

The Great Depression

The 1929 stock market crash set into motion a series of events that plunged America into its greatest economic depression. By 1933, the country's gross national product had been nearly cut in half, and 16 million Americans were unemployed. Not until 1937 did the New Deal policies of President Franklin Roosevelt temper the catastrophe. This economic downturn persisted until the massive investment in national defense demanded by World War II.

The causes of the Depression were many, and still debated. High spending in the 1920s created a gap preventing working class people from increasing their incomes. The trade policies of earlier administrations increased the cost of American goods abroad. Lines of credit were overextended, which fueled speculation on Wall Street. The crash that occurred on October 29, 1929 ("Black Tuesday") soon spread across the world, ruining European economies not fully recovered from World War I.

American writers and artists depicted the devastation in prose and pictures. John Steinbeck immortalized the plight of Oklahoma tenant farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise*

Famous Men (1941) used the grim but dignified photographs of Walker Evans to illustrate the catastrophe in rural areas. Photographer Dorothea Lange, employed by the Farm Security Administration, documented in magazines and newspapers nationwide the reality that confronted American farmers.

Harper Lee experienced the Great Depression as a child in Monroeville, Alabama, and used her memory of it in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Maycomb County," she writes, "had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself" (p. 6), a reference to a famous speech by President Roosevelt. Walter Cunningham's father refused a WPA (Works Progress Administration) job, fearing what would come of his independence if he went on relief. And Bob Ewell, as Scout tells us, was "the only man I ever heard of who was fired from the WPA for laziness" (p. 248).