

18 The Great Depression Transforms Montana – 1929-1941



FIGURE 18.1: *No Place To Go*, by Maynard Dixon, 1935

MAYNARD DIXON
1935



READ TO FIND OUT:

- Why Montanans were already struggling when the Great Depression began
- What Montanans did to survive during the Great Depression
- How the government helped put people back to work
- How the Great Depression changed Montana

The Big Picture

The Great Depression brought tremendous hardship to Montana towns and families. Just as hard times transform a person, the Great Depression changed Montana's personality.

What was the hardest time you have ever had to live through? How did surviving that time change you?

In the 1920s and 1930s, Montana plunged into a crisis so deep and so serious that it changed Montana's personality. It affected everyone who lived here, from the state capital to the Indian reservations.

The crisis came in two parts. First, a ten-year drought (beginning in 1917) dried up Montana's farmlands. Homesteaders lost their crops, their homes, their farms, and their life savings. Impacts from the drought affected every Montana community—especially in the agricultural east.

Then, in 1929, the U.S. economy crashed. America entered the worst economic crisis in its history—the Great Depression. Instead of helping Montana out of its economic troubles, the rest of the country fell into the same desperate condition.

This was a time like no other time in Montana. For many people, the Depression Era was so difficult and so painful that it changed their whole outlook on life. People who had been optimistic and hopeful became bitter and disappointed. Some became very suspicious of change. Other people have fond memories of this time because their families drew closer together. Some people also benefited from some of the changes the Depression Era brought.

The Depression changed Montana as a state, too. The government sponsored projects to put unemployed Americans back to work. These projects brought new technologies and new conveniences like electricity, telephones, and modern roads to rural areas. Even while the economy slumped, Montana became more modern.

If you have been through a very difficult time in your life, chances are that your ability to survive and heal has become an important part of who you are. This happens to societies, too. How people survived the Depression, responded to challenges, and came up with new ideas is an important part of the Montana story.

1920s: Depression Comes Early to Montana

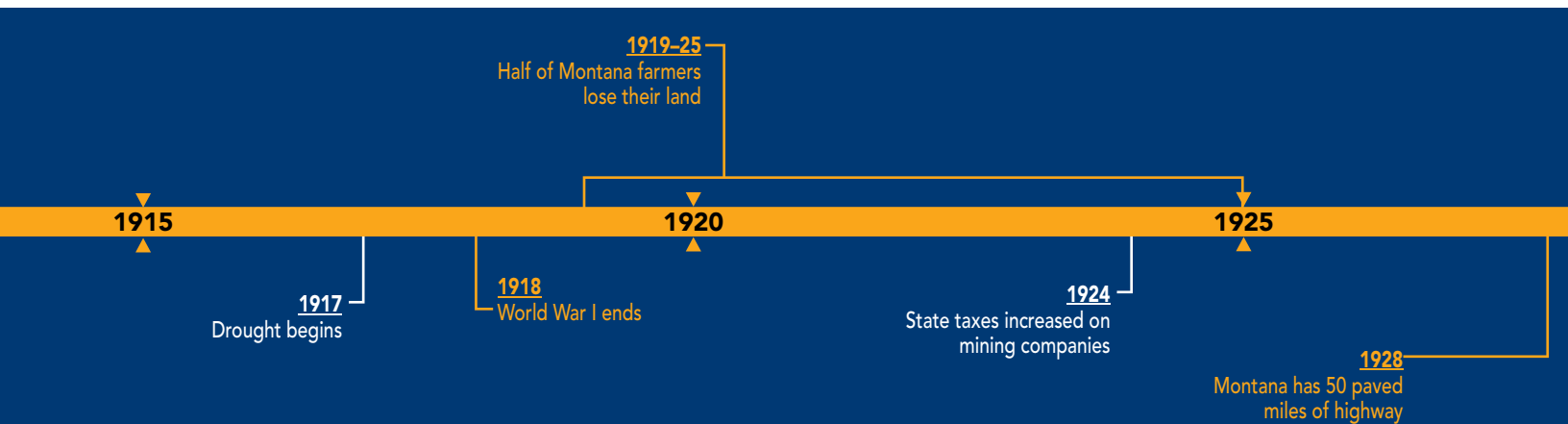
A host of changes came to Montana just before the 1920s. Automobiles arrived, making travel and transportation much easier—especially for people who lived in the country. The Progressive Era brought new laws to improve life and make government work better. Montana’s homesteading boom brought thousands of new residents. They carved up

