



Curriculum Guide

"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum



Dorothea Lange, September 1939.

"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression

Curriculum Guide Objectives
What Does it Mean to Think Historically?
How are Historical Records Helpful in Teaching?



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Overview: The Farm Security Administration

For those born after the 1930s, the Great Depression is something that can be visualized only through photography and film. Certain images have come to define our view of that uncertain time: an anxious migrant mother with her three small children; a farmer and his sons struggling through a dust storm; a family of sharecroppers gathered outside their spartan home. These photographs are icons of an era.

Remarkably, many of these familiar images were created by one small government agency established by Franklin Roosevelt: the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Between 1935 and 1943, FSA photographers produced nearly eighty thousand pictures of life in Depression-era America. This remains the largest documentary photography project of a people ever undertaken.

President Roosevelt created the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937 to aid poor farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers and migrant workers. It developed out of an earlier New Deal agency called the Resettlement Administration (RA). The FSA resettled poor farmers on more productive land, promoted soil conservation, provided emergency relief and loaned money to help farmers buy and improve farms. It built experimental rural communities, suburban "Greenbelt towns" and sanitary camps for migrant farm workers.

One of the New Deal's most progressive—and controversial—agencies, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) advocated government planning and economic intervention to improve living conditions in rural America. Conservative critics attacked the FSA and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration (RA), as "socialistic."

To defend and promote the Resettlement Administration director Rexford Tugwell created a publicity department to document rural poverty and government efforts to alleviate it. It included a photographic unit with an odd name—the "Historical Section." In 1937, the RA and its Historical Section were merged into the newly created FSA.

Tugwell chose Roy Stryker, a college economics instructor, to run the Historical Section. Though not a photographer, Stryker successfully directed an extraordinary group of men and women who today comprise a virtual "Who's Who" of twentieth century documentary photography. Many later forged careers that helped define photojournalism at magazines like *Life* and *Look*.

The FSA photographic unit was not a "jobs program" like the New Deal's Federal Arts Project. Photographers were hired solely for their skills. Most were in their twenties or thirties. They traveled the nation on assignments that could last for months.



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Farm Security Administration Director

Roy Emerson Stryker (1893-1975)

RA/FSA, 1935-1943

"I never took a picture and yet I felt a part of every picture taken. . . . I sat in my office in Washington and yet I went into every home in America."

-Roy Stryker, 1973



Roy Stryker was a 42-year-old economics instructor at Columbia University when he accepted Rexford Tugwell's offer to direct the Resettlement Administration's new photographic unit, which became part of the Farm Security Administration in 1937.

Stryker encouraged his photographers to read about regions and people they were photographing and often gave them "shooting scripts" describing assignment themes.

A savvy bureaucrat, he fought to preserve the photo unit's funding and arranged its preservation as part of the Library of Congress. Stryker remained head of the unit until it was dissolved in 1943.

Biographer Biographies

Arthur Rothstein (1915-1985)

RA/FSA, 1935-1940

New York City native Arthur Rothstein met Roy Stryker while an undergraduate at Columbia University, where Stryker was then an instructor. In 1935 Stryker invited the twenty-year-old to join him at the newly formed federal photo project.

Rothstein became one of FSA's most productive photographers. He left the agency in 1940 to join the staff of





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Look magazine where—with the exception of wartime service with the U.S. Army Signal Corps—he remained until 1971 when the magazine folded. He was later director of photography at *Parade* magazine.

Walker Evans (1903-1975)

RA, 1935-1937

One of America's pre-eminent photographers, Walker Evans created many of his most memorable images while working for Roy Stryker's photo unit.

Born into a well-to-do Midwestern family, Evans left college to pursue an artist's life. In 1928 he turned to photography. By the mid-1930s he had exhibited his work at New York's Museum of Modern Art. He was among the first photographers hired to work for the Historical Section.



During a leave from the photo unit, he and writer James Agee spent a month living with three Alabama sharecropper families. Their classic 1941 book about these families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, featured photographs by Evans.

Evans later worked for *Time* and *Fortune* magazines. He was a professor of graphic design at Yale University from 1965 until his death.

Carl Mydans (1907-2004)

RA, 1935-1936

After graduating from the Boston University in 1930, Carl Mydans worked as a reporter for a small New York City newspaper, often carrying a camera with him.

