

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

The Great Depression ArcReader Project

Background Layers: U.S. States, U.S. Counties, U.S. Cities

Data for this project compiled from the U.S. Census 1920, 1930, 1937 and 1940. Data for the layers are aggregated at the county level. Where comparisons are made between time periods, the county boundary layer for the earliest decade is used (e.g. when mapping change from 1920 to 1940, the 1920 county layer is used). The U.S. Cities layer includes the largest 500 cities in the U.S. (1930).

The Financial Crisis:

% Bank Failures (1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932 & 1933)

In the early 1920s, intense real estate speculation (particularly in Florida and at the fringes of major urban areas) fizzled due to over supply and lack of demand and resulted in major loan defaults. This started a cascade of bank failures in 1928 and 1929 leading up to the October 1929 stock market crash.

The % Bank Failures layers show the ripple effect of the financial crisis, beginning in Florida in 1928 and spreading throughout the country over the next five years. The layers indicate the percentage of bank failures for a given year based on the existing (remaining) number of banks in that county that year (not the total number that existed prior to the crash) thus showing a cumulative effect.

The Economic Crisis:

% Unemployment (1930, 1937 & 1940)

% of Workers in Categories (1940)

% of Workers in Professional/Semi-Professional Positions

% of Workers in Skilled Labor Positions

% of Workers in Service/Domestic Positions

% of Workers in Unskilled Labor Positions

% of Workers in Agriculture

The Crash of 1929 was the beginning of an economic domino effect that depressed the country's stock market, financial institutions, industry and agriculture. The most direct consequence was seen in rising rates of unemployment beginning in 1930 and extending through 1940.

The % Unemployment layers were created by calculating the total number of persons indicating that they were "looking for work" as a percentage of the total number of potential gainful workers (14+) as defined by the census (gainful workers include persons employed for salary or wage). These layers capture only those totally unemployed (not partially or intermittently employed as those categories were not clearly delineated). It also does not include agricultural workers who may own/lease a farm, a laborer working only for room and board or uncounted

homeless persons. Therefore, the percentages are likely to be underreported, though they represent the most substantive “unemployment” data as reported in the census.

The % of Workers [in various categories] provides foundational information about the distribution of different classes of labor around the country (in 1940 – the earliest Depression-Era decade that this information was collected by county) and is helpful in assessing the impact of the economic crisis and the mitigating effects of various New Deal programs on different regions of the country.

- Professional/Semi-Professional includes typically “white collar” positions such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, managers, clerical workers, etc.
- Skilled Labor includes typically “blue collar” positions such as machine operators, carpenters, loggers, builders, etc.
- Service & Domestic encompasses the non-industry service positions such as maids, waiters, porters, nannies, cooks, etc.
- Unskilled labor includes manual labor and unspecified jobs.
- Agriculture includes all those who own/lease, provide labor for, or manage a farm.

The Agricultural Crisis:

% of Total Farm Acres with Crop Failure (1930)

% Change in Net Forest Products Value (1930 – 1940)

% Change in Net Crop Value (1920 – 1940)

% Change in Average Farm Size (1920 – 1940)

Additional Number of Large Farms over 1000 Acres (1920 – 1940)

A Depression-Era drought and the Dust Bowl that followed transformed the country’s agricultural sector; most New Deal programs concentrated on putting unemployed urban dwellers to work on construction and other projects and by and large neglected the farming community. This had several unintended consequences: (1) stimulation of a rural-urban migration as farmers lost their land due to loan defaults; and (2) the subsequent consolidation of abandoned farmland into much larger managed holdings (or corporate farms).

The % Crop Failure layer indicates how many acres of farmland experienced crop failure in 1930 (as a percent of total farm acreage under cultivation in that county).

The Forest Products and Crop Value layers show the change in net value (what the products were sold for after subtracting costs of production) of agricultural products from 1930 to 1940 (for forest products) and 1920 to 1940 (for crops). Darker colors indicate a higher loss of net value during the time period indicated.

The Average Farm Size layer indicates the extent to which average farm sizes for a particular county changed from 1920 to 1940 (as a percent) and is one way to gauge the consolidation of land holdings during this period. Often, average farm sizes in a county increased over 1000%.

The Number of Large Farms layer provides another way to look at the impact of agricultural land consolidation into large corporate holdings. This layer shows the increase in actual numbers of large farms (rather than as a percentage). Large farms are defined as 1000 acres or more.

Poverty:

- % Rural Population (1920, 1930, 1940)
- % Urban Population (1920, 1930, 1940)
- % Change in Urban Population (1920 to 1940)
- % Change in Home Ownership 1930-1940 (Total, White, Black)

Economic hardship and the collapse of the agricultural sector stimulated a rural-urban migration with attending social and political ramifications.

The Rural and Urban Population layers show the distribution of the urban and rural population in 1920, 1930 and 1940 (as a percent of total population).

The U.S. Census defines “urban” (by 1930+) as a census unit that conforms to one of the following three categories: (1) contain cities and other incorporated places of 2,500 or more population; (2) towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island in which 2,500 or more inhabitants lived in a village or other thickly settled area and more than one-half of the town's population lived in such areas; and (3) townships and other political subdivisions, not incorporated in whole or in part as municipalities, with a total population of 10,000 or more and an average density of 1,000 or more persons per square mile.

The Change in Urban Population layer indicates the change in the urban population by county from 1920 to 1940. Darker colors indicate a large percent increase in urban population during that time period.

The Change in Home Ownership layers provide a proxy measure for the impact of the financial crisis on individual homeowners.

NOTE: The layers for % Change in Home Ownership for Blacks is difficult to interpret. In many cases, the percent change is based on very low raw numbers. For example, a county may experience a 100+% increase in Black home ownership, but that reflects a move from 0 black home owners to perhaps 3 or 4. The same may be true for decreases in home ownership.

The New Deal, the WPA and Electrification:

- % Families with Radio (1920 and 1940)

One of the most enduring legacies of the Depression-Era and the New Deal projects is the electrification of the country (particularly the West). In many cases, government-funded work groups provided the labor that strung millions of miles of electric wire throughout rural America or built the dams that provided the electricity.

The Families with Radio layers provide a vivid picture of the extent to which the country was “electrified” over a scant 20-year period (1920 to 1940). This layer shows the percent of families (1920) or dwellings (1940) – not individuals – that possessed a radio. The presence of a radio was used as a proxy for electrical use as this information was recorded in both 1920 and 1940 (1940 also included refrigeration and electric light).