

0. DESPERATE TIMES - Story Preface

1. DESPERATE TIMES

2. STARVING PEOPLE

3. PICTURES BY DOROTHEA LANGE

4. THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

5. SKULL ISLAND AND DINOSAURS

6. DIGGING FOR DINOSAURS

7. SUE, THE T. REX

8. RAPTORS

9. DINOSAUR FOSSILS

10. GORILLAS



In 1939, a migrant family—one of many in America at the time—pitches a tent on the outskirts of Hammond, Louisiana. The family is picking strawberries, during the spring of 1939, to earn a living. The boy, in the picture, has just returned from the city dump where he found some springs the family will use to fashion beds. Photo by Russell Lee on behalf of the U.S. Farm Security Administration. Online via the Library of Congress. Click on the image for a full-page view.

For anyone born after World War II, it is inconceivable that such a time as "The Great Depression" ever existed. The ongoing personal tragedy, fear and utter despair, which crippled the country, are nearly unimaginable today.

But for those who experienced the reality of constant unemployment, desperate poverty, insufficient food, homelessness and lost family wealth, the memories are still vivid and painful. Photographs from America's archives, which document the struggle, open a window—at least to some extent—into those difficult years.

Many uprooted, out-of-work families packed up everything they owned and moved to California. Travel—which often meant sleeping in tents—wasn't easy since Interstates did not yet connect the country. Some families, without vehicles, had to walk—or push carts with their belongings—as they moved along the roadways.

Destitute mothers had few, if any, options to provide for their children. Some families who formerly lived in tents tried to upgrade their circumstances by building "housecars."

Fathers left their families "at home" while they went to the industrial north to find work. Their "bachelor cabins" were nothing more than shanty towns. But there was also "No Work" for people in the north. The once-bustling docks of New York City were mostly quiet.

By 1932, the worst year of the depression (follow the link to see the dramatic downturn in U.S. rates of production), nearly 25% of the American work force was unemployed. Without means of transportation, people had to walk miles just to see their families. Living in squatters' camps (called "Hoovervilles"), dislocated families tried to stay together. Even Central Park, in New York City, was turned into a Hooverville.

Before the days of the FDR along the East River, and the Westside Parkway along the Hudson, an artist (like Russian emigre Raphael Soyer) could draw images, along the water's edge, of human hopelessness.

Meanwhile ... employment agencies in New York City were inundated with applications from well-dressed, out-of-work people. The "land of plenty" had become the land of hard times.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/DESPERATE-TIMES-King-Kong>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DESPERATE-TIMES-King-Kong>



Great Depression - Living in Tents

Image online via the Library of Congress; Russell Lee, photographer. Reproduction number: LC-USF33-012116-M4 (b&w film nitrate neg.) LC-DIG-fsa-8a25792 (digital file from original neg.) Public Domain.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Great-Depression-Living-in-Tents>



Living in Times of Despair

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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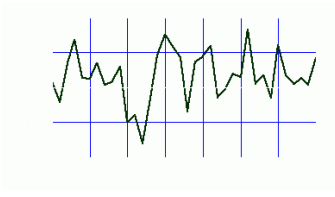


Loss of Childhood - Great Depression

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Graph: U.S. Rate of Production during Great Depression

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Graph: Unemployment in the Great Depression

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Great Depression - Transportation, on Foot

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Very Poor Living Conditions - Great Depression

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Great Depression Era - Squatter's Camp

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Great-Depression-Era-Squatter-s-Camp>



Families Living in Poor Conditions

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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A Hooverville in New York's Central Park

From the American Memory Collection at the Library of Congress.

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Depression Era Image - by Raphael Soyer

Image online, courtesy the United States National Archives.

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Looking for Work During the Depression

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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