

# The Human Face of the Great Depression



1929-1940

# Initial Impact

- Many factories cut back on production and some just closed their doors.
- U.S. Steel announced a 10% wage cut in 1931.
- Many industries laid off workers—in Detroit unemployment soared to over 40%.
- More than 4 million Americans were out of work in 1930. By 1932 that number had increased to 12 million.
- Unemployment caused rates of eviction and foreclosure to soar. More than 200,000 people were evicted in NYC in 1930.



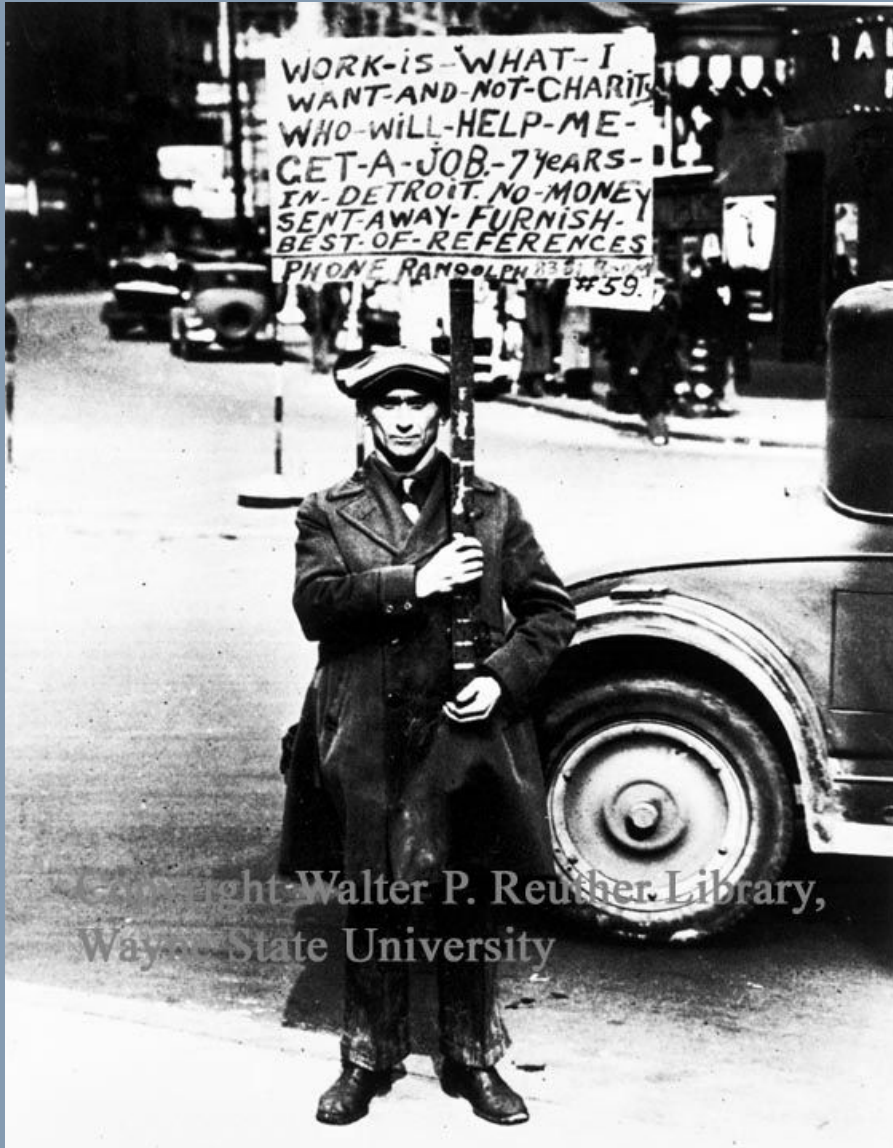
# Impact on Various Social Classes

- THE RICH

- Those who invested heavily in the stock market lost everything. Some were able to remain millionaires by selling short as the market went down (like Joseph Kennedy ->).
- Many rich people began to hoard gold and fear revolution.