most of its last remaining open lands into farms, ranches, and townships.

America’s involvement in World War I boosted Montana’s economy. The war created a huge demand for Montana’s copper, lumber, and wheat. Then the influenza epidemic of 1918 killed 5,000 Montanans in their beds. Before the events of this chapter began, Montana already was undergoing many changes.

In 1917 the drought began: years of dry, hot summers; springs with no rain. In 1918 World War I ended. The military canceled its purchases

FIGURE 18.2: For Montanans like sheep rancher Charles McKenzie, the 1920s and 1930s brought daily toil and few luxuries.



of copper, lumber, and wheat. The price of copper **plummeted** (fell dramatically). Thousands of lumbermen, miners, and smelter workers lost their jobs. Farmers had planted as much wheat as they could—and no other crop—to support the war. But when wartime demand disappeared, farmers could no longer make a living.

Half of Montana’s farmers lost their land between 1919 and 1925, and 70,000 people moved away. Businesses failed, banks closed, and many families lost their life savings. When people could not pay their taxes, county governments went bankrupt. While much of the rest of the country enjoyed growth and prosperity in the 1920s, Montana struggled.

Drought destroyed many farms on the Indian reservations. Without crops to sell, many Indian farmers sold off their lands. Tribes already battled against **allotment** (the federal program of subdividing Indian reservations into privately owned parcels), which subdivided some **reservations** (land that tribes had reserved for their own use through treaties) and sold off millions of acres of Indian-owned lands to farmers and homesteaders (see Chapters 11 and 13).

Hope Dawns—Briefly

In the mid-1920s rain began to fall again—in some places. Crops grew, and some farmers began to prosper again, especially those who had adopted good conservation techniques and who had planted a variety of crops.

Another thing helped farmers prosper: bigger farms. The drought had driven thousands of homesteaders off their land. The farmers who survived could buy up neighboring farms at very low prices. Gas-driven tractors and trucks enabled them to work more land. They had learned that standard 160- or 320-acre homesteads could not produce enough to support a family—but a 1,000-acre farm could.

A new tax law also brought relief. Until 1924 mining companies like the Anaconda Copper Mining Company paid the lowest state taxes of any group in Montana—yet earned more money than other industries.

“Windstorms normally lasted three days. The wind rose in early morning, died down toward the third evening, and rose again before sun-up.”

