

# TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

A partnership between Portland State University, Portland Public Schools and the Beaverton School District, funded by the U.S. Department of Education

## HISTORICAL TOPIC (HIGH SCHOOL)

### The Great Depression and the 1930s

One of the great accomplishments of the federal government during the 1930s was to jump-start the full incorporation of the South and West into the national economy. Long treated as economic colonies of the Northeast, the South and West were areas with pockets of extreme poverty, boom-bust economies, and an inadequate industrial base. The public works programs of the 1930s helped these regions move toward economic maturity and laid the groundwork for the postwar rise of the Sunbelt.

The Pacific Northwest was one of the focal points for the remaking of the American economy. The great Columbia River dams, irrigation projects, and rural electrification transformed the rural economy, and Columbia River hydropower facilitated the industrial boom of World War II.

*The Great Depression topic contains the subtopics listed below. Each subtopic includes a narrative with highlighted text [**resources**] indicating that additional support material is available for viewing and/or downloading including primary documents, maps, spreadsheet data and websites. To access the material go to the Teaching American History Website [access the website via the link on the Community Geography page <http://www.pdx.edu/ims/comgeo.html>] and use the links available on the **TOPIC AREAS [Great Depression]** page or the **QUICK NAVIGATION [Topic Resources and Map Resources]** pages.*

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## 1. The Trajectory of Crisis

### *Economic Weakness in the 1920s*

Sharp observers should have known that something was wrong even before the stock market crash of October 1929. The nation had suffered from chronic unemployment in coal mining and textile manufacturing through the 1920s. Farm income had also showed a steady decline. Great inequality in the distribution of wealth limited the ability of average Americans to purchase the consumer goods coming out of factory doors. A short recession in 1927 interrupted the booming sales of new cars and new houses, and the leading automotive and construction industries scrimped through 1928 and 1929 with flat markets.

A preview of future problems was the popping of the Florida land bubble in 1926. Completion of good highways into South Florida and the construction of luxury hotels triggered intense interest in property in Miami and Miami Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton, and a number of other towns that existed only in the imagination of promoters. The result was a classic land boom where everyone hoped to get rich by selling to someone else. One estimate counted 25,000 real estate agents operating out of 2,000 southern Florida offices at the peak of the boom. The pyramid collapsed in 1926 when the land sharks ran out of suckers. The most telling sign of the impending depression was the increasing number of bank failures in 1928 and 1929 as buyers defaulted on speculative loans.

No other city approached the Miami frenzy, but the real estate market was overbuilt nationwide by the end of the decade. Developers had platted land far in advance of demand on the suburban fringe of most cities. Speculators subdivided land, ran utility lines, and poured concrete for curbs and side-walks, but throngs of buyers failed to materialize. Atlanta's entrepreneurs put up more than a dozen major office buildings in the 1920s but found it difficult to fill the hundreds of thousands of square feet of new office space. Even New York's iconic Empire State Building would earn the nickname "Empty State Building" in the early 1930s.

### *The Crash*

The stock market crash in October 1929 erased years of speculative gains. Stock prices weakened in September and then plummeted on Black Tuesday (October 29th). Because many speculators had been purchasing stocks on credit in the expectation of gains, a rapidly declining market fed on itself, reaching a low point in 1932. By wiping out the liquidity of both consumers and business, the Crash cut the flow of credit, halting business investment and weakening the

banking system. Each facet of the financial crisis fed off the others, cutting the level of demand within the economy.

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**Spreadsheet Data:** 1920-1936 FDIC Data on Bank Failures

**PDF Map Poster:** 1928-1933 Bank Closures by County

### *Spiraling Depression*

The most direct measure of the building economic disaster after 1929 was the unemployment rate. National unemployment climbed from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 8.7 percent in 1930, 15.9 percent in 1931, 23.6 percent in 1932, and 24.9 percent in 1933. Mining towns and cities built around heavy industry felt the impact worst. More than 75 percent of the families in Butte, Montana, were on relief by the early 1930s. Steel mills in Gary, Indiana, laid off 90 percent of their workers. Cleveland's machine tool industry shut down completely for lack of factory expansion. Cities like Toledo, which supplied parts for automobiles, virtually collapsed. The unemployment figures for individual cities were little more than guesses, for even a person with a job might work short hours and two-day work weeks. Estimates for late 1931 and early 1932 put Philadelphia's army of unemployed at two hundred-fifty to three hundred thousand, Chicago's at six to seven hundred thousand, and New York's at eight hundred thousand to one million. Because African American workers were often the last-hired, first-fired by contracting businesses, the black unemployment rate reached 50 percent.