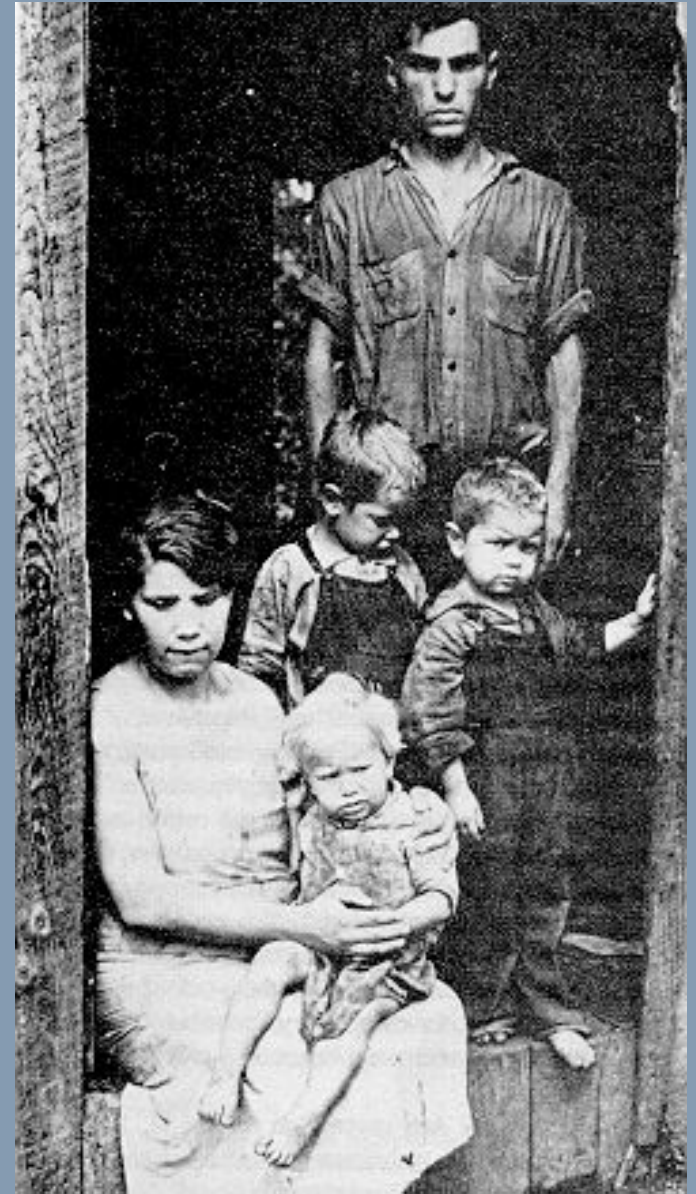
# THE MIDDLE CLASS



- The 98% of Americans who did not own stock would have hardly noticed the crash; rather, the Depression would have meant the loss of a job or a bank foreclosure.
- Luxuries had to be given up; telephone service, for example.

# LOWER CLASSES

- For unemployed blacks and tenant farmers, the Depression had little immediate effect because their lives were already so depressed.
- Municipal and private charity funds were quickly exhausted.
- Many families could not afford to feed their children.



The gravest effects of the depression on family life were largely invisible to the casual observer. The most common response to its harsh disruptions was denial of economic realities. Many families sought desperately to maintain their social status by postponing payments on loans and mortgages, taking second mortgages on real estate, depleting savings accounts, or borrowing against insurance policies before being willing to pare luxuries or other expenditures. "Status" expenditures persisted as families sought to disguise their economic straits by painting the exteriors of their houses or purchasing new shutters in order to impress neighbors. Unable to confront the loss of income and the loss of social position it entailed, they tried to forestall disaster for as long as possible.

Other families sought to cope by adopting more labor-intensive household practices, including planting gardens, canning foods, making clothing, and doing their own household repairs. Sales of electric toasters, mixers, percolators, and washing machines slumped, as many families attempted to pickle, preserve, and cure food, bake bread, and dye cloth. In 1931 sales of glass jars reached an eleven-year high even though demand for store-bought bottled and canned foods declined. Falling back on their own resources, many Americans tried to return to an earlier state of self-sufficiency. Unemployed Massachusetts textile workers set up looms in their living rooms. Wives and mothers throughout the nation tried to earn supplementary income by taking in sewing or laundry or by dressmaking, performing manicures for a dollar, setting up parlor groceries, or feeding and housing boarders.

