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## From Dreams to Dust

### America Between the World Wars

By Beth Haverkamp Powers

America emerged from World War I in 1918 as a nation both confident and proud. Its citizens began to enjoy the peace and newfound prosperity. The 1920s saw vast economic expansion and increased participation in the democratic system. Traditional values were challenged by new jazz music, expanded women's rights (with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment), and the failed try at **Prohibition**. New pastimes like listening to radio and watching films with sound other than music (called "talkies") became popular. Average Americans invested in the **stock market** -- an activity that had formerly been practiced only by wealthy citizens.

Jobs were plentiful, and wages were high in the 1920s. New products and conveniences became available. Americans purchased automobiles and household appliances such as electric washing machines and vacuum cleaners. Farmers invested in tractors, **listers**, and plows. However, items often were bought on credit. Thus, consumer debt went up, leaving many citizens in risky financial situations. The production of goods then began to exceed the demand. In late October 1929, the stock market crashed, bringing the nation's economy down with it.

This worldwide economic slump, known as the Great Depression, lasted from the end of 1929 until about 1940. During those ten-plus years, America's leaders struggled to enact changes that would help improve both the lives of suffering Americans and the country's economy. Yet, even while socially minded programs were being created, mankind and Mother Nature seemed to be secretly planning to make the situation worse.

On the heels of the **euphoric** "Roaring Twenties," the decade of the 1930s must have seemed like a bad dream to most Americans. In cities, the factories that had overproduced closed their doors. Twenty-five percent of Americans were unemployed. In **rural** areas, farmers had no market for their crops.

The popular song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" reflected the growing sense of hopelessness shared by many during this time. Unemployed men stood in long lines seeking temporary, low-paying jobs. Some had to beg for money and food. Soup kitchens served meals to increasing numbers of hungry Americans. Homeless people **squatted** in "Hoovervilles," temporary shantytowns or clusters of shacks named after President Herbert Hoover. Americans blamed his lack of action for the nation's desperate situation.

On the Great Plains, years of land misuse -- cattle grazing and row planting -- had created the potential for an ecological disaster. Although farmers reaped a record wheat crop in 1931, prices were lower because of oversupply and less demand. Lower prices meant farmers needed to cultivate even more land and grow more crops to make enough money to pay for their equipment and credit purchases. These poor economic conditions caused by the Depression became worse when the droughts began, turning the dreams of the 1920s into dust in the 1930s.

In the early 1930s, a series of severe droughts plagued the plains. Overgrazed and dry, the **topsoil** began to blow away, leaving land that was unsuitable for farming. Many farmers could not raise the crops needed to pay off their debts. They were forced from their farms when banks **foreclosed** or when they left to find jobs to feed their families.

In some instances, entire communities uprooted and migrated. Some went to big cities in other parts of the country. Others moved westward toward California. The drought was not as bad there, and crops still were being grown and gathered. And there were some who stayed on their land on the plains. Those folks often had to rely on **public assistance** to survive.

In 1932, the Depression-battered nation wanted a change in the White House. The people elected Franklin D. Roosevelt as their president. Roosevelt proposed a "New Deal" -- a plan for relief and reform.

Several of Roosevelt's New Deal agencies specifically addressed the needs of rural farmers. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) tried to raise farm prices and repair poor farming practices by restricting the amount of land farmers could **till**. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided jobs in reforestation and flood control to those seeking relief from the ravages of the Dust Bowl. Finally, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) launched an educational campaign to encourage crop rotation and land reclamation.

In the spring of 1938, steady rains finally began to improve water tables in many states of the Great Plains. By 1941, the end of the drought and the outbreak of World War II cured many of the country's economic ills. In fact, new demand for American factory goods, coupled with improved weather conditions, brought the United States out of the Depression and into another period of economic prosperity.

The lean years of the Great Depression and the effects of the Dust Bowl had deeply scarred the American spirit, however. Federal relief efforts during this time changed America forever. Previously, there was little direct government involvement in the lives of American citizens. In the 1930s, for the first time, there was increased government intervention at all levels of the national economy. After that, most Americans accepted, and even expected, a more powerful and involved federal government.

**Prohibition** was the period (1920–1933) when the manufacture and sale of alcohol was forbidden in the United States under the 18th Amendment.

The **stock market** is a place where stocks and bonds are bought and sold.

A **lister** is a specially equipped plow that turns up the soil on each side of a furrow.

**Euphoric** means having a feeling of great happiness.

**Rural** refers to the country

**Squatted** means occupied a piece of public land without legal claim to it.

**Topsoil** is the upper part of the soil.

**Foreclosed** means denied access to mortgaged property when payments have not been made.

**Public assistance** is aid in the form of money or food given to financially needy people.

**Till** means to prepare land for raising crops by plowing and turning under the soil.

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