Impacts were severe in the Pacific Northwest because of dependence on resource production. Agriculture struggled in the 1920s, and real estate development and construction in Portland tapered off after 1925. Wood products collapsed when the California building market crashed. Many Portland mills closed in the late 1920s, before the Crash, and by 1931, Oregon lumber mills operated at only 38 percent of capacity. The value of new construction in Portland in 1933 and 1934 was only 6 percent of the record level of 1925. Two-thirds of small businesses were delinquent on their property taxes by 1933.

In Portland, the needs of the unemployed quickly overwhelmed the resources of the Community Chest [United Way]. The Catholic Women's League found temporary jobs for 500 women and girls in 1932. The Council of Jewish Women opened a bake shop to provide work for poor residents in South Portland. City and county officials hoped that small-scale public works projects would help, but quickly ran out of money and had to float bond issues to fund additional projects which could employ only a fraction of those wanting work. Nevertheless, by March 1933 there were 40,000 people without work in Portland and 24,000 families registered with the local employment bureau. There were shantytowns (nicknamed "Hoovervilles" all over the country) on vacant land at Guild's Lake, under the Ross Island Bridge, and in Sullivan's Gulch. In southern Oregon's Jackson County, the Good Government Congress was a radical movement that challenged the political establishment.

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**PDF Map Poster:** 1920-1940 Unemployment by County

## *Hoover and Roosevelt*

Herbert Hoover has had a bad rap. He did not ignore the Depression and intervened more actively than any previous president, but he was locked into an ideology of voluntary action. He tried unsuccessfully to persuade businesses to hold wages, and he relied on voluntary relief efforts, but the scale of the disaster overwhelmed private charities and local governments. He also pioneered with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which made loans to banks, railroads and other businesses so that they could booster recovery. Nevertheless, he remained limited by his fundamental ideological commitment to limited government. Government's role in the economy was to maintain a level playing field and provide emergency help, but not to substitute for private action and individual initiative. In these ways he looked back to the traditions of Progressivism from the 1900s and 1910s rather than forward toward the more active and welfare-oriented government that both Democrats and Republicans were to craft from the 1930s through 1970s.

For voters, the Hoover administration's steps were too little and too late. The Republicans knew in advance that they were unlikely to hold the White House or Congress. In the election of 1932, Franklin Roosevelt won an easy victory with 57 percent of the popular vote and the electoral votes of 42 of 48 states. Roosevelt had promised a "new deal for the American people" but no one—not even Roosevelt himself—knew what he actually planned.

## *The First New Deal*

Roosevelt took office with a flurry of activity. FDR's 1932 inaugural speech [[pdf text](#)] proclaimed that Americans had "nothing to fear except fear itself," and he acted to rebuild confidence by *doing things*. He did not have a consistent program, and his personal views in early 1933 were not dissimilar to those of Hoover. Nevertheless, he was an enormously pragmatic politician who was willing to try a wide range of ideas—some good and some bad. The result was the passage of a dozen major programs in the first hundred days of his administration.

In particular, Roosevelt's inauguration after the fourth long winter of discontent initiated a "new deal" for the new urban poor. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) [[website](#)] and the Civil Works Administration [[website](#)] put millions of people back to work within months. FERA money in New Orleans put twenty thousand men back to work on public construction projects. Robert and Helen Lynd described the impacts of the new programs on Muncie, Indiana—population 37,000.