He joined Roy Stryker's new photo unit in 1935 and left a year later to join the staff of a new photo magazine—*Life*. During World War II he was a photo reporter for *Life* in Europe, China and the Philippines and spent part of the war as a prisoner of the Japanese. Mydans later created memorable photographs of the Korean War and had a distinguished international career in photojournalism.





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Dorothea Lange (1895-1965)

RA/FSA, 1935-1939

Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, Dorothea Lange's father abandoned the family when she was twelve and polio left her with a lifelong limp. She developed an early fascination with photography and in 1918 moved to San Francisco and established herself as a portrait photographer.

During the Great Depression, she abandoned studio portraiture and began documenting the lives of struggling Americans. In 1935 she joined Roy Stryker's photo unit.

Though Lange's work includes many of the FSA's most memorable photographs, she had an unsettled career at the agency. Eventually, budget constraint and friction between Lange and Stryker led him to reduce her role to occasional contract work. She was terminated in 1939.

During World War II, Lange worked for other government agencies. Later, though hampered by illness, she photographed for *Life* and other publications and occasionally taught photography.



John Vachon (1914-1975)

RA/FSA, 1936-1943

John Vachon began working for the photo unit as a messenger. Several months later he borrowed a camera "just to see what I could do with it." The Minnesota native became one of the FSA's most prolific photographers. Stryker, he recalled, "made a photographer out of me."

Vachon remained with the photo unit until it was disbanded in 1943. After military service during World War II, he began a long photographic career at *Look* magazine.





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Russell Lee (1903-1986) RA/FSA, 1936-1942

Russell Lee was educated as a chemical engineer. After attending an exhibition of FSA photographs, he thought, "I ought to meet these people." When Carl Mydans resigned from the photo unit in 1936 to join *Life* magazine, Stryker replaced him with Lee.

He was known for his photo series work and his skill at interior lighting led to many distinctive photographs.

After serving as a photographer in the Army's Air Transport Command during World War II, Lee worked as a photographer for the government and private industry, including work for Roy Stryker at Standard Oil. He taught Photography at the University of Missouri and University of Texas.

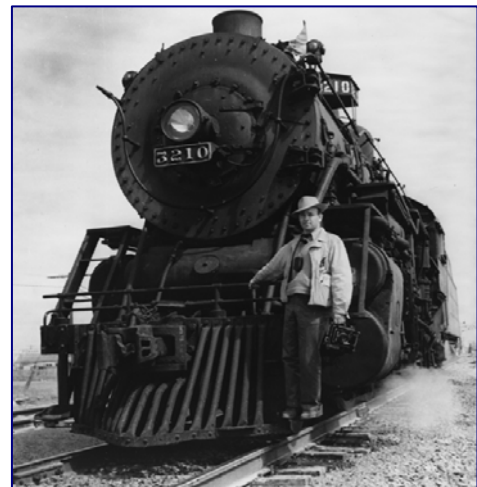


Jack Delano (1914-1997) FSA, 1940-1942

When he was a child, Jack Delano's family emigrated from Kiev to Philadelphia. He studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and worked as a commercial photographer on the side.

In 1939, he produced a series of photographs about Pennsylvania coal miners for the New Deal's Federal Arts Program, which led Stryker to hire him for the photo unit in 1940.

An assignment in Puerto Rico led to a lifelong fascination with the island and its people. He moved there after serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. During his eclectic career, he worked as a photographer, composer of symphonic music, creator of illustrated children's books, and director of Puerto Rico's radio and TV network.





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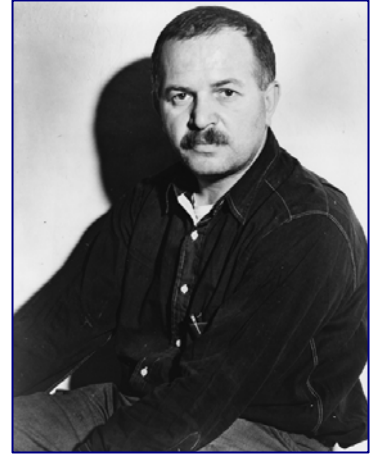
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Ben Shahn (1898-1969)

RA/FSA, 1935-1938

Though best remembered as a painter, muralist and graphic artist, Ben Shahn produced distinctive photography for the FSA during the 1930's.

Shahn's family emigrated from Lithuania in 1906. Apprenticed to a lithographer at age fifteen, he took college and art classes at night and had his first one-man show in New York City in 1930. His art expressed his deeply felt social liberalism.



