

Key Vocabulary

Great Depression

Route 66

The Grapes of Wrath

New Deal

100 Days

Civilian Conservation Corps

Rural Electrification Administration

Dust Bowl

Indian Reorganization Act

Will Rogers

Kiowa Six

Learning Outcomes:

The learner will be able to...

- Describe the political and economic significance of the Great Depression in Oklahoma.
- Explain how the Great Depression impacted various groups of Oklahomans, including oil workers, farmers, families, and women.
- Identify New Deal reforms and evaluate their effectiveness in Oklahoma.
- Describe the causes and conditions of the Dust Bowl and how it impacted different groups of Oklahomans.
- Describe the contributions of prominent Oklahomans such as Woody Guthrie, “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, and Will Rogers.

Compelling Question:

- What responsibilities do state and federal governments have during times of crisis?

Chapter Overview

The decade of the 1930s gave rise to new levels of suffering across Oklahoma and throughout the nation. In this chapter we explore the impact of the **Great Depression** on Oklahomans and the ways they responded with a mix of defiance, humor, optimism, and hopelessness. Oklahomans did not all suffer in equal amounts during this time, but they all did, in one way or another, find their lives and communities challenged by the events that unfolded. The state's economy, deeply rooted in agriculture and oil, experienced a dramatic downturn. Some Oklahomans were determined to stay put, no matter what happened. Others left the state in droves and were lumped in with other poor migrants fleeing other dust Dust Bowl states. Collectively these migrants were called “Okies.” Personal recollections, song lyrics, literature, photographs, and other artistic expressions from this time all serve to remind later generations of the toll exacted by the Great Depression. This chapter tells that story.

Migrant Mother

Photographer Dorothea Lange documented the devastating effects of the Great Depression on Americans for the Farm Security Administration. Her photographs ranged in subject from the living conditions of agricultural workers in the American West and South to bread lines in cities. Lange's best-known work is *Migrant Mother* (1936), an iconic symbol of the Great Depression in the United States. The Farm Security Administration hired photographers like Lange to document the displacement of people during the 1930s. The photograph known as *Migrant Mother* is actually the last in a series of six images created by Lange. Have you seen this image before? Why do you think this photo has become such an iconic image of the Great Depression?

To understand the importance of this photo, it is helpful to learn its back story. What led Lange to take this photo and what do we know about the people she photographed? Initially Lange drove past the pea pickers camp in Nipomo in central California, but something inspired her to turn around. She parked her car and entered the camp. Immediately she saw a woman and her children. The woman, Florence Owens Thompson, told Lange that she was thirty-two years old and that she and her children had resorted to eating frozen vegetables from nearby fields and birds that the children had caught to keep from starving. The pea crop was frozen and there was no work. Thompson had just sold the tires on her car to buy food.

Florence Thompson had left Oklahoma in the mid-1920s with her husband. They moved to California looking for mill and farm work. Her husband died in the early 1930s, leaving her with six children to support. Thompson continued to do farm work in California to support her family. She began a new relationship and had another child. Even though Thompson did farm work for a living, she was not actually one of the pea-picking migrant workers in Nipomo, contrary to what Lange believed her to be. When Lange encountered Thompson and her children, Thompson had been on her way to find work picking lettuce when her car broke down, forcing her to pull over into the migrant workers' camp area.

Although Thompson had left Oklahoma for California ten years earlier, her story represents the larger outmigration of people leaving Oklahoma for potential work opportunities in the American West, particularly California. During the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people left Oklahoma traveling west on **Route 66** and other highways. Many tenant farmers or sharecroppers from rural areas moved to cities and lived in tent camps. Pushed off the land, tenant farmers packed up their belongings and headed west, seeking jobs in California, reminiscent of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), winner of the Pulitzer Prize in literature. And it has been difficult to escape the Okie stereotype that Steinbeck's book has left in its wake. Historian Angie Debo challenged many of the inaccuracies found in the book and questioned Steinbeck's nine days of research in Oklahoma and the region. In later decades, governors Dewey Bartlett, George Nigh and others would work hard to dispel the state's negative Okie image and reclaim "Oklahoma!" as the state song and as a source of pride.

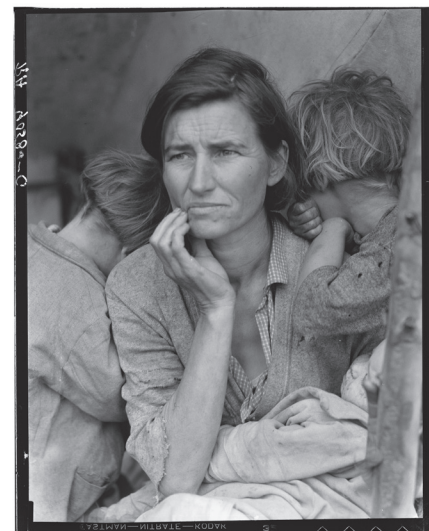


Fig. 9.1: The photograph known as *Migrant Mother* served as an iconic symbol of the Great Depression in the United States. Oklahoman Florence Owens Thompson, photographed in March 1936 by Dorothea Lange of the Farm Security Administration, represents the larger outmigration of people leaving Oklahoma and seeking work in California during the 1930s.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 9.2: This postcard depicts the famous Route 66 highway and its route through Oklahoma. First established in 1926, Route 66 connected Chicago to Los Angeles, with more than four hundred miles of road stretching across much of Oklahoma. Today there are many historical markers and landmarks along this route, including the Round Barn in Arcadia and the Route 66 Museum in Clinton.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Route 66

Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1921. This law came in response to a study that found that less than 11 percent of rural roads were paved. The law aimed to build a network of well-paved highways throughout the country. Interstate highways already existed, but they were rough to travel.