—CHARLES VINDEK, A FARMER NEAR PLENTYWOOD

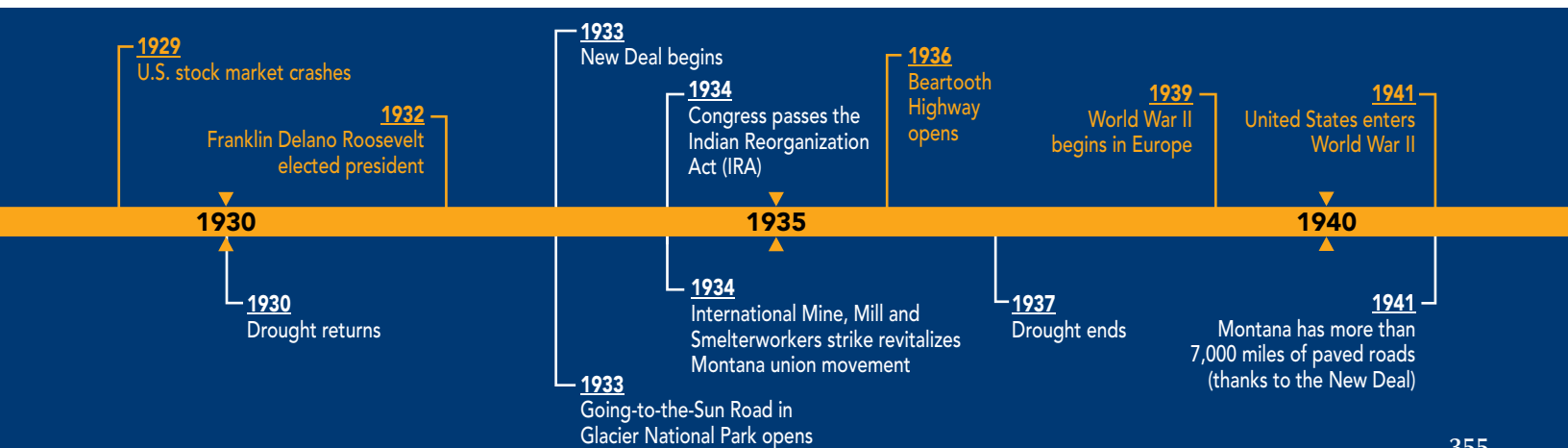




FIGURE 18.3: Many Montanans, like this thin, tired woman of Flathead Valley, were used to working hard to build a better life for their families. But when they lost what little they had during the Depression, they wondered if it was all worth it.

FIGURE 18.4: Millions of Mormon crickets hopped across Montana's farmlands in the 1930s. Farmers dug trenches and built metal fences around their crops to keep them out, but the Mormon crickets just piled up and walked over one another's backs. Here a Big Horn County farmer cleans out a cricket trap.



In 1924 Governor Joseph Dixon, a Progressive, supported an **initiative** (a law passed by the people rather than by the legislature) increasing state taxes on mining companies. The new tax law made mine owners pay a larger share. The Company made sure that Dixon lost his bid for reelection for what he had done. But the initiative succeeded. Farmers no longer had to pay most of the costs of state government. Life started to look more hopeful for Montana's farmers.

The World Comes Crashing Down

In 1929 the entire U.S. economy crashed. A deep and lasting economic depression hit the United States, Canada, and most of the developed countries of the world. It was the worst economic crisis in U.S. history. The stock market crashed. The average income of American workers was cut in half. Thousands of businesses and banks failed, and across the country one out of every four workers lost his or her job.

Historians still argue about what really caused the Great Depression of 1929–41. Most of them agree it was a combination of forces. But the results were devastating. Across the United States, people became almost as poor as many Montanans had been for a decade.

The Great Depression pitched Montana's economy into a downward spiral. Crop prices dropped sharply again. Beef prices collapsed. The price of copper fell from 18 cents per pound to 5 cents per pound. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company cut its production levels by 90 percent. Industrial plants in Butte, Anaconda, East Helena, and Great Falls closed. Mines and smelters laid off thousands of workers. Every industry suffered.

Drought Returns—Worse than Ever

Then, in 1930, the drought returned. This time it covered the entire Plains region from Canada to Mexico, from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi River. The Plains became so dry that great swaths of topsoil simply blew away in hot, dry windstorms. Swarms of grasshoppers flew so thick they blotted out the sun. Mormon crickets marched across the dry soil, devouring everything in their path.

A weather observer said that 1931 was the driest in 30 years—only 5.67 inches of rain, less than half the normal annual rainfall. A farmer in Daniels County wrote in his diary, "The world is a dreary spot for Montana grain growers."

That year Governor John Erickson visited Scobey, a town that promoted itself as the world's largest wheat-shipping town. What he saw made him bury his head

in his hands. Of the 5,000 people living in Daniels County, 3,500 of them were broke.