Pooling family incomes provided another buffer against loss of work. The 1930 census indicated that one-third of all American families had more than one wage earner and that a quarter had three or more income earners. Part-time jobs for children—running errands, mowing lawns, baby-sitting, and selling newspapers and magazines, shining shoes, carting groceries, or returning pop bottles for two cents apiece—supplemented their father's income. Altogether, half of the nation's unemployed lived in a household in which someone was working.

People turned to creative economies to meet the exigencies of the depression. They bought day-old bread, handed down old clothing, reused razor blades, used cardboard and cotton for shoe soles, and relined coats with old blankets. To cut expenses and avoid embarrassment, social interaction with friends and neighbors was sharply restricted. In New Haven, Connecticut, just 3 percent of the adults questioned said they still attended parties, and only 25 percent continued to visit neighbors. Club memberships and extracurricular school activities were also restricted, and fewer family members went to pool halls, bowling alleys, or boxing rings.

**SOCIAL INDICATORS**

	1928	1930	1932	1934	1936	1938	1940	1980
Marriage rate (per 1,000 pop.)	9.8	9.2	7.9	10.3	10.7	10.3	12.1	10.9
Birth rate (per 1,000 pop.)	22.2	21.3	19.5	19.0	18.4	19.2	19.4	16.2
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	68.7	64.6	57.6	60.1	57.1	51.0	47.0	12.5
Suicide rate (per 100,000 pop.)	13.5	15.6	17.4	14.9	14.3	15.3	14.4	12.7
Homicide rate (per 100,000 pop.)	8.6	8.8	9.0	9.5	8.0	6.8	6.3	11.3
Radios (% of households with)	27.5	45.8	60.6	65.2	70.5	79.2	81.1	99.9
Telephones (% of households with service)	40.8	40.9	33.5	31.4	33.1	34.6	36.9	96.3
Annual meat consumption (lbs. per capita)	124.3	121.7	124.2	134.1	120.9	118.6	134.1	157.2
College degrees (per 1,000 persons 23 yrs. old)	55	57	63	61	63	72	81	238

Source: American Telephone & Telegraph Co.; *Merchandising* (Mar. 1980); U.S. Department of Agriculture; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; U.S. Department of Education; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