During the 1930s Shahn created murals and posters for the New Deal's Federal Art Project and other federal agencies. He found photography a useful tool "to make notes for future paintings." Yet Shahn's photographic eye was distinctive and perceptive.

He did little photography after leaving the FSA. In 1939, he and his family moved to a cooperative community built by the resettlement Administration called Jersey Homesteads (now Roosevelt, New Jersey), where he lived for the rest of his life.

Gordon Parks (1912-)

FSA, 1942-1943

In the late 1930s Gordon Parks bought a \$7.50 camera and taught himself to use it.

While working as a fashion photographer in the Midwest, he met FSA photographer Jack Delano. With Delano's encouragement, he resolved to join the agency. A foundation grant paid for his salary.



As the photo unit's only African American photographer, Parks later recalled that Roy Stryker was initially reluctant to hire him because the photo unit's lab personnel were hostile to the appointment of a black photographer.

In 1943 Parks joined the Office of War Information, where he created memorable photographs of the home front during World War II. He later worked again for Stryker at the Standard Oil Company. Parks has forged a distinguished career as a photographer, painter, author, composer and pioneering black filmmaker. He lives in New York City.



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Marion Post Wolcott (1910-1990)

FSA, 1938-1941

The daughter of a prosperous New Jersey family, Marion Post got her first lessons in photography while studying abroad in Vienna in 1933. She had an established career and was a staff photographer at the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* when she convinced Roy Stryker to hire in 1938.

Post developed a warm relationship with Stryker and was strongly committed to the photo project. During her years at the FSA, she often traveled alone for long periods through remote areas of the nation.

In 1941 Post married Lee Wolcott, a federal agriculture official, and resigned from the FSA. Though she occasionally took photographs in later years, she never again devoted herself full-time to professional photography.





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Geographic Regions

The Great Plains and the Southwest



The most enduring image of rural America during the Great Depression is one of dust and human migration. This image was formed in the nation's heartland, where the people of the Great Plains and Southwest suffered both natural and economic disasters during the 1930s.

Decades of intensive farming and inattention to soil conservation had left this region ecologically vulnerable. A long drought that began in the early 1930s triggered a disaster. The winds that sweep across the plains carried away its dry, depleted topsoil in enormous "dust storms." Dramatic and frightening, the dust storms turned day into night as they destroyed farms. The hardest hit area—covering parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle—was nicknamed the "Dust Bowl."

FSA photographers recorded the hardships that drought, economic depression and low crop prices created throughout the Great Plains and Southwest. They documented the plight of farm families forced to abandon the land and join the ranks of migrant workers toiling for low wages on distant commercial farms. The migrant flow out of the region included people from cities and small towns and farm laborers who'd been replaced by motorized farm machinery.



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"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression California and the Far West



For thousands of struggling rural people in the Great Plains and Southwest, California represented hope. During the 1910s and 1920s, some began traveling to California and other Far Western states in search of work. When the Depression hit, news of jobs picking crops on the state's large commercial farms swelled the migration. Hundreds of thousands of people packed their belongings into cars and trucks and headed west.

Most found more hardship at the end of their long journey. The new arrivals, dubbed "Oakies" or "Arkies," often struggled to find employment. Wages were low and living conditions abysmal. Many migrants were crowded into shanty towns or squalid "ditchback camps"—unsanitary housing located along irrigation ditches.

The Farm Security Administration tried to assist migrant farm workers by creating clean residential camps with running water and simple, sturdy living quarters. The camps were organized democratically and governed by the residents. They became islands of stability for migrants enduring grinding poverty and dislocation. In John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family spends time in a government-run migrant camp.



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"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression **The South**



Long before the Great Depression, the South was marked by deep poverty. Largely rural and agricultural, it was home to millions of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In exchange for cash rent (or, for sharecroppers, a portion of the crop), they farmed the fields of large landowners.

Even in good times, life for these workers was harsh, with little hope for the future. The Depression—and, ironically, some New Deal programs—deepened their economic plight. To increase sagging crop prices, the government paid farmers to reduce production. Large landowners chose to evict thousands of sharecropper and tenant families from unplanted land. The growing use of gas-powered farm machines eliminated the need for many tenant farmers.

The region's large African American population carried the heaviest burden. In 1930 more than eighty percent of American blacks lived in the South. Jim Crow segregation laws and the legacy of slavery forced them to endure poverty, discrimination, and racial violence.

