

...the time criticized political leaders, resident Hoover foremost among them, for the parts they played in bringing about, or failing to prevent, the depression. *Judging from these images, what would it have been like to live in a Hooverville?*

Poverty Devastates Rural America

In cities and towns across the nation, Americans faced a terrible plight. The numbers of the unemployed, homeless, and hopeless increased like a casualty list in some great war. In rural America, people fared no better. In fact, sometimes their condition was even worse. Farmers had been suffering even before the Great Depression. Falling commodity prices and accumulating debt had made it a struggle for farmers to keep their heads above water. Many failed to stay afloat and sank so deep that they lost their farms.

Commodity Prices Plunge But then the bottom fell out of the economy and the depression added more woes. Crop prices fell even further, and new debts were added to old debts. To make matters even worse, the Great Plains was suffering through a choking drought, an ecological disaster that lasted for years. As a result, many more farmers lost their farms and moved. They traveled about the country, looking for work and fighting for survival.

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The basic reality of farm life was the low prices paid to farmers for crops they grew for market. In 1919, a bushel of wheat sold for \$2.16; in 1932, it sold for 38 cents. A pound of cotton fetched 35.34 cents in 1919; the same pound fetched 6.52 cents in 1932. The sharp fall in prices was evident with other farm products—corn and beans, cattle and hogs. The income farmers generated was not enough to allow them to continue farming. They could not pay their debts, purchase more seed, repair equipment, and buy what their families needed to survive. Overburdened by the diminishing returns for their labor, some farmers buckled under the stress.

In Sioux City, Iowa, in 1932, the Sioux City Milk Producers Association threatened to strike if its members did not see higher profits for their milk. When the association's threats were ignored by local storeowners, farmers dumped 1,000 gallons of milk on a road outside the city. Despite such a **drastic**—and for many Americans unthinkable—action like this, farmers everywhere feared losing everything.

farmers Lose Their Farms Between 1930 and 1934, nearly one million farmers failed to pay their mortgages and lost their farms. Banks foreclosed on their lands and houses and repossessed their farming equipment. The bankers sold what they could at public auctions. Some farmers remained on the land as **tenant farmers**, working for bigger landowners rather than for themselves. Others drifted away from their communities, looking for some other kind of work.

Cesar Chavez, who later became a well-known labor organizer, recalled the troubles his proud father had during the depression. A California bank repossessed his father's small ranch, and the family was evicted from their house. Chavez remembered how it felt to lose his home:

Primary Source “We had been poor, but we knew every night there was a bed *there*, and *this* was our room. . . . But that all of a sudden changed. When you're small, you can't figure these things out. You know something's not right and you don't like it, but you don't . . . let that get you down. You sort of just continue to move.”

—Cesar Chavez

Like the Chavez family, other farmers moved on after their losses. But for those who remained, Mother Nature dealt a cruel blow to already cruel times.