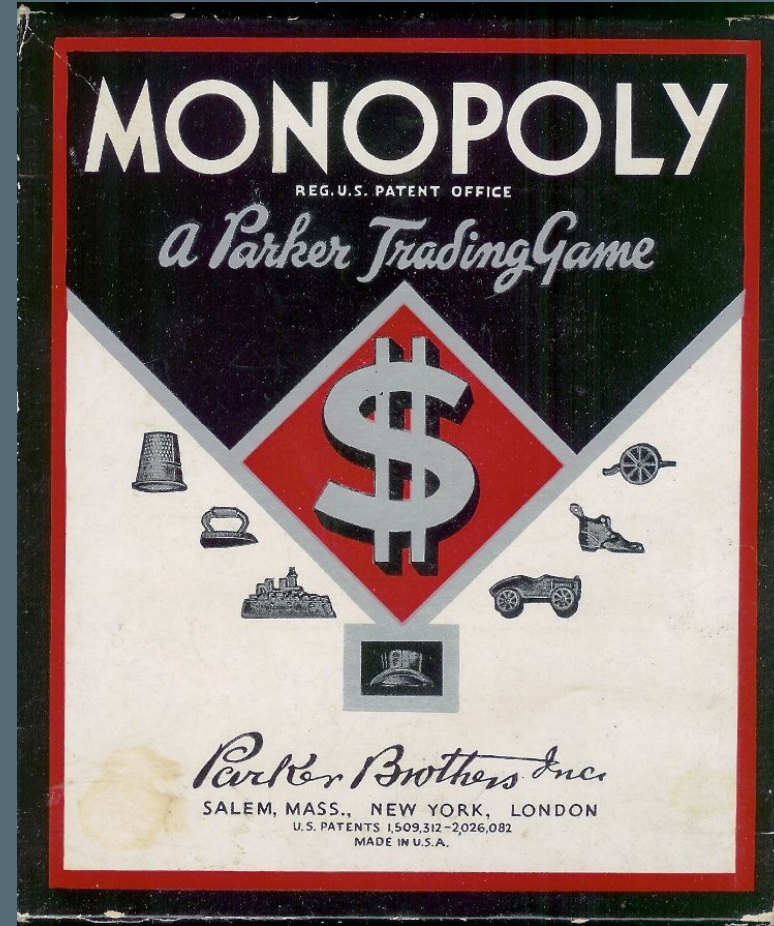
# Psychological Impact

- Many victims tended to blame themselves.
- People felt ashamed that they could no longer support themselves.
  - One man forced to stand in a breadline would bend his head low so that no one would recognize him.
- This trend especially applied to men, who had formerly played the role of family breadwinner but could no longer do that during the Depression.
- Women then bore the psychological burden of dealing with unemployed husbands, hungry children, and unpaid bills.



# Family Impact

- In many ways, the Depression brought families closer:
  - As families cut back on activities outside the house, they pooled resources and found comfort in each other.
  - Greater cooperation within the family
  - Divorce rates dropped
  - More families listened to the radio, went to the movies together, or played games at home instead of going out
  - Families were forced to move in with relatives



# Family Impact

- In other ways, the Depression had a destructive impact on the family:
  - Unemployment, reduced earnings, and lowered living standards tore apart the family, destroyed men's self-esteem, and undermined a family's self-respect
  - Desertion rates soared (By 1940, 1.5 million women were living apart from their husbands)
  - Number of children in custodial institutions increased 50% in the first 2 years of the Depression and more than 200,000 vagrant children wandered the country
  - Children suffered from nutritional deficiencies
  - Marriage rate declined as couples were forced to delay marriages, put off having children, and stay in unhappy marriages

# Children of the Depression – Walker Evans

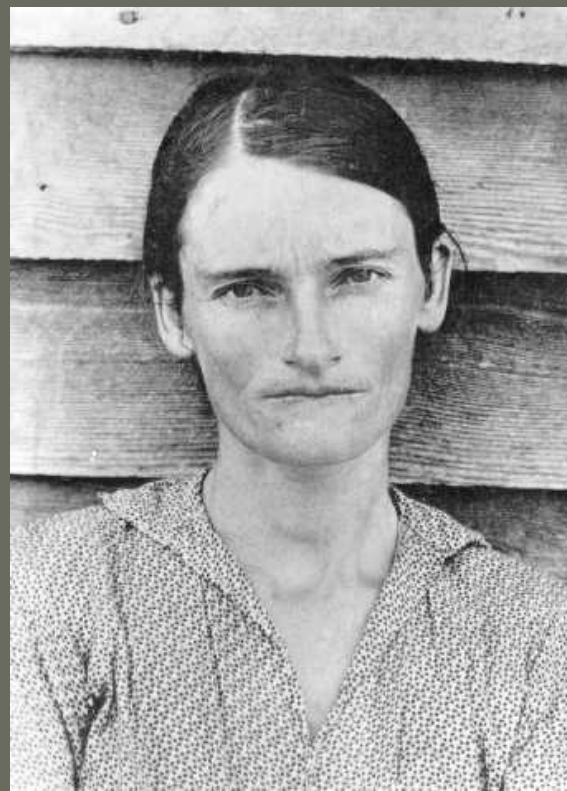
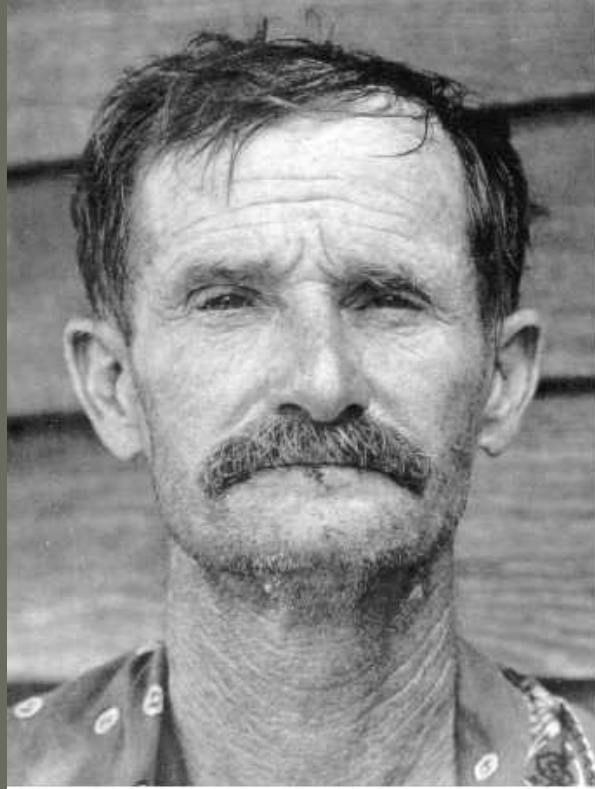