What Would You Do?

What would you do if you could not work, could not grow food, and had no money? Many Montanans left for the West Coast, where things were not as bad. Many others found part-time work or odd jobs.

Charles Vindex, a farmer outside Plentywood, helped a neighbor cut and store ice, sawing until his muscles trembled. "I would have said this was the hardest work a man could do for \$1.25," he wrote later. "A year later I did the same job for 75¢ a day."

For the first few years at least, the farmers could feed their families on what they grew. City folk had it tougher. With no jobs, no money, and no hope, they appealed to the Red Cross and other agencies for aid.

People **scrimped** (used less) and re-used everything they could. Neighbors shared labor, wagons, cars, and water. They patched their clothes, then patched the patches. When their clothes wore out altogether, they cut them into strips and wove rugs out of them. All across the state, people hunted deer and elk until they nearly wiped them out. When one group studied people in Butte in 1934, they discovered that five out of every six kids were **malnourished** (seriously underfed).

Local Relief Efforts Were Not Enough

Towns and counties started their own programs for **work relief** (relieving poverty by giving people jobs). Towns hired men to build playgrounds and parks. Counties hired teams to build roads. But with so many people too poor to pay their taxes, towns and counties quickly ran out of money to hire people.

Charities set up food banks and distributed clothing to people in desperate need. In 1931 the Red Cross shipped to Montana and North Dakota 200 freight-car loads of food and clothing donated from people in other states. But soon the

A Letter from the Depths of Despair

"I am an old man, 70 years old. I and my old wife at the present time have one baking of flour left and one pound of coffee. We have no credit and no work . . . We have lived here 20 years and I have paid \$3,500 in taxes since I have been in Montana and this is the end. What can you or anyone do about it?"

—J. E. FINCH, FARMER NEAR SUMATRA, IN A LETTER TO GOVERNOR JOHN ERICKSON, JULY 16, 1931

“Our family hadn’t had a crop in four years. When you went to lunch, the grasshoppers would gnaw at the salt from your hands on your pitchfork. Anyone who could get out did.”

—SAM RICHARDSON, WHO FARMED IN DANIELS COUNTY

FIGURE 18.5: Many Americans were horrified at the idea of being “down and out”—so bad off that they could not take care of themselves. So when people helped one another, they also offered encouragement. This woman serves dinner to two unemployed men at the Salvation Army in Butte.



“Many of us have put in the best years of our life out here; we know what hardship, privation and hard work means. We realize that we must start over somewhere else, as we have lost faith and confidence in this part of the country. It isn’t easy for us to give up our homes and admit defeat but we must admit that we are done.”

—WARNER JUST, GARFIELD COUNTY FARMER, WRITING TO SENATOR JAMES E. MURRAY, AUGUST 10, 1936

“The thirties I don’t want to remember at all. That was bad all the way through . . . Nobody had any money . . . You could buy a set of overalls for 25 cents but nobody had 25 cents.”

—WALLACE LOCKIE, MONTANA FARMER

FIGURE 18.6: Some people packed up and moved to the West Coast, where there were more opportunities. More than once, road crews working on MacDonal Pass (east of Helena) had to help heavily packed automobiles get over the pass. They sometimes gave the desperate families an extra dollar or two to help out.



churches and the charities were overwhelmed. There were just too many families in need. For Montanans who had carved farms out of the grasslands by hard work and stout-heartedness, asking for help was humiliating.

Montana hit bottom between 1930 and 1932. In 1930 one out of every four Montana households received some kind of aid. In January 1931 Governor Erickson told the **legislature** (the branch of government that passes laws) that he thought “the great heart of the people of Montana will see to it that **destitution** [extreme poverty] and suffering are relieved.” But he also told the legislature not to spend any more money. The state had no more money to provide relief, anyway. Montana, along with many other states, began pressuring the federal government to help.