FSA photographers captured the varied worlds of black and white farm workers throughout the South. They also explored the region's mill towns and cities.



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The FSA photography unit is best known for its images of rural life in the South, the Great Plains and the West. But in thousands of images FSA photographers also created a vivid record of life in the farms, towns, and cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

Agency photographers documented mining towns in Pennsylvania, slum housing in Chicago and Washington D.C. and rural life in Ohio, New England, and upstate New York. They studied the lives of migrant farm workers in Michigan and the homes of packinghouse employees in New Jersey. Their work offers glimpses into everything from unemployment lines and child labor to social life and leisure activities.



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The Skull Controversy



"I never felt any compunction about moving people around and posing them.... I don't think that in any way detracts from the documentary value of the photograph because that isn't what 'documentary' photograph means to me. It isn't something that you happen to see.... [it's] an expression of the essence of what you are seeing."

-Jack Delano, 1964

In the summer of 1936 the photo unit was engulfed in controversy. The trouble began in the Dakotas, when photographer Arthur Rothstein noticed a sun-bleached cow's skull on a parched alkali flat. Rothstein photographed it. Then he moved the skull to a different location, arranging it beside a cactus and some scrub grass to create a photograph that suggested that overgrazing had created the barren environment.

When Rothstein's actions were discovered, critics accused the FSA of "staging" photographs to make drought conditions on the Great Plains appear worse than they actually were.

The photo unit survived the "skull controversy." Yet the incident raises important questions about the nature of documentary photography.

Like letters and documents, photographs are a form of historical evidence. They are complex and incomplete sources. It is important to approach them with a critical eye and ask questions of them. Why, for instance, was a photograph made? Who made it? How was it created? What was its intended audience? Where was it seen? The activities included later in this guide will allow these questions to be explored in greater detail.



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With the outbreak of World War II, the focus of the FSA photo project began to change. As the nation's attention turned from economic and social issues at home to the war against Germany, Italy and Japan, the photo unit reflected this shift. Roy Stryker encouraged his photographers to take more "positive" images of American life to bolster America's war effort. And while FSA photographers continued to document poverty and inequality, they were told to increase their output of photographs featuring reassuring images of American life. Pictures of defense factories, war workers and patriotic activities on the home front also began entering the FSA files.



In October 1942 the FSA photo unit became part of the new Office of War Information (OWI), created to direct America's wartime propaganda efforts. The following year the unit formally went out of existence. Director Roy Stryker left government and a few FSA photographers went to work for the OWI.



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"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression **Saving the FSA Photographs**

As the FSA photo project neared its end, Director Roy Stryker faced a dilemma. From 1935 to 1943, he had created a vast trove of nearly eighty thousand photographs (and 68,000 unprinted negatives). Stryker recognized the importance of this collection to history and feared it might be dispersed when it came under the full control of the Office of War Information (OWI).

A seasoned Washington bureaucrat, Stryker had been maneuvering as early as 1939 to secure a safe harbor for the collection in the Library of Congress. Now, working with his friend Archibald MacLeish --who was both the Librarian of Congress and Assistant Director of the OWI-- Stryker helped arrange a transfer of the entire FSA photo file to the Library's custody under unusual terms. The Library took title to the collection in 1944, but loaned it back to the OWI for the duration of the war. In 1946, the collection was physically moved to the Library, where it is available to all for study and reproduction.



This curriculum guide draws from that collection and presents a new generation the opportunity to examine the role of photographs as historical evidence. By examining, thinking, and asking questions about photographs, students will learn to better understand how and why they were created and used.



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"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression **Photographs as Historical Evidence**

A photograph is a view into a place and moment in time. Yet that view is limited to what fits in the camera's frame and what the photographer chooses to put there. Photo cropping further restricts what we see.

Often, what's outside a picture's frame can reveal a lot. This Dorothea Lange photograph of a Mississippi plantation owner and his field workers is a good example. Lange's framing and composition suggest a great deal about class and race in the deep South. The owner dominates the photograph, much as, we suspect, he ruled his workers' lives.

But Lange's photograph also contains a revealing detail. On the left, part of the head and hand of her husband (economist Paul Taylor) is visible. Taylor accompanied Lange on some assignments and talked with people she photographed. Sometimes his questions distracted Lange's subjects, letting her capture unguarded moments. Editors often crop Taylor out of this photograph. This improves the appearance of the photograph, but removes evidence about how it was created.



