

The First New Deal: Unemployment

Roosevelt faced unprecedented mass unemployment. By the time he took office, as many as 13 million Americans – more than a quarter of the labor force – were out of work. Bread lines were a common sight in most cities. Hundreds of thousands roamed the country in search of food, work, and shelter. "Brother, can you spare a dime?" was the refrain of a popular song.

1. Approximately how many Americans were unemployed when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president?

An early step for the unemployed came in the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a program that brought relief to young men between 18 and 25 years of age. CCC enrollees worked in camps administered by the army. About two million took part during the decade. They participated in a variety of conservation projects: planting trees to combat soil erosion and maintain national forests; eliminating stream pollution; creating fish, game, and bird sanctuaries; and conserving coal, petroleum, shale, gas, sodium, and helium deposits.

2. What government organization employed young men between the ages of 18 and 25 in camps administered by the army?

A Public Works Administration (PWA) provided employment for skilled construction workers on a wide variety of mostly medium-to large-sized projects. Among the most memorable of its many accomplishments were the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams in the Pacific Northwest, a new Chicago sewer system, the Triborough Bridge in New York City, and two aircraft carriers (Yorktown and Enterprise) for the U.S. Navy.

3. What government organization provided employment for skilled construction workers?

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), both a work relief program and an exercise in public planning, developed the impoverished Tennessee River valley area through a series of dams built for flood control and hydroelectric power generation. Its provision of cheap electricity for the area stimulated some economic progress, but won it the enmity of private electric companies. New Dealers hailed it as an example of "grass roots democracy."

4. What government organization built dams in the Tennessee River valley area?

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), in operation from 1933