The 1932 Election: How Should the Government Help?

If you were president, what would you do? Herbert Hoover, a Republican, was president of the United States in 1931. He did not think the government should directly help poor people. He feared that giving aid directly to poor people would make them dependent on the government. He thought that relief to individual families should come from private sources—churches, charities, and the Red Cross.

Hoover thought that government should aid businesses. If businesses were healthy, people would get their jobs back and the economy would recover. He thought that people needed jobs more than food. “Nobody is starving,” he said.

But people were starving. Even if they were not dying in the streets, long-term poverty had weakened the health of even hardy people. Some of the hardest hit were disabled people who had been injured while working and could not get work at all.

The election of 1932 pitted two opposing political ideas against each other.

Hoover's opponent was Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat. Roosevelt thought that the government should use its resources to help the millions of people who were suffering. He proposed that the government strike a "new deal" with the American people. Under this "new deal," the government would feed huge amounts of money into each troubled state to build roads, bridges, dams, sewer systems, and other improvements. The government would also provide loans to farmers to get through the tough years and back on their feet.

The voters overwhelmingly elected Franklin D. Roosevelt. As soon as he took office, in 1933, his New Deal programs began.

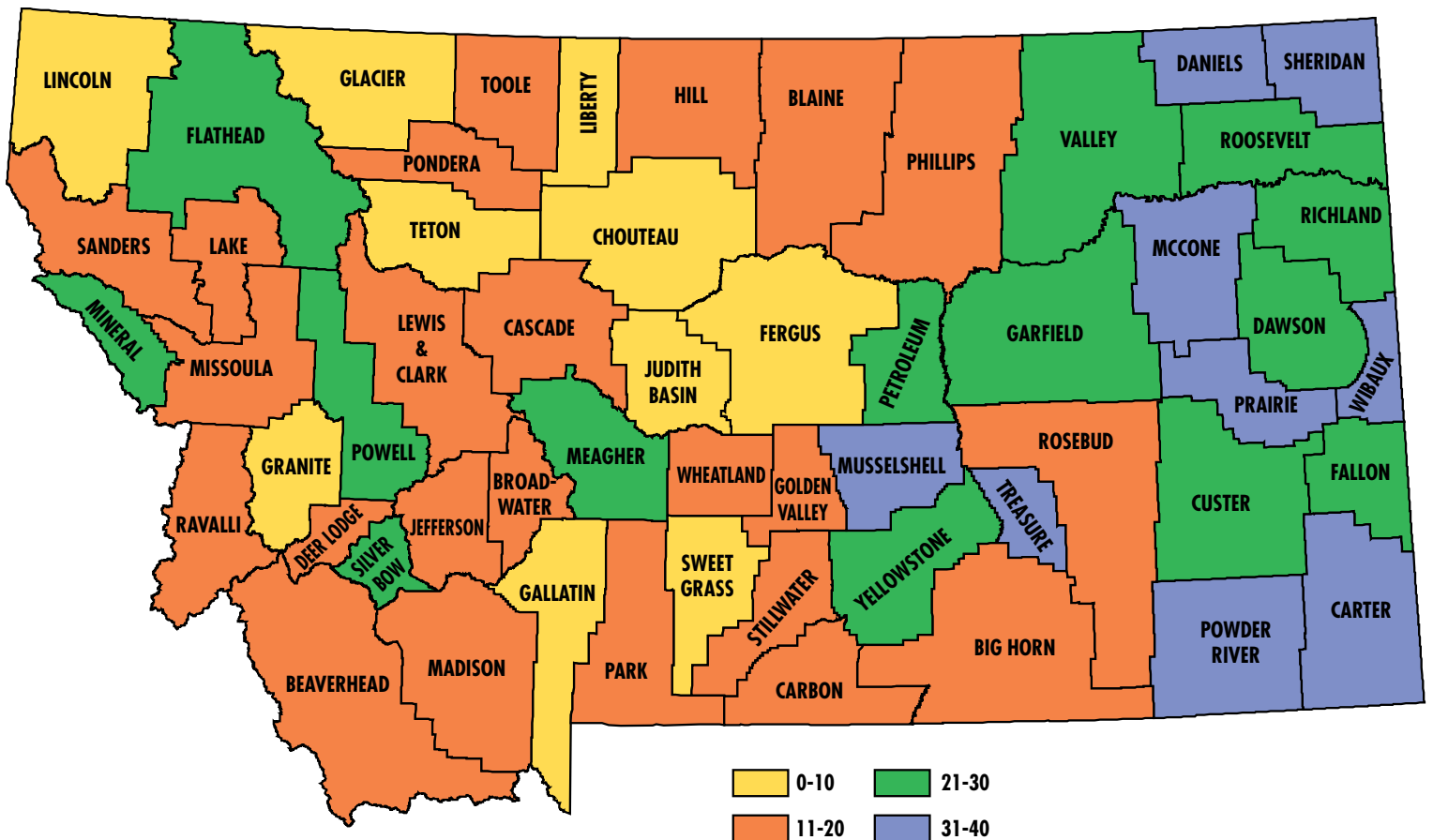
Roosevelt knew that two of his most powerful supporters were Montana's two Democratic senators, Thomas J. Walsh (a senator from 1913 to 1933) and Burton K. Wheeler (a senator from 1923 to 1947). He later repaid Walsh and Wheeler for their political backing by sending important projects to Montana.