Congress revised the 1921 law in 1925. This allowed the Bureau of Public Roads to finally begin building the highways. Prior to this time, two businessmen had been advocating for a road that went from Chicago to Los Angeles. One was Cyrus Avery, from Tulsa, Oklahoma. The other was John Woodruff, from Springfield, Missouri. In 1926, their dream became reality when construction on the new Route 66 began. The highway, called the “Mother Road,” went through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. It connected the main roads of small towns and cities. Now people could travel outside of these

areas much more easily and more quickly, because they could take more direct routes. Travel also became cheaper after the construction of Route 66. It now took less gas to get to places. Smoother roads also did less damage to cars. Cheaper gas and smoother roads were more important than ever as cars gained popularity in the 1920s. People traveling along Route 66 brought more money to towns and cities on the Mother Road. During the Dust Bowl, many people left Oklahoma and the surrounding states and headed west on Route 66 to California to find new opportunities. Route 66 appears in important literary works, such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Sanora Babb’s *Whose Names are Unknown*. Babb was born in Red Rock, Oklahoma. She wrote her novel in the 1930s, but it was not published until 2004. Both novels depict families who left Oklahoma during the 1930s and traveled along Route 66 to California. The families do not find the prosperity in California that they were promised. Both writers based their stories on real-life Oklahomans they met in California. To this day Route 66 is deeply tied to the people that traveled along it during the period. Even though the Mother Road is no longer a major thoroughfare, its surviving stretches attract thousands of tourists every year.

The Grapes of Wrath

A native of California, novelist John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. The story follows the Joad family from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to California. The Joads hear that there are jobs out west. When they arrive in California, they learn that there are far more people than jobs. The camps are crowded, and Californians do not like the new arrivals. The landowners exploit them. The police target their camps with raids and attacks. When they do find work, it is only temporary, often ending when the harvest season is over.

Tom Joad, the main character, gets involved in the labor movement. Members of this movement fought to protect the rights of workers. Tom's friend Jim Casy becomes a labor organizer. The police brand Casy a "communist." One officer kills him in front of Joad. Joad then immediately kills the police officer, and afterward goes into hiding. He then decides to become a labor organizer himself.

Many people in Oklahoma did not like the book. They thought the characters did not act the way real Oklahomans did, and they feared that people in other states would get the wrong ideas about Oklahomans. Some thought that the Joad family used too much foul language. Others pointed out that the town the Joad family was from, Sallisaw, was not in an area where the Dust Bowl happened, which made the book seem inaccurate. Still others thought that the book was too critical of Oklahoma.

People began to like the book more after a US congressional committee came to Oklahoma in the early 1940s. Their purpose was to investigate the large number of people leaving the state. The committee's visit was unrelated to the book, but many hoped it would help get rid of the poor image the book gave to Oklahoma. The committee found that national problems, not the actions of Oklahoma farmers, had caused many to flee the state. One member claimed that the same conditions could have caused people to leave other states in the same way. Following this report, the number of copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* increased in Oklahoma libraries.



Fig. 9.3: John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is based on the lives of thousands of Oklahomans who were driven from their homes by poverty, drought, and dust storms during the Great Depression. In the 1930s and 1940s, the population of 62 of 77 counties in Oklahoma decreased. This image from 1939 shows a family in Muskogee in their fully packed car as they prepared to head to California to find work. Steinbeck called such a journey west on Route 66 "the road of flight."

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Great Depression

Like the COVID-19 pandemic that started in late 2019, the Great Depression was a cataclysmic world event. Many thought the whole global financial system could collapse. The ordeal altered the lives of nearly all those who lived through it in ways they never forgot.

During the 1930s, the United States joined the rest of the world in this international crisis. The US stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. The world economy then began to unravel. Oklahoma was producing almost 25 percent of the US supply of oil. By the early 1930s, most manufacturers in the United States cut back on production. In addition, auto sales dropped. Oil companies, however, did not reduce production, and the market dropped. Oil prices dropped to ten cents a barrel. In Tulsa, oil companies laid off half of their production workers, two-fifths of their pipeline hands, and nearly a third of their refining employees.

In agriculture, commodity prices started dropping in the 1920s and continued to plunge into the 1930s. Cotton, for example, plummeted to five cents a pound. As we have seen, most farmers in Oklahoma were tenant farmers, meaning they did not own their own land. They had to pay their rent and expenses with shares of their crops. Wheat farmers in Oklahoma were more likely to own their land. Agricultural experts had advised farmers to kill off the native grasses, plow up anything their tractors could reach, plant as much wheat as possible, and then leave their fields lying open, beneath thin layers of dust. But this method led to devastating results, as we will discover in more detail later in this chapter.

