

Erosion of the People

The Great Depression in the United States lasted from 1929 to 1941, and only ended because of the U.S. entry into World War II in December 1941. No decade in the 20th century was more terrifying for people throughout the world than the 1930s, which included economic disorder, the rise of totalitarianism, and the coming (or existence) of war. For Americans, the 1930s summons up such images as breadlines, rural poverty, and homeless families in shacks cobbled together from salvaged wood, cardboard, and tin. The combination of severe drought and plummeting agriculture prices during the decade caused the Dust Bowl disaster, the worst drought in modern U.S. history, which in 1934 covered more than 75 percent of the country and severely affected 27 states. As a result, some 2½ million Americans fled the Plains states, and many headed for California where the promise of a better life often collided with the reality of scarce, poorly paid work as migrant farm laborers. Illinois experienced its own natural disaster during the



Lining up for food in Louisville KY during the Great Depression, 1937

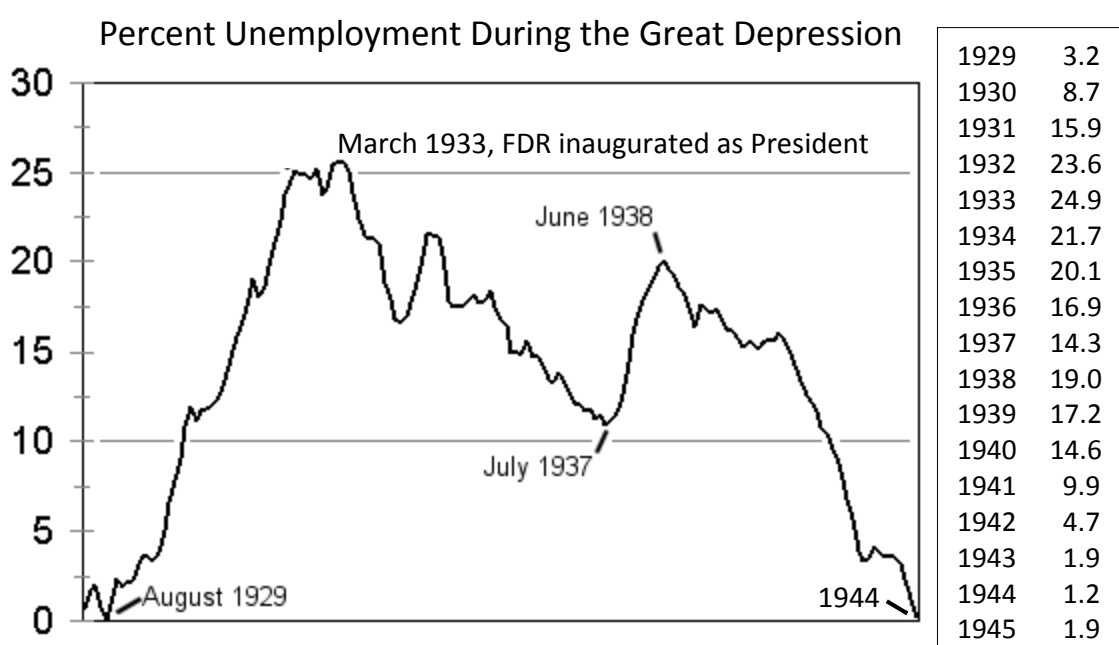
Great Depression in February 1937 when the worst flood to date on record impacted the southeastern and southern parts of the state along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

The Great Depression changed the American family structure in dramatic ways. Many couples delayed marriage — the divorce rate dropped sharply (it was too expensive to pay the legal fees and support two households), and birth rates dropped below the replacement level for the first time in American history. Traditional roles within the family changed during the 1930s — men finding themselves out of work now had to rely on their wives and children to make ends meet. Many did not take this loss of breadwinner status very well, and a 1940 survey revealed that 1½ million married women had been abandoned by their husbands. It was a time when thousands of teenagers became drifters, feeling they were a burden to their families; and children grew up quickly, taking on adult responsibilities. Long considered the "last hired, first fired" before the Great Depression, minorities were the first sector of the population impacted by job layoffs. African American men were either shut out completely, or had to settle for separate and lower pay scales, and a shortage of jobs in the Southwest led to the illegal deportation of 400,000 Mexican-Americans.



Overturned houses in Shawneetown IL resulting from 1937 flooding

The Great Depression did not affect all Americans in the same manner. Many who were wealthy felt little or no impact at all, and as many as 40 percent of Americans may never have faced real hardship. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has estimated that nearly 13 million Americans were unemployed in 1933, nearly 25 percent of the civilian labor force of over 51 million. March of 1933 was the worst month for joblessness in the history



of the United States, with about 15½ million people unemployed. This startling increase came 4 years after the rate reached its lowest percent in August 1929, two months before the stock market crash on "Black Tuesday". Although the unemployment rate fell to nearly 14 percent in 1937, it rose to nearly 20 percent during 1938, less than 12 months later and did not fall below 10 percent until February 1941. Unemployment remained in the single digits throughout WWII. As a comparison, the U.S. unemployment rate for September 2014 was reported as 5.9 percent.