

## Missouri Life

Life in Missouri during the 1930s and 1940s was much like life all over the Midwest during the Great Depression. Most of the state was rural and farmers suffered greatly. Families had little money to spare and had to live off of what they could grow on their land. A devastating drought in the early thirties greatly impacted farmers in the western portion of the state, leading to migrations out west in search of work. These Missourians lived in or near the Dust Bowl and their experiences were reflective of those expressed by John Steinbeck in the *Grapes of Wrath*. The declining value of farms, the economic slump of agriculture and the lack of production led to a record number of unemployed workers. Unemployment in St. Louis was over thirty percent in 1933. Once people lost their jobs, they soon lost their homes. Settlements of shacks made by these homeless appeared all over U.S. cities. These 'Hooverilles,' named bitterly after President Herbert Hoover, were built of cardboard, scrap metal and packing boxes. Americans were angry that the president's attempts to fight the depression were failing. The largest Hooverville was in St. Louis, just west of the Mississippi, housing over 1,000 people.

While much of the state suffered, there were areas that fared better than others. The Works Progress Administration, developed out of President Roosevelt's New Deal Programs, created many jobs for Missourians all over the state. Forest Park was further developed during this time with the building of the Jewel Box, the Municipal Opera buildings and the further cultivation of its grounds. Jackson County (Kansas City) had passed a \$50 million dollar, ten-year plan for public improvements just before the stock market crashed and so thousands of jobs were created. The reconstruction of the Jackson County Courthouse was funded and built through this program.

Due to its unusual prosperity during this time, Kansas City was also able to support many musicians. Count Basie took over Bennie Moten's band and Julia Lee's career took off here. Also, the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art was opened in the 1930's and, finding themselves one of the only museums in the country that had any money to buy art, they were able to build a significant permanent collection.

In the middle of the state, Bagnell Dam was built in the early 1930's, providing employment for 4,600 workers at any one time and a total of 20,500 over the two-year construction of the dam. Because of this, Central Missouri experienced a time of growth and expansion during the Great Depression which was highly unusual.

Many of Thomas Hart Benton's works depict rural scenes that would be typical of certain areas of the state during the 1930's and early 1940's. However, many of the crops would not have been this healthy and the true devastation that some farmers experienced is not explicit. Benton was a Regionalist painter and was fond of looking back at America's agrarian roots and idealizing and romanticizing the farmer's life.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fsaPlaces24.html>

Pictures of Missouri during the Depression