Wheat and other farm commodities started to collapse in the early 1930s. The price of wheat dropped. And yet farmers tried to produce more wheat by plowing up more land. The 1931 harvest was a bumper crop, an exceptionally good harvest, but there was no market for the wheat. Prices dropped by 25 cents a bushel, or about half of what it cost farmers to grow the wheat. By the early 1930s, farmers in northwestern Oklahoma faced the economic realities of the Great Depression. Total farm prices dropped by more than 50 percent. Farmers could not pay off their bank loans, leading to foreclosures and bankruptcy sales. And things became often worse for tenant farmers in the state, who could no longer pay the rent they owed for the land they farmed. They were already poor when the Great Depression started, and things got even worse for them as the 1930s continued. The poorest tenant farmers did not have the means to try to relocate to California or other states. Some moved to Oklahoma City or Tulsa to find work and began living in makeshift homeless camps along the rivers bordering these cities, where they at least had access to water.



Fig. 9.4: A group of children are pictured here at a migrant camp located in Oklahoma City near Mays Avenue. During the Great Depression era, many families experiencing homelessness congregated in migrant camps in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. A large number of these families were previously tenant farmers.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

While farmers struggled to sell their crops, at least some still had one thing going for them: food to eat. Oklahomans in large cities faced high levels of unemployment, and thousands of them were going hungry by the early 1930s. Tulsa began issuing scrip, or stamped vouchers, to unemployed people so they could get food in one of the city's soup kitchens. Homelessness became a growing problem in Oklahoma, and people struggled to find work and food.

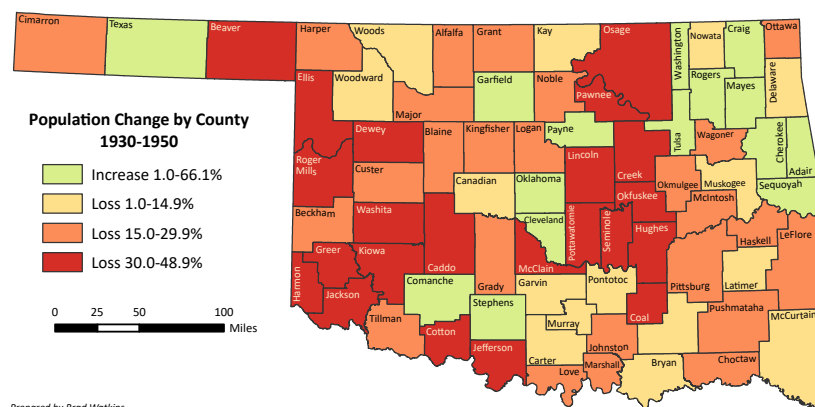
For women of color in particular, and all women in general, the Great Depression hit fast and hard. In 1929, 40 percent of African American women and girls were in the workforce. By 1931, more than 25 percent of these women had lost their jobs. As the depression intensified, 50 percent of Black women lost their jobs, while about 30 percent of white women lost their jobs. And so women “made do” and took whatever jobs they could get. All the while women’s wages were about half the wages of men. Also, some laws barred married women from certain jobs, and many state and local governments, including school districts, refused to employ married women. Why was there such a double standard for women? During the 1930s the common public opinion was that all available jobs should go to men rather than married women, with the idea that men should financially support their family. In reality the number of married women workers actually increased during the 1930s, as all family members had to contribute what they could to make ends meet.



Fig. 9.5: Breadlines such as this one at St. Anthony's Hospital in Oklahoma City became increasingly common during the Great Depression, as many people did not have the means to support themselves.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

According to the 1930 census, Oklahoma’s population was almost 2.4 million, an increase of 300,000 from 1920. One in three people in Oklahoma lived in urban areas. By the mid-to-late 1930s landless farmers and out-of-work oil field workers headed west to California looking for work. From 1930 to 1950, 62 of 77 counties in Oklahoma experienced a population decline. The population of Oklahoma did not recover from the outmigration until the early 1960s.



Map 9.1: Oklahoma experienced significant population changes during the Great Depression. Rural counties suffered the greatest decrease in populations as Oklahomans struggled to find work and care for their families.

Courtesy of Brad Watkins, PhD.

The New Deal

Americans elected Franklin D. Roosevelt (or FDR, as many called him) as president in 1933. Roosevelt had promised the country a “**New Deal**,” which would address the serious problems of unemployment, homelessness, and hunger in the United States. He had a plan, and his first 100 days produced a flurry of legislation and executive orders meant to create jobs, relieve suffering, and stimulate the economy in a variety of ways.

Roosevelt began working on these problems as soon as he was elected. The day after his inauguration, he declared a bank holiday, closing all banks until they could reopen following federal inspection and support. This helped restore some trust in the banking system. Previously, many ordinary people worried their own banks would collapse and their own money would disappear. This worry caused a series of “runs” on banks, when large groups of depositors would withdraw their money from local banks. In response to the banking crisis, Roosevelt’s administration created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which proved a significant outcome of the New Deal. The FDIC insured individual accounts so people would no longer lose their money if a bank failed. The FDIC remains in place today, insuring individual accounts up to \$250,000.

New Deal in Oklahoma

In Oklahoma, the New Deal made an impact in a variety of ways. New government programs addressed the problems in rural areas so badly affected by the financial collapse. One of the most important programs, which operated in other states as well, was the **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)**. Young men ages 18–25 joined the CCC and worked on conservation projects such as trails, picnic areas, and buildings for public use. In return for their labor, the government paid the men monthly wages, plus room and board. As a result, the program helped ease the unemployment crisis.