When, on November 15, 1933, the blessed rain of Federal CWA funds began to fall upon the parched taxpayers, the straining city brought out projects big and little to catch the golden flood. "County Rushes Projects to Place Unemployed Persons on Government Payrolls" shouted the headlines. It was too good to be true! Thirty hours a week at fifty cents an hour...Nobody was talking then about the unbridled waste of Washington spending in the hands of "brainless bureaucrats"...By mid-January 1934, \$33,500 of Federal funds were pouring in each week to 1,840 workers...Then after \$350,000 of CWA funds had been expended locally, the FERA took up the load, and...paid in sums ranging up to \$16,000 to \$17,000 a week.

Taken together, the actions and programs of 1933 interrupted the speculative down spiral (e.g., runs on banks), offered quick relief to the destitute and unemployed, and otherwise worked with existing economic interests to prevent further failure. Mortgage and debt refinancing helped banks as well as individual homeowners and farmers. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, involving both crop subsidies and reductions in production, worked most effectively with large landowners, unfortunately often at the expense of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) [[website](#)] created industrial cartels in which existing business made agreements on sharing markets and production.

The following are the key legislative measures of the first 100 days as summarized by Jo Ann Argersinger in *Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression*:

- Emergency Banking Act: Stabilized the private banking system.
- Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA): Established a farm recovery program based on production controls and price supports.
- Emergency Farm Mortgage Act: Provided for refinancing farm mortgages.
- National Industrial Recovery Act: Established a national recovery program and authorized a public works program [[website](#)].
- Federal Emergency Relief Act: Established a national system of relief.
- Home Owners Loan Act: Protected homeowners from foreclosures by refinancing home loans.
- Glass-Steagall Act: Separated commercial and investment banking and guaranteed bank deposits.
- Tennessee Valley Authority Act: Established the TVA; provided for the planned development of the Tennessee River Valley [[website](#)].
- Civilian Conservation Corps Act: Established the CCC to provide work relief on reforestation and conservation projects.
- Farm Credit Act: Expanded agricultural credits and established Farm Credit Administration.
- Securities Act: Required full disclosure from stock exchanges.
- Wagner-Peyser Act: Created a U.S. Employment Service and encouraged states to create local public employment offices.

### ***The Second New Deal***

In 1935-36, with the economy partially recovered, the Roosevelt administration undertook longer range reforms that were designed to preserve the basic structures of American capitalism while mitigating some of its pernicious effects. In comparison to the programs of 1933-34, the Second New Deal had a decided tilt to the left, but it remained committed to the basic outlines of American society.

The key measures included the National Labor Relations Act (see the section on Labor), Social Security Act (see the section on Poverty), and a graduated income tax. Farmers benefited from the Resettlement Administration [[website](#)], which helped smaller farmers secure their own land

or resettle for urban jobs. The Rural Electrification Administration [**website**] literally brought light into dark rural nights, helping to bring much of the South and West into the modern world. Another action that helped to redress economic imbalance was the Housing Act of 1937 [**website**], which authorized federal funding for locally development public housing projects.

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**PDF Map Poster:** % Families with Radio (1920-1940)

**Web Resource:** LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AMERICAN MEMORY: America from the Depression to WWII 1935-1945 (contains large photo archive).

**Web Resources** for Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal:

**THE PRESIDENCY PROJECT:** Maintained by the University of California, Santa Barbara. This site contains a large archive of presidential papers (easily searchable by year) including text of the executive orders issued by FDR.

**NEW DEAL NETWORK:** An educational guide to the Great Depression of the 1930s, is sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute ([www.feri.org](http://www.feri.org)). The website contains a library, comprehensive photo archive, archives of interviews (available via digital media), a teacher resource page, discussion net, and special interest sections.

**FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM:** Contains information about the Depression-Era Acts and Administrations initiated by FDR including the National Recovery Act.

### ***Economic Weakness and Rearmament***

The New Deal of 1933-36 was an economic success that helped Roosevelt sweep to an easy victory in the 1936 elections. However, the U.S. dropped into another recession in 1937-38. It was nowhere as severe as the drop of 1929-33, but it showed the weakness of the private economy when government began to cut back spending (in part because the administration still held ideas of limited government and had weak grasp of economic theory). It required a new wave of relief spending through the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and Public Works Administration (PWA) to reverse the slide (see the section on Poverty and Social Change). In some analyses, it took rearmament in 1940 and 1941 to truly end the Great Depression.

