

Up From the Dust History to Know Before You Play

Before the class begins playing MISSION US: “Up From the Dust,” here are five important pieces of historical context with which your students should be familiar. If you have not already taught this material in your class, introduce it to your students before they make their way through life during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression.

1. Economic expansion and the rising availability of credit during the 1920s set the stage for the economic crisis of the Great Depression.

The 1920s were a time of economic expansion in the United States. Manufacturing boomed, and the availability of consumer credit enabled Americans to buy new goods such as cars, radios, and refrigerators. Bank loans and credit also led more people to invest in the stock market than ever before. But the prosperity was uneven; as the rich got much richer, the average worker’s income rose slowly, and farm income was erratic. Too much credit and the unequal distribution of wealth contributed to the collapse of the economy triggered by the stock market crash in October 1929.

2. The Great Depression caused widespread and unprecedented suffering among Americans.

Unemployment rose from 3% in 1929 to 23% in 1932, and millions of people could only find part-time work. Average real wages fell 16% in just 2 years. Nine million people lost their savings accounts when thousands of financial institutions failed. Many people, employed and unemployed, fell behind on their rent or mortgage payments and lost their homes. The newly homeless often lived in poorly constructed groups of temporary dwellings that became known as “Hoovervilles,” or they became transients.

3. Racial discrimination and segregation were common and, in many places, legal.

During the 1920s and 1930s, segregation laws in most southern and many northern states meant that African Americans and whites were educated in separate schools, traveled on separate train cars, and were separated in movie theaters, restaurants, and swimming pools. While some African Americans had moved to northern cities during the World War I era, most still lived in the rural South. In Texas, people of Mexican descent made up nearly 12% of the population in 1930 and, like African Americans, faced significant discrimination. During the early years of the Great Depression, state officials in Texas, Arizona, and California rounded up Mexican immigrants and sent them back to Mexico, seeking to reduce demand for local relief.

4. Railroads were an important method of transportation.

Prior to the beginning of commercial air travel and the construction of the interstate highway system, railroads were the most common method of transportation in the United States. In 1930, the U.S. had 250,000 miles of railroad tracks blanketing the country, moving freight and people. By 1932, a quarter of a million youths under age twenty-one (as well as many of their older counterparts) had left home in search of work or shelter, hitching rides or hopping freight trains in what one government agency called a “migration of despair.”

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5. It was difficult for family farmers to hold onto their land.

At the start of the Depression, the number of farmers who owned the land they farmed was steadily shrinking. Between 1929 and 1933, a third of all American farmers lost their farms. Many farmers had taken on increasing levels of debt during the 1920s, and when farm prices dropped with the onset of the Great Depression, they could no longer pay back that debt and banks foreclosed on their land and equipment.