Fig. 9.6: The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a New Deal program, provided jobs for many young men such as this group at Camp Haskell in Binger. The CCC developed state parks in Oklahoma, including Roman Nose, Quartz Mountain, Robbers Cave, and Beavers Bend.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The first seven state parks in Oklahoma—Beavers Bend, Boiling Springs, Lake Murray, Osage Hills, Quartz Mountain, Robbers Cave, and Roman Nose—all started as CCC projects. A CCC camp in Tulsa created Mohawk Park, and two camps in Oklahoma City improved the zoo and built Will Rogers Park. In Oklahoma, CCC participants received training as carpenters, masons, and woodworkers. They were required to send \$25 of their \$30 monthly wages home to help support their families. Most camps were separated by race, but Tulsa had one of the few mixed-race camps, although Blacks and whites still slept in separate quarters. Five camps, including one at Fort Sill and one at Fort Reno, were established for Black participants. In 1934 Oklahoma had 5,000 CCC participants in 26 camps throughout the state. Today we can appreciate the contributions of the CCC in Oklahoma every time we visit a state park.

Federal programs helped farmers, especially larger farmers, survive the Great Depression. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) limited crop production by paying farmers subsidies, or cash payments, for leaving portions of their land fallow, or unplanted. The idea was that by offering farmers money to produce less, the supply of farm produce would shrink, and prices would increase. An effort to regulate livestock, however, resulted in a public relations fiasco when cattle, sheep, and hogs were slaughtered, and the meat went unused at a time when many people were hungry and meat was a luxury. Another weakness of the program was that smaller family farms, especially sharecroppers, received little financial assistance. In fact some landowners evicted their sharecroppers, leaving these families with nowhere to go but the migrant camps on the outskirts of cities.

Second New Deal

The first two years of the New Deal's government programs restored some public confidence and prevented the collapse of the financial system. They did not, however, do much to reduce unemployment or get industry back up and running again. So President Roosevelt launched the Second New Deal in 1935 as a way to help more people and to enact long-term reform. For example, the Social Security Act, one of the most significant legacies of the New Deal, provided retirement benefits financed by payroll taxes. It also provided monthly payments to widows and children who qualified for unemployment assistance through state-based programs. Another New Deal measure was the National Labor Relations Act, which protected collective bargaining, or the right of labor unions to negotiate with employers over wages, benefits, and the working conditions of union members. A third important outcome of the New Deal was the

Rural Electrification Administration (REA). Established in 1935, the REA extended electrical power to rural areas. Thanks to this program, by 1950 two-thirds of Oklahoma farmers had electricity. Finally, the largest New Deal program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), employed approximately 90,000 Oklahomans on WPA projects ranging from roads, sidewalks (which all over Oklahoma bear a WPA stamp), and bridges, to theater, visual arts, and history projects.



Fig. 9.7: The Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal program, allotted funds for developing roads, bridges, schools, and courthouses. WPA projects in Guthrie included the Jelsma Stadium and the thirty-foot-high native sandstone wall, called “The Rock,” on the north side of the stadium.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The “Great Plow Up” and the Dust Bowl

Wheat grown in Oklahoma had helped feed the Allies during the First World War. Farmers ploughed and planted more than 11 million acres of grasslands, turning the grassland into wheat fields in what came to be known as the “Great Plow Up.” When the war ended in 1918, the international demand for wheat declined and wheat prices dropped from \$2 to \$1 per bushel. Still, wheat production continued as farmers bought modern machinery such as gas-powered tractors that pulled disc plows. Tractors worked around the clock to plow the land and get it into production. What farmers did not anticipate, though, was the crisis that would erase all their progress.

The Dust Bowl was a series of dust storms in five states caused by new agricultural practices and severe drought. The catastrophe started in the early 1930s and lasted until 1936. The dust storms did not occur in all parts of Oklahoma. Rather, the dust storms happened in the northwestern part of the state, mostly in the Panhandle, stretching west to around Woodward. In addition to Oklahoma, the Dust Bowl included portions of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, totaling about 100 million acres.



Fig. 9.8: Dust storms, sometimes called “black blizzards,” darkened the skies and left dust on everything, including food, skin, and hair. The storms could lead to dust pneumonia, which caused difficulty breathing and chest pain. This photograph taken in Hooker, Oklahoma, on June 4, 1937, shows a powerful dust storm.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Beginning in the early 1930s, the Oklahoma Panhandle experienced a series of sand and dust storms sometimes reaching as high as 7,000 feet and with 50-mile-per-hour winds. These storms were like “black blizzards,” blocking out the sun and making daytime seem like nighttime. During the storms, people could not see their own hands in front of them. The wind carried away an estimated 300 million tons of topsoil. People kept the dust out of their homes by tacking up wet towels over open windows to help trap the dust and to keep the air circulating. Other times they would close the windows and try to place towels between each window and windowsill to keep dust from entering their homes.

But dust came into their homes anyway. Opal Blancett grew up in Boise City in the Oklahoma Panhandle and remembers waking up each morning with a dust outline of her head on the pillow. To keep the dust from entering their lungs, many people would cover their head and face with wet tea towels made out of flour sacks to catch the dust. Some children died from dust pneumonia. Others had whooping cough caused by the dust. Sometimes the dust storms were so bad that cars had to pull off the road—even during the day with the car lights on—because it was so dark or because mounds of dust had accumulated on the road, blocking their way.

On April 14, 1935, one of the worst dust storms of the Dust Bowl wreaked havoc on the Oklahoma Panhandle. By the afternoon it was totally dark outside, and dust had filled the sky. It was one of those black blizzards. Blancett’s family was caught up in the storm. She recalled, “My mother started praying. She thought it was the end of the world. My father and my brother had gone down about a couple of miles to pick up some horse feed with the wagon. They had to walk ahead of the horses and lead them home.”