## 2. Political Transformation

### *Demagogues of the Early 1930s*

In 1932 and 1933, the American political equilibrium was challenged by grassroots populist movements that were far more radical than Roosevelt and the Democrats. The same intense dissatisfaction with economic inequality that swept Roosevelt into office generated wide support for mesmerizing figures such as Father Coughlin, Francis Townsend, and Huey Long [websites]. Coughlin was the “radio priest” from Detroit, who used the new mass medium of radio to broadcast a message that mixed anti-capitalism and anti-semitism, blaming Jewish bankers for the ills of the world. Townsend argued that the way to restart the economy was to grant old age pensions to all older Americans. The idea was especially popular in California, where support for EPIC (End Poverty in California) almost helped muckraking author Upton Sinclair win the statehouse.

The most interesting of the lot was Huey Long, governor and senator from Louisiana. In state politics, he challenged the New Orleans establishment on behalf of rural rednecks and brought substantial improvements of roads and schools to rural (white) Louisianians. He also authored the best-selling book Every Man a King, which called for radical redistribution of wealth. He was the most serious threat to outflank the New Deal until gunned down by a local enemy in Louisiana in 1934. He was memorably fictionalized as Willie Stark by Robert Penn Warren in the novel All the King's Men.

### *The “Tenement Trail” and Working Class Voters*

The demagogues of the early 1930s faded by mid-decade, but a more quiet political revolution continued. The federal programs to assist and reemploy city dwellers were both a cause and a consequence of a political revolution in American cities. As late as 1924, the Republican party had expected to capture the majority of urban votes. By 1932, the situation had reversed. The nation’s twelve largest cities were New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Detroit, Baltimore, Cleveland, Boston, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. The net Republican plurality of 1,252,000 votes from these cities in the 1924 presidential election became a net Democratic plurality of 38,000 in 1928, 1,910,000 in 1932, and 3,608,000 in 1936. The shift toward Democratic cities started with the unsuccessful presidential campaign of New York Democrat Al Smith against Republican Herbert Hoover in 1928. Topped with a derby hat, speaking with the unmistakable accent of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, and professing the Roman Catholic faith, Smith had a natural appeal to second-generation Americans—the children of the great migration of 1890 to 1915—as they came of age and voted for the first time. Franklin Roosevelt capitalized on the new allegiance in 1932, when a dozen leading cities went Democratic for the first time in decades. In ten of them, the Democratic margin was enough to carry the entire state for the Roosevelt-Gamer ticket.

The result in 1936 was the consolidation and strengthening of the Democratic hold on city voters. The 1928 and 1932 campaigns had shown the Democratic appeal to Catholic and Jewish voters, particularly in the Northeast. In 1936, Roosevelt picked up a net of 1,700,000 additional

votes in southern, western, and middle western cities populated largely by native-born Americans. White Protestant workers decided to vote their pocketbooks rather than their prejudices, joining in common cause with big city Catholics.

### *African American Voters*

At the same time, black voters decided that they could no longer support the party of Abraham Lincoln when it had become the party of Herbert Hoover and Alf Landon, the Republican candidate in 1936. Roosevelt's 25 percent of the black vote in 1932 grew to 75 percent in 1936. The national political calculus was set for a generation, with racial minorities, ethnic groups, and industrial workers providing the electoral support for the city-oriented programs of Roosevelt's New Deal, Harry Truman's Fair Deal, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Along with white ethnic voters and increasing numbers of Mexican Americans, they constituted the "New Deal Coalition" that dominated U.S. politics into the 1960s.

