IDEA

Americans survived the Great Depression with determination and even humor. They helped one another, looked for solutions, and waited for the hard times to pass.

KEY TERMS

penny auction
Twenty-first Amendment

TAKING NOTES

As you read, prepare an outline of this section. Use Roman numerals to indicate the major headings of this section, capital letters for the subheadings, and numbers for the supporting details.

I. Americans Pull Together

A. Farmers Stick Together

1. Worked together to minimize impact of Great Depression
2. _____
3. _____


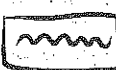



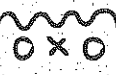


B. Young People Ride the Rails

1. Young people left home to seek a better life.
2. _____
3. _____

VIEWING HISTORY Traveling hobos gave each other helpful information about certain areas with symbols such as these. They were usually written on sidewalks, fences, or buildings using chalk or coal.

Drawing Inferences How did such a symbol system help hobos and the homeless? Why do you think they wanted to help each other?

Hobo Symbols

	Kind-hearted woman lives here		Bad-tempered owner
	Food for work		Unsafe place
	Good place for a handout		Good water
	Can sleep in barn		Doctor won't charge

Setting the Scene No one who lived through the Great Depression ever forgot it. Long after the economy rebounded, many from the “Depression generation,” even those who recovered enough to live a very comfortable life, would continue to pinch pennies as if financial ruin were just around the corner. Many Americans avoided buying on credit, instead saving for years to pay cash for needed items. Others even stuffed money under their mattresses rather than trust their life savings to banks.

Americans Pull Together

Not all the memories of the Depression were bad or despairing, as one reporter noted:

“The great majority of Americans may be depressed. They may not be well pleased with the way business and government have been carried on, and they may not be at all sure that they know exactly how to remedy the trouble. They may be feeling dispirited. But there is one thing they are not, and that is—beaten.”

—Journalist Gerald W. Johnson, 1932

Throughout the country people pulled together to help one another. Tenant groups formed to protest rent increases and evictions. Neighbors, in difficult circumstances themselves, helped those they saw as worse off than themselves. One woman remembered:

“There were many beggars, who would come to your back door, and they would say they were hungry. I wouldn't give them money because I didn't have it. But I did take them in and put them in my kitchen and give them something to eat.”

—Depression survivor Kitty McCulloch

McCulloch also gave one beggar a pinstripe suit belonging to her husband, who, she explained, already had three others.

Farmers Stick Together Farmers also worked together to minimize the impact of the Depression. When a farmer was unable to pay the mortgage on his farm, the bank would foreclose on the property and then sell it at an auction. In some farm communities, local farmers met secretly and agreed to keep bids low during the auction. In what were known as **penny auctions**, farmers would bid mere pennies on land and machines auctioned by the banks in order to help their struggling neighbors. Buyers then returned the farms and machinery to their original owners. As one farmer recalled about his farming community:

“The aim of our organization was pure survival. All the farmer asked was more time to see him through the depression years. If they won, they had saved (temporarily at least) their home and means of livelihood, and the means of paying their just debts. If they lost, they would be no worse off. They knew they had nothing to lose, so they decided to fight. . . .”

—Harry Haugland

In the first two months of 1933, more than 70 foreclosure sales on farms were blocked by penny auctions. The success of penny auctions as well as the threat of violence at some farm auctions led some states to pass laws suspending foreclosures on farms. For example, in February 1933, the Iowa state legislature passed a “foreclosure moratorium law,” which gave farmers more time to pay back their mortgages.

Young People Ride the Rails At the height of the Great Depression, many young people left their homes, either out of necessity or the desire to seek a better life. In the mid-1930s roughly 250,000 teenagers were living on the road, illegally riding the rails of freight trains. Some rode the rails to find work; others hungered for adventure. Clarence Lee, who left home when he was 16, recalled:

“I wanted to stay home and fight poverty with my family. But my father told me I had to leave. . . . But I didn’t have it in my mind to leave until he told me, ‘Go fend for yourself. I cannot afford to have you around any longer.’”