Woody Guthrie

One famous Oklahoman, Woody Guthrie, wrote the song “The Great Dust Storm” about the April 14 black blizzard:

*On the 14th day of April of 1935,
There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky.
You could see that dust storm comin', the cloud looked deathlike black,
And through our mighty nation, it left a dreadful track.*

Woody Guthrie grew up in Okemah. His family endured many challenges while Woody was a child, but he had happy memories too of his father singing cowboy songs and his mother playing the piano. By his senior year of high school, Woody went to live with his father in Texas. He learned to play the guitar, banjo, fiddle, and mandolin.

Guthrie went on to spend time in Los Angeles and had a radio program. Then he lived in New York and participated in the urban folk music revival with Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and others. He recorded songs about the Dust Bowl in New York. Ever on the move, his next stop was Portland, Oregon, where he wrote twenty-six songs in one month, including “Roll On, Columbia” for the Bonneville Power Authority. The song promoted hydroelectric power generated by the Grand Coulee Dam and the Bonneville Dam in Washington and Oregon.

Woody Guthrie wrote more than a thousand songs and poems. He was a major influence in folk music and social protest songwriting. One of his most famous songs, written in the 1940s in New York, is “This Land Is Your Land.” Different people have different interpretations of this song. Some view it as patriotic, while others believe it is a protest song. Guthrie wrote an original version of the song and then a revised version. Although the revised version is more familiar nowadays, the lyrics in his original version have deep meanings worth examining:

*There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.
The sign was painted, said “Private Property.”
But on the backside, it didn't say nothing.
This land was made for you and me.*

The Woody Guthrie Center is located in Tulsa. And the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival takes place annually in July in Okemah.



Fig. 9.9: *Woody Guthrie*, by Charles Banks Wilson. A singer-songwriter, Woody Guthrie became known as the “Oklahoma Dust Bowl Balladeer.” Some of his most famous Dust Bowl songs are “The Great Dust Storm,” “Do Re Mi,” “Tom Joad,” and “Dust Bowl Refugee.”

Courtesy of the Capitol Art Collection, Oklahoma Arts Council.

Families got by in northwestern Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl by planting orchards and gardens. They canned lots of fruit such as peaches and cherries from their orchards and vegetables like tomatoes from their gardens. Often families raised their own beef, hogs, and chickens, and drew milk and cream from their dairy cows. Many families lived on meat from livestock they raised themselves as well as on flour from the wheat they had taken to the mill. Many cities, such as Boise City, had their own mills. Children raised on these farms in northwest Oklahoma do not recall being hungry. Children had chores on the farm including milking the cows, feeding the animals, and helping with household chores. They were somewhat better off than their urban counterparts during the Great Depression.

People throughout the country suffered during the 1930s, but the Great Depression and Dust Bowl hit Oklahoma especially hard because the bulk of the state's economy centered on oil and agriculture. And both industries failed.

Latinx Communities

During the early decades of the twentieth century, small Latinx communities were growing in size throughout Oklahoma, especially in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Latinx are people of Latin American descent, who came to Oklahoma from diverse locations, including Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean. By 1930 Oklahoma City had just under one thousand residents of Mexican descent. The Mexican government opened a consulate in Oklahoma City. Many Latinos worked for the railroads and meatpacking facilities in Packingtown, today's Stockyards City, located across the river south of the downtown area. Little Flower Catholic Church in south Oklahoma City served the Mexican community living there. A Spanish-language library opened in Oklahoma City in the late 1930s.



Fig. 9.10: Beginning in the 1920s, the Little Flower Catholic Church served the growing Latinx community in south Oklahoma City. This image from the early 1930s shows a group of children attending the Little Flower School.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



By 1930 there were 294 Latinos in Tulsa, and 486 overall in Tulsa County. Many worked for the railroads and the city streetcar lines. Some worked in the coal mines. St. Catherine's Catholic Church was an important religious and community institution in the city, serving the Latinx community that lived near the West Tulsa refinery and railyards. In addition, St. Catherine's had a K–8 school. Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church served Mexican coal miners and their families.

Fig. 9.11: In 1937, Luis Alvarado opened the restaurant El Charro in Oklahoma City. This work of art shows what El Charro looked like during the era, complete with bright reds and yellows, and a sign on the outside stating "Like a Visit to Old Mexico." By the 1960s El Charro and about sixty other Mexican restaurants in Oklahoma and Texas combined to become the restaurant chain El Chico.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

A New Deal for Native Americans

Congress passed the **Indian Reorganization Act (IRA)** in 1934. The driving force behind this legislation was John Collier, who served as US commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945. Collier called the act a “New Deal for Indians.” The IRA ended the policy of allotment and focused on restoring tribal government, building the tribal land base, and tribal economic development. The IRA was not well received by the Five Tribes and the majority of Native nations in Oklahoma, however. Collier visited Oklahoma three times, in Anadarko, Miami, and Muskogee, to promote the IRA, but he was met with resistance in many communities. In fact, when the IRA passed in 1934, Native nations in Oklahoma were exempted, as more time, discussion, and compromise were needed.