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**PDF Documents:** Statistics on the Election of 1936 (by State Precinct); Political Divisions of the US Congress (1890-present) Chart

**PDF Map:** Map of the Presidential Election Results 1932 and 1936; Historic Presidential Elections (1796-1968)

### *Supreme Court Battles*

One of the most interesting political fronts of the 1930s was the battle between FDR and the Supreme Court. The Court, made up of appointees from the 1910s and 1920s, was intensely conservative. It overturned both the NRA and the AAA as unconstitutional extensions of federal power. It denied that the federal government had the right to build housing for the poor, forcing it to work through local housing authorities.

Fearing the same sort of veto of measures like Social Security, Roosevelt in 1937 proposed a bill that would have allowed the president to appoint an additional Supreme Court Justice for every sitting justice over the age of seventy, up to a total of six. The size of the Supreme Court was set by Congress, and had been changed several times in the early years of the new republic, but the number had long stayed at nine and now seemed sacrosanct. The public and Congress both resisted the "Court packing" plan, which FDR withdrew. However, several justices soon retired – perhaps because of the controversy – and Roosevelt appointed such important figures as William O. Douglas, Hugo Black, and Felix Frankfurter [**websites**] who would give the Court an activist tilt for at least thirty years.

### 3. Organized Labor

#### *National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (Wagner Act)*

Over the course of the twentieth century, the United States has made three fundamental decisions to extend the reach and effectiveness of democracy. The first was the Nineteenth Amendment, extending the vote to women nationwide (after a number of western states had already done so). The most recent was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as amended in 1974 to include Latinos as well as African-Americans and renewed in 2006. In between was the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 [pdf text], which recognized workers as legitimate participants in economic decision-making.

The law was most closely identified with Senator Robert Wagner, who would also be the prime mover behind public housing. It followed earlier actions that had forbidden the federal courts to issue injunctions against labor strikes as conspiracies in restraint of trade (1932) and Section 7(a) of the National Recovery Act (1933) which required collective bargaining for businesses participating in the NRA program. The 1935 Act became necessary when the Supreme Court nullified the NRA.

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**Website Resource:** A text of a statement made by FDR concerning the signing of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act can be found at the FDR Library website.

#### *CIO and Organizing Battles*

The Wagner Act and the continuing toll of the Depression opened the way for industrial unionism. The unions that organized as the CIO, or Congress of Industrial Organizations [website], believed in organizing workers industry by industry rather than craft by craft. The biggest organizing battles pitted the Steelworkers against the nation's core industry, the United Auto Workers (against GM and Ford), and the United Mine Workers against the coal industry. The course of the Depression was marked by violent confrontations, such as the police attack on workers during the Republic Steel strike in Chicago, and by new tactics, such as the UAW sit-down strikes in which workers refused to leave General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan.

The biggest labor confrontation on the West Coast was the 1934 dock strike by the International Longshoremen's Association. The ILA wanted to be recognized as the bargaining agent for dock workers and to run the hiring halls. City officials and stevedoring companies resisted (this was before the Wagner Act). The strike in San Francisco led to violence, the appearance of the National Guard, and a general strike. In Portland, the strike involved 3,000 waterfront workers and idled another 15,000 workers in related jobs. Mayor Carson backed management, authorizing the police to harass strikers. On July 9th, "Bloody Thursday," there was a concerted effort up and down the coast to break the strike. Three days later, Senator Wagner arrived as a special emissary to settle the strike before FDR visited Oregon in August to help kick off the Bonneville Dam construction. Company guards took shots at his car, embarrassing the city and management. The incident, plus the threat of holding up the dam, forced business leaders to work out the painful details of a settlement in a secret meeting at the Arlington Club.

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**Website resources for the 1934 Longshoreman Dock Strike:**

- San Francisco Historic Photo Collection at the Public Library has an extensive collection of photographs about the 1934 Longshoreman Strike. The following link is to a search page – type in “strikes 1934” to access a selected sample of photographs (<http://sflib1.sfpl.org:82/>).
- Virtual Museum of San Francisco California contains historical narratives and photos of the 1934 Strike (<http://www.sfmuseum.net/hist/thursday.html>) with photo and news coverage from the San Francisco Daily News (<http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist4/maritime17.html>).
- Portland and Seattle 1934 Strike: The PSU Dept. of History has a short narrative and Oregonian photo (<http://www.history.pdx.edu/guildslake/sidebars/longshore1.htm>)
- The Oregon Historical Society’s Oregon History Project also has a short narrative and photo ([http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical\\_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc\\_ID=000D5118-80DF-1E24-A17880B05272006C](http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=000D5118-80DF-1E24-A17880B05272006C)).