Editorial cropping can also change a photograph's meaning. In 1938, poet Archibald MacLeish used a heavily cropped version of Lange's photograph to illustrate a poem. The cropped image assumes a very different meaning in its new context.

**Excerpt from the poem *Land of the Free*
by Archibald MacLeish, 1938**

*We told ourselves we were free because we were free.
We were free because we were that kind.
We were Americans.*

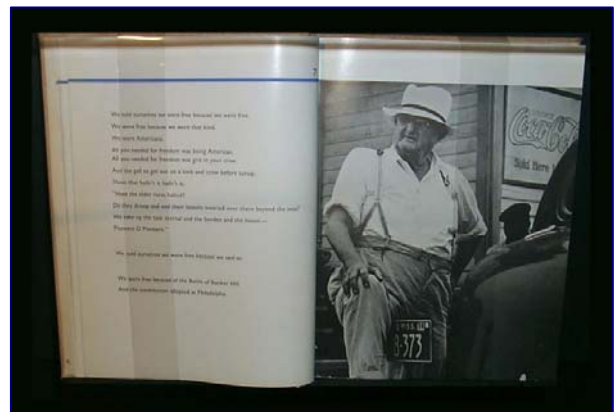
*All you needed for freedom was being American.
All you needed for freedom was grit in you crawl
And the gall to get out on a limb and crow before sunup.*

Those that hadn't it hadn't it.

"Have the elder races halted?

*Do they drop and end their lessons wearied over there beyond the
seas?*

*We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson
— Pioneers O Pioneers."*





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Nearly all of the photographs shot by the FSA are black and white. But during the photo unit's later years a few photographers began experimenting with color photography. In some cases, these photographers shot the same subjects in both black and white and color.

These photographs are drawn from the 644 color transparencies and 35 mm Kodachrome slides in the FSA photo collection. None of these color images were published during the 1930s and 1940s. The entire group was only discovered at the Library of Congress during the 1970s.



Jack Delano, December 1941.



Arthur Rothstein, January 1942.



Jack Delano, December 1942.

These images can seem startling, because we are accustomed to experiencing the 1930s and 1940s in black and white. But color photography draws the viewer into the past in a different way. Color makes the photographs appear more immediate and intimate. Faces in color appear more real--more like us. The effect is often arresting.

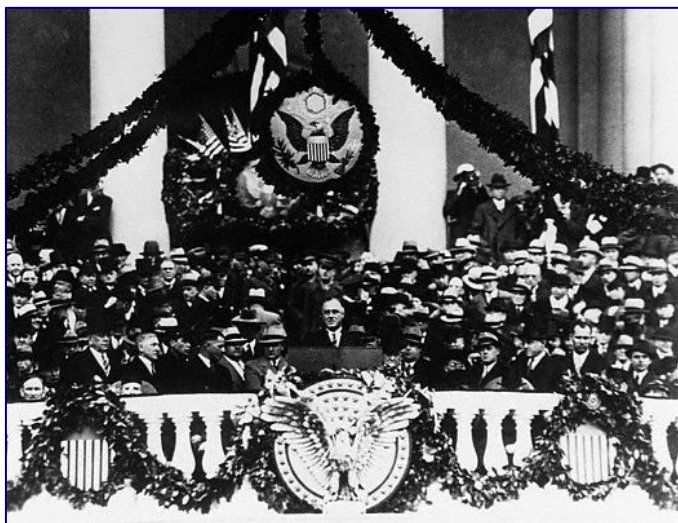
These are just a few technical and editorial considerations that need to be kept in mind when viewing photographs as historical evidence. The activities that follow will allow your students the opportunity to explore these and other considerations in greater detail.



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Overview: The Great Depression



"This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive, and will prosper..."

Franklin D. Roosevelt
March 4, 1933

As Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke these simple and inspiring words, Americans from coast to coast, weary from years of economic hardship, were willing to take the freshly minted President at his word. He was offering them hope, which was all that many people had left. The economic hardships brought on by the Great Depression had reached a pinnacle by the spring of 1933. The banking system was near collapse, a quarter of the labor force was unemployed, and prices and production were down by a third from their 1929 levels. Just a few short years before, Herbert Hoover had proclaimed, "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land." How could things have gone so wrong, so fast?