Two years later Congress passed the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA), extending many parts of the IRA to Native nations in Oklahoma, including the end of allotment policy, formation of tribal governments, and economic development. Under the law, ten or more Native Americans could organize as a “cooperative” enterprise that could administer credit, produce goods, or manage land. These cooperatives could also apply for federal loans to assist in starting these enterprises. And yet Native Americans in Oklahoma remained divided over OIWA. Some Native nations, mostly in western Oklahoma, drafted and ratified tribal constitutions under OIWA. These nations included the Caddo Nation, Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, Sac and Fox Nation, and Tonkawa Tribe. The majority of Native nations in Oklahoma, however, did not organize under the IRA or OIWA. Following passage of OIWA, only 36,000 acres were added to the tribal land base in Oklahoma. In addition, only about 10 percent of eligible Native Americans in Oklahoma applied for OIWA loans.

Will Rogers

Each US state selects two statues to represent the state in the National Statuary Hall Collection in the US Capitol Building. Oklahoma selected two notable Cherokee citizens: Sequoyah, who developed the written Cherokee language or syllabary, and **Will Rogers**, the famous performer, humorist, and writer.



Will Rogers was born in 1879 near Oologah in Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory. He grew up on his family's cattle ranch. Rogers became a performer first in vaudeville and then with the Ziegfield Follies, a New York-based show, where he developed his rope act and told humorous stories. He became known as “The Cherokee Kid.” He went on to become a movie star, radio broadcaster, syndicated newspaper columnist, and author. Some of his best-known phrases include “All I know is what I read in the papers,” and “I joked about every prominent man of my time, but I never met a man I didn't like.” When he moved to Los Angeles, his home and ranch included polo grounds near the beach in Santa Monica. Later a portion of his California land would become Will Rogers State Beach.

Fig. 9.12: *Will Rogers*, by Charles Banks Wilson. A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Will Rogers was an entertainer, author, and humorist. “Will Rogers was always a Cherokee,” Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, Jr. noted, “and he talked about it. He reminded people every day that there are Native people of this land still alive and who remain a vibrant part of America's tapestry.”

Courtesy of the Capitol Art Collection, Oklahoma Arts Council.

In 2020 the Cherokee Nation purchased the Will Rogers Birthplace Ranch near Oologah from the Oklahoma Historical Society. In addition, the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, located in Claremore, shares the story of Will Rogers through photographs, manuscripts, and memorabilia. Will Rogers's final resting place, alongside his wife Betty Rogers, is on the museum grounds.



Fig. 9.13: This photo of Will Rogers (left) and Wiley Post (right) was taken just before their final flight on August 15, 1935. Both men were avid boosters of aviation and technology. Wiley Post had constructed a hybrid floatplane from a Lockheed Orion. He wanted to test the operational capabilities of the aircraft by embarking on a long-distance flight in Alaska with Rogers. Shortly after takeoff, Post lost control of the aircraft, and it crashed near Point Barrow, Alaska, resulting in the death of both Post and Rogers.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Wiley Post's Aviation Milestones

Wiley Post was a pioneer in aviation. He is well known for advancing aviation and aerospace technology. Post grew up in Maysville, Oklahoma. His interest in flying began when he saw an airplane in flight at the 1913 county fair in Lawton. Wiley attended aviation school in Kansas City and sharpened his skills as a member of Burrell Tibbs's Flying Circus.

In 1926, Post lost vision in his left eye after an oil rig accident. He then filed a lawsuit against the oil company. With money he received from the settlement he bought his first plane: a JN-4 "Canuck." A few years later, in 1928, oilman F. C. Hall hired Post to be his personal pilot. It was with Hall's plane, the Winnie Mae, that Wiley Post began to make a name for himself in aviation. Piloting the Winnie Mae, Post won his first air race from Los Angeles to Chicago in 1930. The next year Post and navigator Harold Gatty set the world record for the fastest flight around the world. They took off from New York City in the Winnie Mae, then landed back in the city after 8 days, 15 hours, and 51 minutes. In 1933, Post broke his own world record. He did this by completing a round-the-world flight in only 7 days, 18 hours, and 49 minutes. Post made the flight solo, the first person to ever do so!

Wiley Post's contributions to aviation and aerospace technology came through his work on high-altitude flying and pressurized suits. Post worked with the B.F. Goodrich Company to create a pressurized suit. Wearing the suits allowed pilots to conduct test flights at high altitudes. Pressurized cabins were still in development. While conducting high-altitude flight tests, Post set an unofficial altitude record of an estimated 50,000 feet. This happened over Bartlesville on December 7, 1934. Through such tests and his own calculations, Post found that flying in the stratosphere could allow for greater speeds due to the thinner air at higher altitudes. He also discovered the east-to-west jet stream during his test flights.

Tragically, Wiley Post and longtime friend Will Rogers died together on August 15, 1935. Post was piloting the plane and Rogers was the passenger. They lost their lives when Post's hybrid floatplane crashed near Point Barrow, Alaska, due to engine failure. Yet his accomplishments and contributions to aviation and aerospace technology ensure his lasting legacy. His designs for pressurized suits aided NASA in their suit designs in the early years of the US space program. Post's test flights formed the groundwork for today's high-altitude commercial air travel.

Kiowa Six

The Kiowa Six were a group of six Kiowa visual artists from Oklahoma. Their names were Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope, Lois Smoky, and Monroe Tsatoke. These six artists created a new style of painting that depicted ceremonial and social scenes of Kiowa life. Through their work we can study the development of Native American painting from Plains hide painting and ledger art to flat-style Southern Plains painting.