## **4. Poverty and Social Change**

### *Structural Unemployment and Work Relief Programs*

Many New Deal program were intended – first and foremost – to put people back to work so that they could again participate in the economy and reverse the downward spiral. There was no systematic plan behind the different programs, but they ended up as a massive set of public works that helped the United States catch up on some of its need for public infrastructure.

The acronyms get especially confusing. The first of the work relief programs was the CWA or Civil Works Administration. It was replaced by the better organized PWA (Public Works Administration), which was different from the WPA (Works Progress Administration). The PWA was intended to spend federal funds to help get things built. Cities like New York, which had lots of projects planned and waiting to be implemented, were the most successful claimants of PWA funds. The WPA, on the other hand, was intended to put as many people to work as possible. Most jobs involved lots of men with lots of shovels, but there were also WPA programs for writers, artists, and actors [[website](#)].

In total, the WPA employed 8,500,000 people over its career from 1935 to 1942. Oregon WPA projects included Rocky Butte, the Portland Airport, Macleay Park improvements, Wolf Creek Highway, Wilson River Highway, and the Oregon Guide. Timberline Lodge was also substantially a WPA project.

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**PDF Poster:** One-Third of a Nation WPA Production (poster for the Portland OR production, Oregon Federal Art Project, WPA, 1938 – from the National Archives).

### **Website Resources for WPA Projects:**

- Voices from the Thirties: Life Histories from the Federal Writers’ Project (Library of Congress American Memory Pages)

- The Oregon History Project (Oregon Historical Society) – contains articles and archived photos of WPA projects in Oregon and Washington. Use search engine to find articles and photos.

### ***Agriculture, Dust Bowl, and Migration***

No sector of the economy was weaker in 1929 than agriculture, and no sector suffered more in the early 1930s. Prices of corn and wheat fell by nearly two-third from 1929 to 1933. Faced with debts that they had taken on when prices were high, many farmers simply could not pay off their machinery or mortgages. The situation was especially bleak in the South, where tenant farmers and sharecroppers had always lived from year to year, and on the Great Plains, where drought drove thousands of farmers off the land in the years of the Dust Bowl.

There was no effective government response to the Dust Bowl migrations, or to the more general crisis of American agriculture. In the long run, the solution was modernization, meaning the substitution of capital for labor. The proportion of American workers involved in agriculture had been declining since the late nineteenth century, and would continue to decline into the twenty-first century as fewer and fewer individuals have been able to produce more and more food and fiber. The crisis of the 1930s simply accelerated a powerful long-term trend.

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**PDF Maps:** Urban/Rural Population Change 1930-40 (2 map posters); 1930 Crop Failures Map (showing the Dust Bowl region)

### ***Social Security***

The Social Security program is now a bedrock of American society. The current program, of course, started on a much more limited basis. It grew out of a variety of state-level programs that experimented in the 1920s with providing financial benefits to widows and orphans. The achievement of the Social Security Act of 1935 [**pdf text**] was to link these politically appealing categories (who wants to be cruel to orphans?) to the problems of old age more broadly. Coming at a time when very few private sector workers had significant pensions, it was a revolutionary step in broadening the growth of the middle class. As a general entitlement that combined employer and worker contributions, it automatically built a powerful set of supporters. As FDR said, “With those taxes in there, no damned politicians can ever scrap my social security program.” The story of Social Security from the 1940s through the 1980s would be the expansion of coverage and benefits.

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**Web Resource:** “Signing the Social Security Act of 1935” photo and essay from the Social Security Online website.