# Family Portraits – Walker Evans

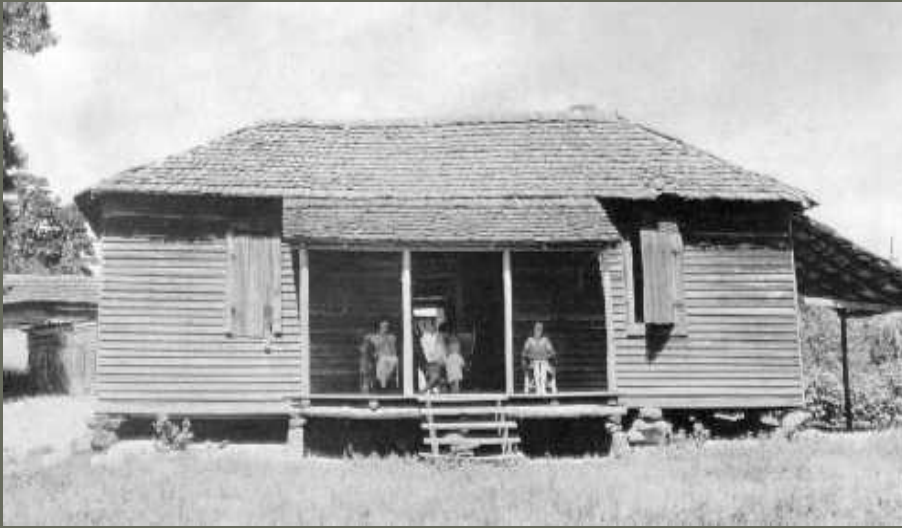


# Family Portraits – Walker Evans





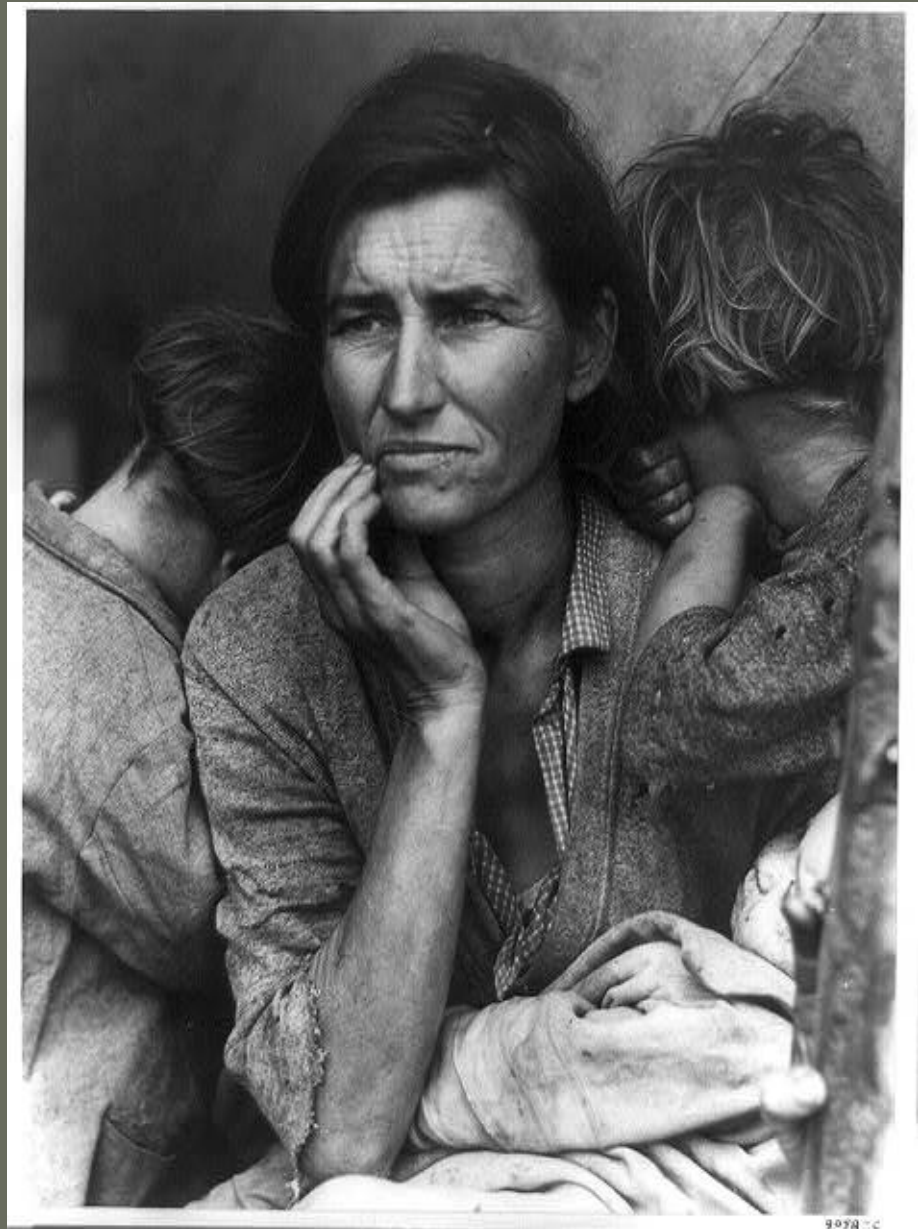
# Homes – Walker Evans





# Migrant Mother Series – Dorothea Lange

“I am trying here to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated. About death and disaster, about the wounded, the crippled, the helpless, the rootless, the dislocated. About finality. About the last ditch.”



## Migrant Mother Series

In 1960, Lange gave this account of the experience:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

(From: Popular Photography, Feb. 1960).

# Migrant Mother Series (cont.)





# The life of migrant workers – Dorothea Lange



# The life of migrant workers (cont.)



# Faces of the Depression – Dorothea Lange



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# Faces of the Depression (cont.)