Stephen Mopope, the oldest of the Kiowa Six, was born in 1898 on the Kiowa Reservation in Oklahoma Territory. His relatives, including his great-uncles Silver Horn and Fort Marion ledger artist Ohettoint, taught him traditional Kiowa painting techniques. Mopope received acclaim as an artist for his mural work. One of his most striking works, which he painted for the Anadarko Post Office in 1936, is a large mural depicting Native life on the southern plains. In addition, he was commissioned to paint large murals for the new Department of the Interior building in Washington, DC.



Fig. 9.14: Kiowa Six, by Mike Larsen. The six Kiowa artists, Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope, Lois Smoky, and Monroe Tsatoke, studied with Oscar Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma in 1927.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Judicial Center, Oklahoma Supreme Court.

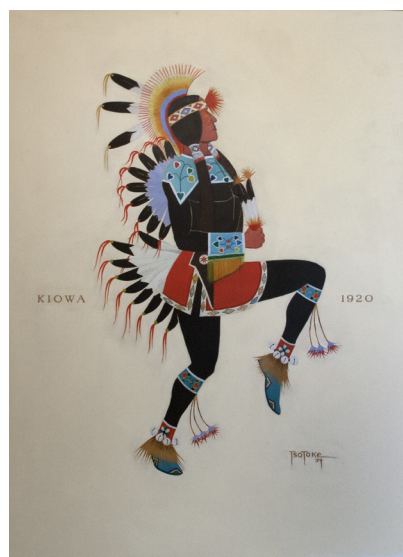


Fig. 9.15: In the 1930s Kiowa artists Monroe Tsatoke and Spencer Asah painted scenes such as this one depicting Native life on the third-floor walls of the Oklahoma Historical Society building. Today that building is the Oklahoma Judicial Center, which houses the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Professional conservationists spent time using special tools and cotton swabs to preserve these murals by the Kiowa artists so that visitors can experience the art for themselves.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Judicial Center, Oklahoma Supreme Court.

The youngest of the Kiowa Six was Lois Smoky, who was born near Anadarko in 1907. Her Kiowa name was Bou-ge-Tah, or “Coming of the Dawn.” Smoky’s family gave her permission to attend the University of Oklahoma (OU) with the other Kiowa artists but required that her mother come with her. The university would not allow her mother to live in the dorms, so the Kiowa Six and Smoky’s mother lived off campus. Smoky attended OU for only one semester and then returned to Anadarko. She then got married and raised seven children. She became known for her beadwork, an art form she learned from her mother and grandmother.

Five of the six artists attended St. Patrick’s Mission School in Anadarko during their youth. There they received art instruction from a Choctaw nun named Sister Mary Olivia Taylor. As the students approached college age, Kiowa agency field matron Susie Peters contacted University of Oklahoma art professor Oscar B. Jacobson about these artists. After learning about their talents, Jacobson created a special program for the Kiowa artists in 1926. The Kiowa Six moved to Norman to work with Jacobson at the university. The six artists exhibited their paintings at the Denver Art Museum and the First International Art Exposition in Prague, Czech Republic, in 1928. Their Southern Plains flat-style paintings highlighted dancers, ceremonies, and daily life.

Another place where Oklahoma's Indigenous artists received formal artistic training was Bacone Indian University in Muskogee. At Bacone, Chickasaw artist and educator Ataloea McLendon established a Native American art and music center. Acee Blue Eagle (Muskogee Creek and Pawnee), who had studied under Oscar Jacobson, was the first director of Bacone's art school, and many eastern Oklahoma Indians followed as its directors. Dick West (Southern Cheyenne) was chairman of the art department there from 1947 to 1970. His son W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) would serve as the founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in the fall of 2004 in Washington, DC. Then, from 2012 to 2021, he served as president and CEO of the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles.



Fig. 9.16: Allan Houser's sculpture *As Long as the Waters Flow* (1989) stands in the South Plaza of the Oklahoma State Capitol. Known for his distinctive work as a sculptor, Houser, a member of the Chiricahua Apache Nation, connected traditional and modern styles in his abstract-figural artworks.

Courtesy of the Capitol Art Collection, Oklahoma Arts Council.

displayed his art at the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco and the World's Fair in New York.

After finishing school, Houser lived and worked in Los Angeles, Haskell Institute in Kansas, and the Inter-Mountain Indian School in Utah, before returning to Santa Fe to become a founding member of the Institute of American Indian Arts. Houser received many awards and honors due to the originality and popularity of his tribal artwork. In 1980 and 1983, he received state art awards from New Mexico and Oklahoma. Houser was the first Oklahoma Cultural Ambassador. In 1985, Houser was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush presented him with the National Medal of Arts.

Houser's sculptures can be viewed in many museums and public places in Oklahoma. These works include *As Long As the Waters Flow* in the South Plaza of the Oklahoma State Capitol, and *Unconquered* in front of the Oklahoma History Center.

Allan Houser, Chiricahua Apache Sculptor

In 1914 Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache) was the first baby born after Geronimo's band was released from Fort Sill, the US Army post just north of Lawton, Oklahoma. Houser is one of the most renowned Native American modernist sculptors of the twentieth century.

Before his birth, the Apache Tribe had a turbulent history. As leader of his people, Geronimo fought to protect the Apache ancestral lands of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. Geronimo and his tribal community fought against white settlers, Mexican troops, and the US Army. He surrendered in 1886. The federal government imprisoned close to 1,200 Apache people, including Geronimo. Houser's parents, Sam and Blossom Haozous, spent over twenty years as prisoners of war at Fort Sill.

