

Guiding Question: What actions did people take to cope with the economic hardship of the Great Depression?

Document Analysis

Text Analysis: Bonus Army Memoir

Read the following excerpt from W.W. Waters' memoir and answer the questions that follow.

In the following memoir, World War I veteran W.W. Waters recalls the high unemployment and low morale he witnessed on the streets of Portland, OR, during the first years of the Great Depression. Facing a similar situation himself, Waters was a founding member of the Bonus Expeditionary Force, a large group of veterans who marched from Oregon to Washington, DC, in the spring of 1932 demanding immediate payment of their war bonuses.

In my ceaseless beating about the city I found family after family in the same general condition or worse. I saw men half clad, in threadbare clothing, pacing the streets in soleless shoes. On their faces was the same look, part hope, part bewilderment, as they searched for a chance to earn a few dollars at honest work. I talked with hundreds of these men and found that, with few exceptions, they wanted not charity but work that would enable them to live and to regain their self-respect ...

These men had fallen far down into the valley of despair. Some push was necessary to start them out and up over the hill. Jobs would have provided the best sort of impetus but there were no jobs. The Bonus, a lump sum of money, could act in the same fashion. Debts could be met, doctors' bills paid, a fast fraying credit renewed, and one man could look another in the eye once more.

Source: Waters, W. W. & William C. White. 1933. *B.E.F. The Whole Story of the Bonus Army* (pp. 6–10). New York: The John Day Company.

<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001874081>

Word Bank	
memoir (n) – a first-person historical account	soleless (adj) – shoes with bottoms that are worn out
low morale – lack of confidence or motivation	bewilderment – a feeling of being confused or lost
ceaseless (adj) – without end	valley of despair – a place with no hope
threadbare (adj) – cloth that is thin and tattered with age	impetus (n) – a force that makes something happen
	Bonus (n) – a payment the US government promised to those who fought in WWI, that veterans were demanding
	fraying (v) – wearing out

Time: At least 40 minutes

Instructions

Goal/Intent: Building on their game knowledge, students develop their document-reading and writing skills as they answer the essential question: *What conditions did ordinary Americans face during the early years of the Great Depression, and how did they respond?*

- A. **Document Analysis** (30 min)
- These documents present an excerpt from a memoir and two photographs that reveal conditions during the Great Depression. Ask students to read the excerpt silently (or have a student read it aloud) and look closely at each photograph, including the contextual headnotes and captions, and then use the Note-Taking Tool to summarize each photograph either as a full class, in small groups, or individually.
- Make sure students understand that the memoir writer was a WWI veteran who helped organize the Bonus March on Washington, DC.
 - Similarly for the photographs, make sure students understand that the encampments, or Hoovervilles, were created by unemployed and homeless people and were common in every urban area of the U.S. during the Great Depression.

If your students need additional support in interpreting the documents, you might have them focus on the two images and respond to the following questions:

- For Image 1: What kinds of buildings do you see? What are they made of? Who do you think built them? What would you feel like living there?

Document Analysis Questions

Highlight three or four phrases that stick out to you in the passage.

1. What do these phrases reveal about how the writer, W. W. Waters, felt after walking the streets of Portland during the early years of the Great Depression?
2. According to Waters, what did these veterans need and why? How would a “bonus” for veterans provide relief?

- For Image 2: Describe the kinds of people you see, and how they are dressed. Would these people have been eating together before the Depression? What are some feelings they may have had about eating in the soup kitchen?

B. Discussion (15 min)

Have students share their responses and prompt them to consider both the desperation unemployed workers felt during the Great Depression, and the actions they took to survive, such as:

- the demand for WWI bonuses
- the makeshift solutions that communities found, such as the creation of Hoovervilles
- the contributions of private individuals and charities.

Ask students to consider how individuals responded to the conditions and how the government and private charities responded:

- Do you think that organizing the Bonus Army March on Washington, DC, was an effective response to the economic depression? How should the government have reacted? What other responses could unemployed workers or veterans have taken?
- How do you think communities reacted to the Hoovervilles of the 1930s? What could governments, communities, or individuals have done to provide better options for homeless families?

Suggestions:

- Use class time to begin the **Document Analysis**; have students work in small groups to “jigsaw” the documents.
- Have students complete the analysis and respond to the questions for homework.

Photo Analysis: Hooverilles

The images below capture Hooverilles in the 1930s. Look closely at both images, read the descriptions, and then complete the chart that follows.

Seattle Hooverville

The Great Depression left millions of Americans unemployed. Some Americans and their families, unable to afford rents or mortgages on their homes, were forced to live on the streets. Massive encampments called “Hooverilles”—named for President Hoover, whom many Americans blamed for the Depression—sprang up as temporary housing for the newly homeless. Seattle’s largest Hooverville (seen in this photograph from 1933) stretched over nine acres and consisted of hundreds of shacks without electricity or running water.



Homeless camps known as a “Hooverville,” foot of S. Atlantic St, ca. 1933, Seattle, Washington.

Source: University of Washington Libraries. Special Collections Division. Seattle Photograph Collection.

<http://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/seattle/id/1167/rec/14>

St. Louis, Missouri, Hooverville

Some of the Hoovervilles lasted for many years and created community-based services for the residents, including soup kitchens (as seen in this photo from 1932). Near this St. Louis Hooverville located along the Mississippi River, a local philanthropist [wealthy donor] helped set up a cooperative food distribution and canning center that supplied food for the needy and unemployed residents of the Hooverville.



Hooverville residents eat meals provided by a charity on Dec. 4, 1932. Fortunately for the 1,500 diners, it was a balmy 52 degrees that day. St. Louis, Missouri.

Source: St. Louis Post-Dispatch photo archives <https://www.stltoday.com/news/archives/>

Note-Taking Tool: Photograph Analysis

After closely studying the images, jot down your observations about the following in the chart (be specific!).

Describe what you see (the buildings, the kinds of people).	What do you learn about Hoovervilles by viewing the images?
What do you learn about Hoovervilles by reading the captions?	What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that communicated?

Discussion Questions

1. Based on Frank's and Ginny's experiences and your analysis of the images and memoir excerpt above, what conditions did ordinary Americans face during the early years of the Great Depression, and how did they respond? What strategies did they use?

2. How does the response of Americans in the 1930s compare to how you think Americans would respond to similar conditions today?