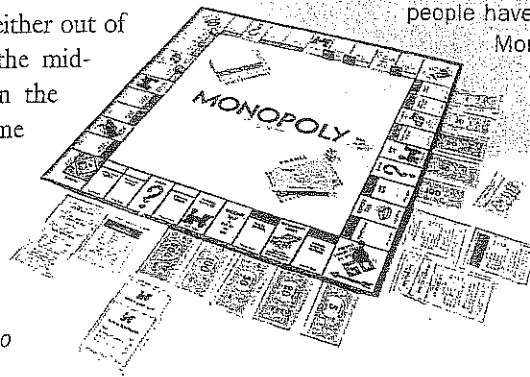
—Clarence Lee

Jim Mitchell also left home at 16. He was not forced to leave, but he could not deal with the pressures of home life after his father lost his job and was unable to support the family. “The quickest and easiest way to get out,” he recalled, “was go jump a train and go somewhere.”

Young people riding the rails faced danger every day. They were vulnerable to train-related injuries, the possibility of being arrested by police, or even the threat of being shot at by angry farmers. These hobos, as they are sometimes called, witnessed the Depression in all parts of the country firsthand. Many who rode the rails described their experiences as some of the loneliest times of their

Focus on CULTURE

Monopoly With everyday life so difficult during the Depression, people needed a way to get their minds off their troubles. In response to this need, Charles B. Darrow, an unemployed man living in Germantown, Pennsylvania, created a compelling board game. Called **Monopoly®**, the game allowed people to live the fantasy of acquiring land, houses, and hotels that they could rent or sell to fellow players. Darrow brought Monopoly to executives at Parker Brothers, a leading board game company, to see if they would produce it. The company rejected Darrow’s game, saying that it had 52 design errors. Determined to make the game a success, Darrow worked on correcting the flaws and produced Monopoly on his own. Darrow sold so many sets so quickly that Parker Brothers reconsidered its decision and agreed to produce it. The game was introduced in 1935 and was a bestseller in its first year. Since then, an estimated 500 million people have played Monopoly.



READING CHECK

Why did so many young people ride the rails in the 1930s?

READING CHECK

What political solutions did some Americans seek in the 1930s?

lives. Yet, most managed to survive and pull themselves together when the Depression came to an end.

Seeking Political Solutions As bad as conditions were, few Americans called for violent political change. In Europe, economic problems brought riots and political upheaval, but in the United States most citizens trusted the democratic process to handle their problems. As one writer wryly observed:

“Ten million unemployed continue law-abiding. No riots, no trouble, no multi-millionaires cooked and served with cranberry sauce, alas.”

—William Saroyan, 1936

For some Americans, however, radical and reform movements offered new solutions to the country's problems, by promising a fairer distribution of wealth. The Communist Party had about 14,000 members, mainly intellectuals and labor organizers. In the 1932 election, the Communist candidate polled just over 100,000 votes. Socialists, who called for gradual social and economic changes rather than revolution, did better. Their presidential candidate, Norman Thomas, won 881,951 votes in 1932, about 2.2 percent of the total vote.

Voting figures and party membership do not reflect the notable interest in radical and reform movements in the 1930s. Those who were part of those movements remember the decade as a high point of cooperation among different groups of Americans—students, workers, writers, artists, and professionals of all races. They worked together for social justice in cases such as that of the Scottsboro boys.

Depression Humor For the most part, Americans gritted their teeth and waited out the hard times. Jokes and cartoons helped people through their troubles. The term “Hooverville” was at first a joke. People who slept on park benches huddled under “Hoover blankets”—old newspapers. Empty pockets turned inside out were “Hoover flags.” When Babe Ruth was criticized for requesting a salary of \$80,000, higher than Hoover's, he joked, “I had a better year than he did.”