Conventional wisdom places the beginning of the Great Depression on "Black Tuesday" October 29, 1929, but the factors undermining the economic stability of American and world markets had been in play for some time. One of those factors was a lack of diversification in the American economy throughout the 1920's. American prosperity had been built on a few core industries, most noteworthy automobiles and construction. As the 1920's progressed, market saturation began to take hold and automobile and construction expenditures began to drop dramatically.



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In addition to the declining demand for products, purchasing power began to skew against those at the lower end of the economic ladder. As demand for products decreased, so did wages - especially for farmers and factory workers. More and more consumers found themselves unable to afford the goods and services the economy was producing. This resulted in even less demand and sparked lay offs and factory shut downs.

Yet another factor contributing to the economic woes of the nation was the dubious debt structure of the economy. Farmers who traditionally live on or near the edge of economic prosperity, were being hit with the double whammy of declining crop prices and a continuing drought that was literally turning their land to unuseable dust. Crop prices were too low to cover the fixed costs of machinery, taxes, mortgages and other debts. By 1933, nearly 45 percent of farms were behind in their mortgage payments and faced foreclosure. Many farmers in the southwest region of the country that had come to be called the Dust Bowl simply abandoned their farms. These "Arkies" and "Oakies" loaded up their families and whatever possessions they could carry and headed west.

A final factor came from beyond our borders. When World War I finally concluded, the Allied nations of Europe owed American banks huge sums of money. With the European economies in shambles, not even the victorious countries were able to make their payments to American banking institutions. They had insisted on reparations from the defeated nations in hopes of using those resources to repay their American creditors. The defeated nations were even less able to muster the necessary funds. American banks refused to forgive the debts, but they did allow European governments to take out additional loans to pay down the original debts. This created a dangerous cycle of paying debts by incurring still more debt. By the end of the 1920's, the American economy was beginning to weaken due to the factors mentioned above. In an effort to protect American manufacturing, protective tariffs were put in place making it more and more difficult for European goods to enter the United States, and many soon defaulted on their loans bringing about a world wide economic crisis.



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"This Great Nation Will Endure": Photographs of the Great Depression **Overview: The New Deal**

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt in his second term as Governor New York. He had steered the Empire State through the early of the Great Depression with relative success and set his sights on the presidency. The summer before the 1932 election, in his acceptance speech before the Democratic National Convention, Roosevelt promised, "a new deal for the American people." Yet many of programs that would come to epitomize the New Deal –the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), Social Security



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Insurance, Works Progress Administration (WPA), National Recovery Administration (NRA), and the Farm Security Administration (FSA), were still in their most embryonic stages.

Upon taking office, the new President began immediately to make good on his pledge to get the country moving again. The pace of his first one hundred days in office, beginning in March of 1933, was a whirlwind which produced and passed no less than fifteen major pieces of legislation. Roosevelt sought to establish broad relief measures, major new programs in industrial and agricultural planning, and banking reform. Though the scope of the programs he proposed seemed to some to go in all directions, the threads that held the New Deal together were Roosevelt's unbridled confidence in himself and the American People, and his commitment to bring about three R's - Relief, Recovery and Reform.

Relief for the millions of Americans who suddenly found themselves without work, without food, without shelter and without hope, was the President's first priority. He had concluded that help for the down-trodden must come from beyond the traditional private or local government sources. He believed that the federal government needed to take on



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a larger role in providing for the well-being of the American people. Though today this concept seems quite natural, the idea of such government involvement in the affairs of business and industry was relatively new and untested in FDR's time. Critics from the political right accused him of exerting too much government influence, while critics from the left complained his programs were not ambitious enough. Roosevelt steered a steady course and kept the American public informed about his plans and their progress through a series of radio addresses that came to be called "fireside chats". These broadcasts were centered on specific topics and issues, and were delivered in warm, folksy language that made people feel they were partners in the efforts the President was putting forth.

The experiment of the New Deal yielded varied results. Some programs were nearly universally applauded such as the CCC, TVA, or the FDIC. Others such as the NRA were attacked in the media or overturned in the courts. Still others such as Social Security have become so interwoven in our social and political fabric that it is difficult to imagine a time when they did not exist. Regardless of the fate of the individual programs, the fact remains that the New Deal forever changed the political, social, and economic landscape of the United States. Historians and scholars continue to debate just how successful the relief, recovery and reform efforts of the New Deal programs were and their lingering impacts today.