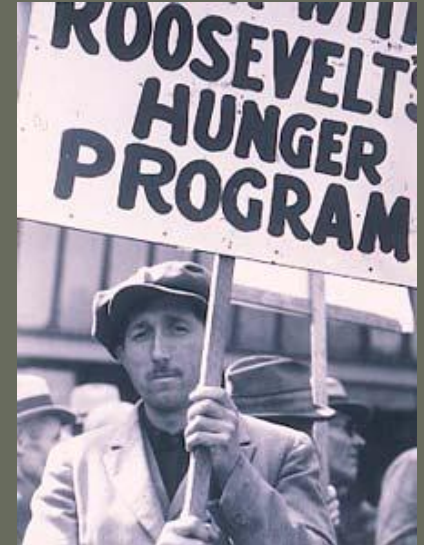




# Faces of the Depression (cont.)



# Life in the City



“I want to tell you about an experience we had in Philadelphia when our private funds were exhausted and before public funds became available... One woman said she borrowed 50 cents from a friend and bought stale bread for 3 and a half cents per loaf, and that is all they had for eleven days except for one or two meals.... One woman went along the docks and picked up vegetables that fell from the wagons. Sometimes the fish vendors gave her fish at the end of the day. On two different occasions this family was without food for a day and a half.... Another family did not have food for two days. Then the husband went out and gathered dandelions and the family lived on them.”