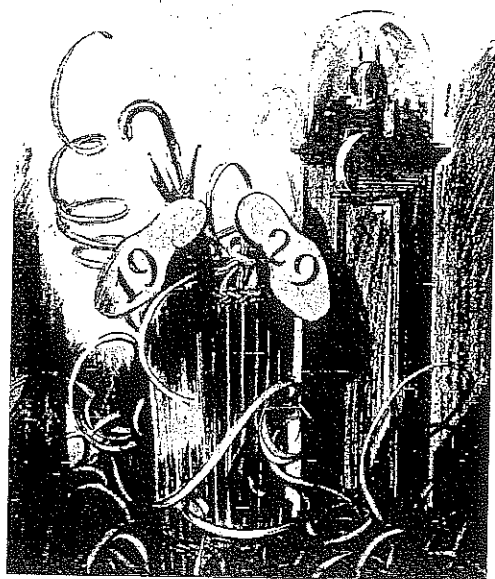
People fought despair by laughing at it. In 1929, humorist Will Rogers quipped, “When Wall Street took that tail spin, you had to stand in line to get a window to jump out of.” A cartoon that showed two men jumping out of a window arm-in-arm was captioned “The speculators who had a joint account.”

Signs of Change

Looking back, we know that the Great Depression began to ease when the United States entered into World War II in 1941. Americans suffering through the Depression, of course, had no idea when the hard times would end. They looked for signs of change, and even in the early 1930s there were some.

Prohibition Is Repealed In February 1933, just 15 years after it passed the Eighteenth Amendment banning the sale of alcoholic beverages, Congress passed the **Twenty-first Amendment**, repealing Prohibition. The amendment was ratified by the end of the year.

Some people, including President Hoover, regretted the repeal, but most welcomed it as an end to a failed social experiment and as a curb on gangsters who profited from bootlegging. Control of alcohol returned to the states, eight of which chose to continue the ban on liquor sales.



INTERPRETING POLITICAL CARTOONS Showing the darker side of Depression humor, an end-of-the-year cartoon in *Life* magazine summed up the hopes and disasters of 1929. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did Americans use humor to fight their despair?

The Empire State Building For many, a dramatic symbol of hope was the new Empire State Building, begun in 1930. John J. Raskob, the developer of the gleaming new skyscraper, won the race to build the world's tallest building. Some 2,500 to 4,000 people worked on its construction on any given day. The cost of the construction was about \$41 million (including land). Because of the Depression, projected building costs were cut in half.

The 102-story Empire State Building soared 1,250 feet into the sky and was topped with a mooring mast for blimps. The building's 67 elevators, traveling 1,000 feet per minute, brought visitors to its observation deck. The building officially opened on May 1, 1931, when President Hoover pressed a button in Washington, D.C. that turned on the building lights, illuminating the New York City skyline. On the first Sunday after it opened, more than 4,000 people paid a dollar each to make the trip to the top.

The End of an Era By the mid-1930s, it was clear that an era was ending. One by one, symbols of the 1920s faded away. In 1931, organized crime gangster Al Capone was at last brought down, convicted of tax evasion and sent to prison. The frugal former President Calvin Coolidge, who presided over the freewheeling prosperity of the 1920s, died in January 1933. Baseball legend Babe Ruth retired in 1935. The Depression-era labor policies of automaker Henry Ford, once admired for his efficiency, made him labor's prime enemy.

In 1932, the nation was horrified when the infant son of aviation hero Charles Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh was kidnapped and murdered. Somehow this tragedy seemed to echo the nation's distressed condition and its fall from the heights of its energy and heroism in the 1920s.



VIEWING HISTORY Workers like the man shown above looked out over New York City as they labored to complete the Empire State Building. **Determining Relevance** How was the Empire State Building a symbol of hope?

Section

3

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. What were **penny auctions** and how did they help farmers overcome some of the hardships of the Great Depression?
2. Why was there an interest among some Americans in radical and reform movements? How did American involvement in these movements differ from the political movements occurring in some parts of Europe at the same time?
3. Why was the **Twenty-first Amendment** passed? Why do you think it was passed during the Great Depression?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

4. **Making Comparisons** Cite three events in American history that reflect the same qualities of cooperation and endurance exhibited by Americans during the Depression.
5. **Writing an Opinion** In a time of crisis, the building of an expensive skyscraper such as the Empire State Building might have been seen as wasteful. Instead, many Americans found it inspiring. What might account for this view of the project?



Take It to the NET

Activity: Virtual Field Trip Take a tour showing the construction of the Empire State Building. What kinds of conditions did the workers encounter? Write a poem or an essay based on the images you see. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

www.phschool.com