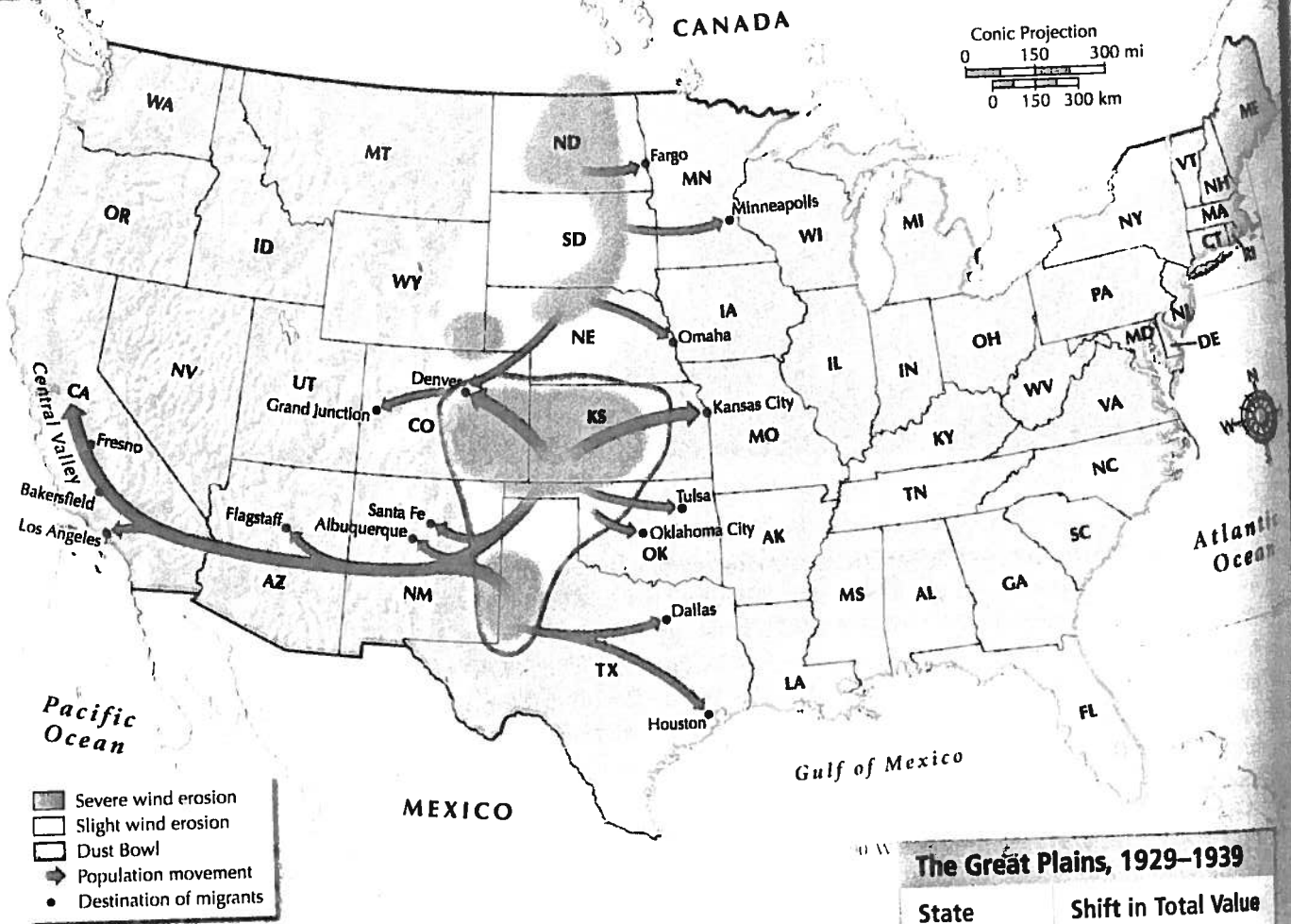
▲ A 1935 political cartoon criticizing Hoover

Vocabulary Builder
drastic—(DRAS tik) *adj.* harsh
severe

Focus On Geography

History *Interactive*

For: To learn more about the Dust Bowl
Web Code: nep-0809



The Great Plains, 1929–1939

State	Shift in Total Value of Harvested Crops
Colorado	-51%
Kansas	-53%
Nebraska	-61%
New Mexico	-32%
North Dakota	-47%
Oklahoma	-49%
South Dakota	-57%
Texas	-45%
Wyoming	-40%

The Dust Bowl

By the middle of the 1930s, drought and wind had cut a huge swath of destruction down the middle of the continental United States. The "black blizzards" of the Dust Bowl soared to heights of 8,000 feet and swept like waves across towns and farms. Outside, rabbits, birds, and field mice suffocated and died in the swirling dust. Inside, dirt seeped through every crack and covered everything and everyone in layers of grit. "We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it," observed one witness. A single storm could carry more than 300 million tons of dust, and constant storms in the "dirty thirties" destroyed as many as 5 million acres of wheat. Much of the Great Plains "breadbasket" simply blew away.

Whole harvests could be destroyed wherever dust storms struck. Many farmers went out of business as a result of their crop failures. ▶

A massive dust storm threatens the town of Stratford, Texas, in this photograph from 1935. ▶

Geography and History
How did environmental change affect farmers living on the Great Plains during the 1930s?