- Shanty towns that popped up near all large cities were called “Hoovervilles” and the privies “Hoover villas.”
- The shanty towns and the breadlines that abounded became symbols of Hoover’s presidency.

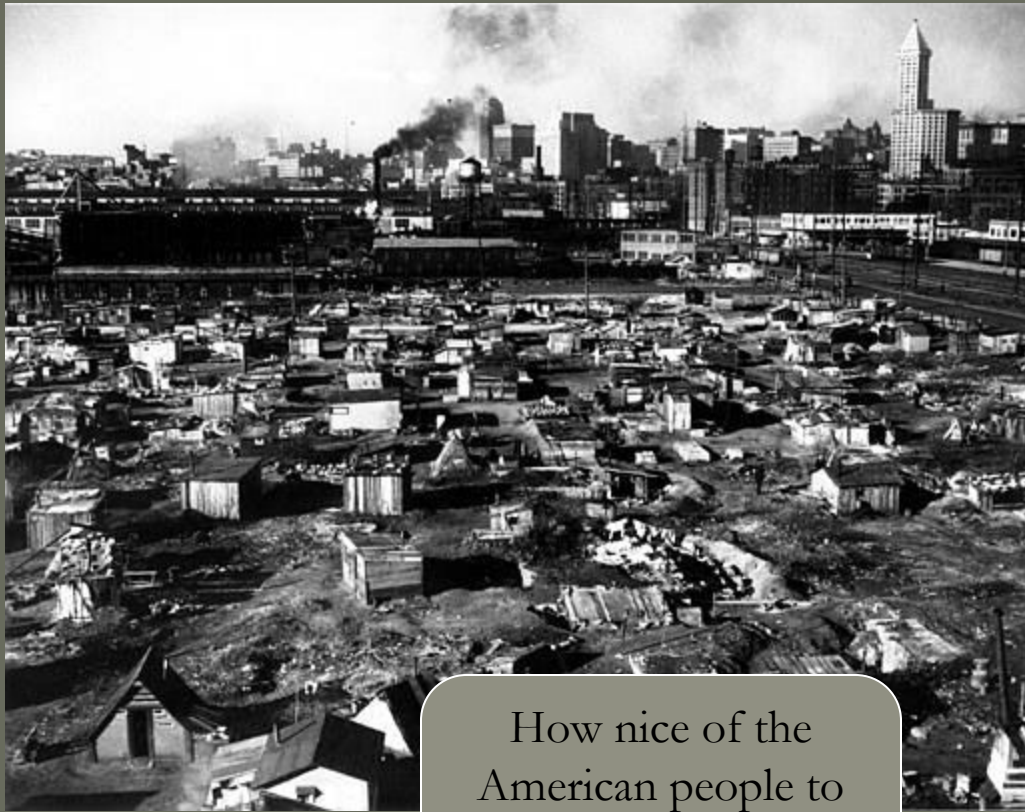




- The Hooverville shanties “vary greatly from mere caves covered with a piece of tin, to weather-proof shanties built of packing boxes and equipped with a stolen window-frame or an improved door. Some have beds and one or two a kitchen stove rescued from the junk heap, though most of the men cook in communal fashion over a fire shielded by bricks in the open.



- “The inhabitants were not, as one might expect, outcasts or “untouchables,” or even hoboes...they were men without jobs. Life is sustained by begging, eating at the city soup kitchens, or earning a quarter by polishing an automobile...”
- “Nearly every town in the U.S. has its shanty town for the unemployed...the largest Hooverville in the U.S. is in St. Louis, with a population of 1200. Chicago had a flourishing one, but it was felt to be an affront to municipal pride and was ordered burned. The inhabitants were summarily told to get out, and 30 minutes later the “homes” were in ashes.”



How nice of the  
American people to  
name a shanty town  
after me!



# Hoover's Attitude Problem

- Hoover approached the Depression with an attitude that many found impractical for the emotional and physical needs of the American populace at that time.
- He was willing to use federal aid to support business, but not for the unemployed.