## *Public Housing*

The PWA included funds for a number of public housing projects, resulting in tens of thousands of new, affordable apartments. However, the Supreme Court decided that building housing for civilians lay beyond the “necessary and proper” clause of the Constitution. It was okay for the government to build housing for military families, for example, because such housing was directly related to the Constitutionally-enumerated purpose of national defense. It was not acceptable when there was no such direct linkage.

The decision angered Senator Robert Wagner of New York (the same who was identified with the 1935 Labor Relation Act), who worked directly with Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins to craft a compromise. Under the Housing Act of 1937 [[website](#)], states would have to authorize localities to create public housing authorities. The federal government could then transfer funds to these authorities, which could then build and operate the housing. This arrangement set the framework for public housing and urban renewal for the rest of the century.

Some cities welcomed the new program. Portland did not. The private real estate industry deplored the possibility that public housing apartments might compete with private rentals and asserted that there was plenty of housing to go around. The City Council in 1938 rejected a proposal to establish a housing authority as verging on communism. The Council would not create the Housing Authority of Portland until *after* Pearl Harbor, when war workers were crowding the city and public housing was suddenly patriotic.

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**PDF Map:** Change in Home Ownership (1930-1940)

## **5. The New Deal and the Environment**

### *Progressive Conservation*

The New Deal inherited the Progressive orientation to natural resources that had been developed earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Theodore Roosevelt and by professional conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot (Forest Service) and Stephen Mather (National Park Service). They approached the natural environment as a set of economic resources to be cared for and utilized over the long run – in effect advocating “sustainability” before the term was current. The approach can be seen in classic documentaries from the 1930s such as “The River” and “The Plow that Broke the Plains” [[pdf scripts](#)] which showed the human and environmental costs of unwise resource use. In Oregon, the replanting of the Coast Range forests after the Tillamook Burn of 1933 [[website/photos](#)] (and several subsequent fires) in order to restore harvestable timber was a direct example of the progressive conservation impulse.

### **Website Resources:**

- [Reaping the Golden Harvest](#): Pare Larentz (Poet and Filmmaker). Website provides information about filmmaking under the Resettlement Administration during the New Deal including more detailed information, photos, scripts and downloadable AVI formats of the

productions “The River” and “The Plow that Broke the Plains.”

- Our Daily Bread and Other Films of the Great Depression includes “The River and “The Plow that Broke the Plains” and can be purchased from Amazon.com (DVD).
- The Tillamook Burn of 1933: Oregon State University Library has an extensive photo collection from the Tillamook Burn. Use the search engine (search under “Tillamook Burn”) to browse the collection.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was a peculiar New Deal creation. It was designed to take aimless, unemployed youth from city streets, give them some semi-military discipline, and put them to work in the bracing countryside . . . and it worked. Many of the CCC projects were designed to improve access to natural resources and facilitate their use, whether for recreation or resource production. When it ended in 1942, the CCC had enrolled 87,000 men for its Oregon projects. They fought forest fires, built roads, campgrounds, trails, lookouts, and Silver Falls State Park. Indeed, one of the legacies of the 1930s in Oregon was the substantial expansion of the state park system.

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**Web Resources:**

- National Association of Civilian Corps Alumni.
- Oregon State Archives: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibit of the CCC. Website contains history and special information about CCC projects in Oregon including Silver Falls Park.

**PDF Text:** CCC Camps in Oregon

***The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)***

The prototype of New Deal environmentalism was the Tennessee Valley Authority [**website**], designed to help relieve the poverty of the South (the nation’s “number one economic problem” according to Roosevelt. TVA included the established federal goals of flood control and navigation (long the province of the Corps of Engineers) but added the goals of power production and economic development, putting the government in competition with private utilities. TVA in its first years was a conservation effort, an economic effort, and an experiment in democracy. Its dams remade the Tennessee Valley economically, physically, and socially.

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**PDF Text:** Tennessee Valley Authority Act

**Web Resource:** The New Deal Network: Tennessee Valley Authority. Website contains articles on the history of the TVA, rural electrification projects and photo archive.

