

Up From the Dust Myths and Misconceptions

*Below are some common misunderstandings about the history of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the New Deal. Each of the bolded statements is **incorrect**.*

1. **Myth: The Great Depression was the first national depression in the United States**
Although the Great Depression of the 1930s was the worst economic crisis in United States history, it was not the first. Severe depressions occurred in 1819, 1837, 1857, 1873, and 1893, and most of these crises were worse than the one that came before.
2. **Myth: Everyone in the Dust Bowl left the Great Plains for the West.**
The Grapes of Wrath, a novel by John Steinbeck that was made into a famous movie in 1940, gave people the impression that millions of people fled the Dust Bowl to find work in California. That is not exactly true. Actually, 16,000 Dust Bowl farmers moved to California looking for work. While this is a lot, most of the farmers in the Dust Bowl, about three-quarters of them, stayed where they were. Some who did leave went to states nearby, not just California.
3. **Myth: The Dust Bowl was entirely a natural disaster caused by the drought.**
Dry spells were common in the Great Plains, occurring about every twenty-five years. However, the lack of rain was not enough to cause the extreme dust storms and devastation of the Dust Bowl. People played a big part too. For a long time, the Southern Plains had grass covering the land, and the soil was held together by this grass. However, starting in the 1890s, settlers began to plow up the grass to grow crops like wheat and cotton. Also, farmers brought more and more cattle and sheep, which ate the grass. During World War I and the years after, farmers planted even more wheat because it was in high demand. When the 1930s came with a severe drought, there was little grass left to hold the soil together, allowing the wind to carry the soil away in massive dust storms.
4. **Myth: President Roosevelt and the New Deal ended the Great Depression.**
Even though they helped millions of Americans who were suffering during the Great Depression, none of Roosevelt's New Deal programs put everyone back to work and fixed the economy for the long term. It was not until the United States joined World War II in 1941 that things really began to change. During the war, factories had to increase production to supply the military. This created more jobs and finally eliminated the last effects of the Great Depression.
5. **Myth: Everybody in the country supported President Roosevelt and the New Deal.**
The New Deal was criticized by both conservative and progressive groups. Conservatives claimed New Deal programs looked too much like socialism. Most business leaders feared that these government programs would mean higher taxes and might make workers more defiant. On the other hand, liberals and radicals thought the New Deal did not go far enough in helping workers and gave too much protection to banks and large corporations.