At age twenty, Houser studied art with Dorothy Dunn at the Studio School of Indian Painting at the Santa Fe Indian School of New Mexico. He had his first solo exhibition as a student. It consisted of nineteen watercolor paintings at the Museum of New Mexico. In 1939, the Department of the Interior in Washington, DC, hired Houser to create murals. He

Governing Oklahoma during the Great Depression

As we learned in chapter 6, **William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray** played a major role in the 1906 Oklahoma Constitutional Convention, where he served as president of the delegation and wrote major portions of the state’s constitution. After statehood, Murray served as Speaker of the First Legislature and later as a member of the US Congress. Then Murray’s career took a sudden turn, when he tried to establish a cotton colony in Bolivia during the 1920s. When that venture did not pan out, he returned to Tishomingo, where he had lived as a young man, and started campaigning for governor. In 1930 Murray became governor with a record majority of the vote. Once in office, he pardoned many convicts and sent over two thousand Oklahoma prisoners to prisons in other states. He frequently declared martial law. He shut down oil wells when prices dropped due to overproduction. A critic of FDR’s New Deal, Murray limited the role of federal relief programs in Oklahoma, causing Oklahomans to lose out on federal funds. His son Johnston Murray served as governor in 1950.

After William Murray served one term as governor, oil industrialist and philanthropist E. W. Marland successfully ran for the position in 1934 on the promise of bringing the New Deal to Oklahoma. A lawyer and businessperson from Pennsylvania, he had formed several oil companies in the 1910s and consolidated them as Marland Oil Company in Ponca City in the early 1920s. To this day the Marland Mansion stands as a symbol of the remarkable oil wealth of the time. By the late 1920s, however, Marland lost control of his company, and it was renamed Conoco when financier J. P. Morgan and other bankers forced him out. With the loss of his oil empire, Marland changed political parties from Republican to Democrat and entered politics, first serving as a member of Congress in the early 1930s.

As governor of Oklahoma from 1935 to 1939, Marland’s “Little New Deal” emphasized the need for the state’s government to work with the federal government in creating jobs for Oklahomans. His administration worked with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) on a series of projects that employed more than 90,000 Oklahomans. Some of the projects in Ponca City included Lake Ponca Park, Blaine Stadium, and the city’s public library.

Before his service as Oklahoma’s next governor, Leon Phillips, a Democrat, called “Red” by members of his football team, attended Southwestern Normal School in Weatherford and taught school in Custer County. Then he studied law at the University of Oklahoma. During the First World War, Phillips served as a private in the artillery division of the US Army. Following the war, he returned to Okemah to practice law. In 1932, he was elected a member of the House of Representatives and served three two-year terms. While in the legislature, Phillips served as Speaker of the House in 1935 and minority leader in 1937. In 1938 Phillips ran successfully for the office of governor.

As governor from 1939 to 1943, Phillips proposed a balanced budget amendment to the constitution, which the state legislature passed. The amendment limits the state’s annual appropriations budget to the amount of expected revenues. The State Board of Equalization makes annual and quarterly estimates of revenues and, accordingly, adjusts the state budget and makes cuts when necessary. If revenues are more than expected, the excess is deposited in a “rainy day fund.” In theory, at least, the state of Oklahoma would no longer spend more than it collected.

Conclusion

Oklahomans faced many challenges during the Great Depression. They experienced crop failures. They lost their jobs. They did not always have enough to eat. Elected officials struggled to find solutions. There were tensions between state and national leaders over how to respond to the Great Depression. Women like Florence Owens Thompson worried about a future where they could not take care of their children. Desperation and fear became all too commonplace. Despite these hardships, or maybe even because of them, the Great Depression in Oklahoma also gave rise to great artistic expression.

Woody Guthrie's soulful lyrics provided vivid descriptions of what it felt like to be down and out in Oklahoma. The artistic talents of the Kiowa Six had a lasting impact on the art world, inside and outside Oklahoma. The humor and optimism of Will Rogers helped sustain Oklahomans in one of the most difficult periods in the history of the country. The creativity of Oklahoma artists, singers, and writers was matched by the creativity of everyday Oklahomans who sought ways to adapt and survive.

The US government made many efforts to deal with poverty, hunger, and joblessness during the Great Depression. However, it would not be until America entered World War II that the depression would come to an end. New challenges awaited Oklahomans as they headed into the mid-twentieth century. Yet as we will discuss in the next chapter, Oklahomans embraced the wartime challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.



Fig. 9.17: During the Great Depression, double features were popular and movie tickets on average cost less than 25 cents, making “going to the show” a favorite form of entertainment. Here is the Mecca Theatre in Enid in 1939.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Short Answer Questions

- 1 How were farmers impacted by the steep drop in commodity prices?
- 2 Describe two federal programs that the New Deal introduced to combat the Great Depression.
- 3 How did the overproduction of wheat and cotton lead to the Dust Bowl?
- 4 How did the New Deal affect tribal governments?
- 5 Select two state governors from the list below and explain what they achieved during the 1930s as governor.

William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray

E. W. Marland

Leon Phillips

Short Response Questions

- 1 How did the state and federal governments respond to the challenges of the Great Depression? Provide an example for each type of government in your answer.
- 2 How did the hardships faced by Oklahomans during this period affect the culture of the state going forward?