***Uncle Sam in the Pacific Northwest***

In the Pacific Northwest, local communities had long accepted and advocated for a federal role in economic development through the Reclamation Service dams and irrigation projects that promoted agriculture in areas such as the Snake River Valley of Idaho and the Yakima Valley of Washington. The 1930s brought three huge new dams to the region. The Fort Peck Dam in Montana was the largest earth-fill dam in the world. A picture of the dam graced the first cover

of Life magazine and its construction became the setting for Ivan Doig's fast-paced novel Bucking the Sun. Bonneville Dam and Grand Coulee Dam followed in the mid- and late-1930s.

The construction of Bonneville Dam surfaced a wide range of conflicts. Was its power to be shared equally, and at one price, throughout the Northwest (that's what Seattle wanted) or was it to be cheapest and most available for Portland? Was it to be sold to private utilities like PGE for resale to customers or was it to be distributed through cooperatives and public utility districts (the solution favored by Oregon Governor Julius Meier and most liberals). Could it be the start of a Columbia Valley Authority? The compromise was the Bonneville Power Administration [see website and curricula resources below] to market both Bonneville and Grand Coulee power through a triangular intertie that connected Spokane, Portland, and Seattle equally to both dams. Power was to be sold at a uniform rate throughout the region, but BPA had to serve the needs of utility districts first and could make special contracts with large customers such as the aluminum plants that appeared along the lower Columbia just in time for World War II. Oregon voters in 1940 turned down the creation of a PUD to buy out the predecessors of PGE and Pacific Power, ending the public-private power debate for two generations.

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**Web Resource:** The Bonneville Dam and the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). Website is mostly about the current operations of the BPA, but it does list the BPA mission and has an education page for teachers (<http://www.bpa.gov/corporate/KR/ed/page6.htm>).

Curricula: "*The Columbia River System: The Inside Story*" for 11-12<sup>th</sup> Grade (a comprehensive look at the Columbia hydropower system including minor references to the politics of hydropower).

Films:

*River of Power* (30 minutes): This story of the development of the Columbia River Power System was produced by BPA in 1987. It combines beautiful aerial photography with historic black and white film clips that tell the story of BPA from the 1930s to the late 1980s. Sound track includes Woody Guthrie singing the songs he wrote for BPA in 1941.

*The Struggle for Power at Cost* (45 minutes): Produced for BPA's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1987, this video would appeal to high school or adult audiences interested in the history, politics, and economics of public power in the Pacific Northwest. Includes Woody Guthrie music and historic film clips.

*The Columbia* (22 minutes): Historic look at the Columbia River and its development. Woody Guthrie was hired by BPA in 1941 to write the songs for this movie, but its production was delayed by World War II. Produced in 1949 in black and white, this film contains rare footage of Grand Coulee Dam construction, Indian fishing at Celilo Falls and the 1948 Vanport flood.

*River of the West* (16 minutes): The story of the Columbia River Basin, from its early settlement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and growing salmon fishery to the development of the Northwest's hydrosystem. It introduces the history of the basin, natural resource issues we struggle with, and the role of the Council to reach a sustainable balance between the needs of the fish and wildlife and the production of electricity.

## Compiled Data and Map Resources for the Great Depression Topic:

**U.S. Census Spreadsheet Data:** 1920-1940 US Census Data by County (includes demographic, economic and agricultural data on the population for the census years 1920, 1930 and 1940)

**PDF Maps:** Great Depression Maps (a compiled document of the individual map posters posted above).

**Powerpoint Presentation:** Great Depression (includes individual maps of various Depression themes such as bank failures, unemployment, urban-rural migration, crop failures, home ownership, electrification that can be used to show change over time).

**Great Depression GIS Projects:** Data for this project were compiled from the U.S. Census (1920, 1930, 1937 and 1940) and include layers that show bank failures, unemployment, agricultural statistics and other demographic characteristics of the population during the Depression Era.

Download [Great Depression GIS Project Description]

Download the GIS Projects:

ArcView Great Depression Project [Depression\_AVProj]

ArcExplorer Great Depression Project [Depression\_ArcExplorer]

ArcReader Great Depression Project [Depression\_ArcReader]

## 6. The Great Depression Bibliography

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