

# THE GREAT DEPRESSION



COMBINING DOCUMENTS AND DOCUMENTARIES FOR USE IN THE CLASSROOM

## The Great Depression

### Main Idea/Enduring Understanding

The Great Depression was a global economic crisis. It resulted in the worst and most enduring economic downturn in American history lasting from 1929 to 1945 and resulting in nearly 25 percent unemployment.

### Film Script

#### *Quote 1:*

*“[W]hen widespread economic conditions render large numbers of men and women incapable of supporting either themselves or their families . . . aid must be extended by Government, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of social duty.”- Franklin D. Roosevelt*

In the Roaring 20s, steady economic growth had ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity. Business boomed. Profits soared. New consumer goods poured out of the nation’s factories.

Then on October 29, 1929 “Black Tuesday”: stock prices on Wall Street plummeted, erasing in a day more than \$14 billion dollars in assets.

The Great Depression was descending upon the land, bringing hard times and suffocating hope.

A record number of businesses failed. Bank closings spread like wildfire. Across the country more than one in four workers was unemployed. Shack cities - nicknamed “Hoovervilles” - and “breadlines” - long lines of hungry people waiting outside charity institutions for bread or a bowl of soup sprang up in communities across the nation. Farm foreclosures were running at nearly 20,000 a month, and everywhere people took to the road looking for work.

Republican President Herbert Hoover tried to combat the Depression, but he believed in limited government and economic relief through private charity and was reluctant to fund massive public works projects and other stimulative measures.

How different from four years before. The optimism of the 20s had given way to despair as more and more people lost their jobs, their savings, and their homes.

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## *Quote 2:*

*“These unhappy times call for the building of plans that . . . build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid. . . .we are in the midst of an emergency at least equal to that of war. Let us mobilize to meet it.”- Franklin D. Roosevelt*

## **Notes:**

## Short Answer Questions

1. What were conditions like for Americans in the 1920s? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What happened on “Black Tuesday?” \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What was a “Hooverville?” \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What was a “breadline?” \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Who was President when the Depression hit? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Vocabulary

**Black Tuesday** – October 29, 1929 the date of the Stock Market crash that caused the Great depression.

**Great Depression** – period in 1930s following the Stock Market crash that brought business failures, unemployment and farm foreclosures

**Hooverville** – areas named for President Hoover in cities where wood shacks and rubble shelters were built by homeless people in the 1930s

**Breadline** – areas where homeless, poor people went to receive food supplies each day

**Foreclosure** – legal process that seizes property when a debt is in default (not paid)

**Prosperity** – time of increased wealth and economic well being

## Document Based Questions

### Document 1:

1. Pretend you are a newspaper reporter who has been tasked to write a story to go along with this photo. How would you answer the questions; who, what, when, where, and why? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How would you describe the conditions there? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What emotions does this picture make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Document 2:

1. How would you describe the tone of this letter? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What advice would you give to Mrs. Biringer if you were asked to respond to this letter? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. If Mrs. Biringer's husband is making just \$60 a month, how likely is it that the family can afford to pay \$20 a month plus interest on the \$400.00 loan? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Do you think the response from Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary was appropriate? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Document 3:

1. Pretend you are a newspaper reporter who has been tasked to write a story to go along with this photo. How would you answer the questions; who, what, when, where, and why? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What emotions does this picture make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Do think the people who found themselves in a breadline felt happy that they were getting something to eat, or sad and embarrassed because they were unable to provide for themselves? How do you think you would feel? \_\_\_\_\_

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**DOCUMENT 1** - Photograph of a squatter camp in California, 1936. Shanty housing facilities like the ones pictured were also known as “Hooverilles,” and sprung up across America during the Great Depression.



DOCUMENT 2 - Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Mrs. F. Biringer, December 7, 1938.

Page 1 of 3

December 7, 1938

91 Royal Ave.

Buffalo, N.Y.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am writing to ask you  
to help me out.

I have a little baby two  
months old and my husband is  
working but receiving only \$15.00  
a week.

We have several debts  
amounting to \$400.00, unless we  
get the money to pay it up  
we will lose all our furniture.  
You know how bill collectors  
are, they want their money or  
else they will take the furniture.

I am asking you if you  
will be so kind as to lend me  
\$400 so, that I can pay my  
furniture out. I will pay you back  
\$20 a month plus the interest you  
will want for borrowing the money.

DOCUMENT 2 - Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Mrs. F. Biringer, December 7, 1938.

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I am writing to you because I have confidence <sup>eyes</sup> and know that you will try to help me out.

I am only 22 years old and certainly couldn't stand the strain of losing my furniture; it would mean the breaking up of our cheerful little home -

My husband does all he can to find a job which pays more but it is so hard. If you will lend us the money then I know we will be happiest people to think that someone saved us our home.

Please let me know whether or not we can borrow the money - We will pay it back as quick as we can.

I'll be praying and hoping you will save us.

Yours Truly

Mrs F. Biringer

91 Royal ave.

Buffalo, N.Y.

DOCUMENT 2 - Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Mrs. F. Biringer, December 7, 1938.

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December 10, 1938

My dear Mrs. Biringer:

Mrs. Roosevelt asks me to acknowledge your letter and to tell you she is very sorry to learn of your difficult situation. Unfortunately, the heavy demands on her resources make it impossible for her to respond to the many appeals from those who, like yourself, are in need of financial assistance. She regrets she cannot help you as you wish.

Very sincerely yours,

Secretary to  
Mrs. Roosevelt

Mrs. F. Biringer  
91 Royal Avenue  
Buffalo  
New York

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**DOCUMENT 3** - Photograph of a breadline on Sixth Avenue and 42nd Street, New York, NY, where free food was distributed with private funds to large numbers of unemployed citizens, February 1932.