“We became shy of other people during those patched and shabby years.” —CHARLES VINDEK

“The world owes no man a living, but it certainly owes all of its people a chance to make a living.”

—JOHN F. HAUGE, *A GROCER IN PARADISE*, WRITING TO GOVERNOR JOHN E. ERICKSON, NOVEMBER 1931

FIGURE 18.7: In February 1935 all but ten Montana counties had more than 10 percent of their population on relief.



Percentage of Montanans on Relief by County, February 1935

Roosevelt and the New Deal

Roosevelt's New Deal lasted from 1933 to 1939. It had three goals: to bring relief to hungry, unemployed people; to help the economy to recover; and to bring reforms that would make sure an economic crisis like this never happened again.

First, Roosevelt sent relief funds to each state to help the people who were in the most desperate situations. He closed all the banks temporarily so they could reorganize and open up again on stronger footing. The government also created a federal insurance program for banks. Today, if your bank fails, the government insures your family's deposits so you would not lose your life savings.

The second phase was a series of work programs. These programs put unemployed people back to work. They brought practical, much-needed improvements to cities and counties across the country. And by doing these things, they restored hope and pride to people whose spirits had been crushed by despair.

The New Deal included an alphabet of laws and programs designed to improve the economy:

- **AAA (1933)**—The Agricultural Adjustment Acts were several laws to help farmers. They allowed the government to raise prices of farm goods and to pay farmers to reduce their crop production so that there would not be so much extra on the market. The AAA brought

FIGURE 18.8: President Franklin D. Roosevelt, shown here at Fort Peck, visited Montana three times during the 1930s. Tribal leaders at the Fort Peck Indian Reservation made him an honorary chief in 1934.



between \$5 million and \$10 million to Montana farmers. They came to rely on this program to survive.

- **FCA (1933)**—The Farm Credit Administration gave farmers easy loans so they could pay taxes and buy grain. This program helped prevent farmers from losing their land, as so many had in the 1920s.
- **REA (1935)**—The Rural Electrification Administration formed non-profit corporations to provide electricity to rural farms and ranches. Low-cost electricity greatly improved life in Montana's rural communities. It also created competition for Montana Power Company—which was not pleased.
- **CCC (1933)**—The Civilian Conservation Corps was one of the most popular of the New Deal programs. The CCC hired young men 17 to 25 years old to work in national parks, national forests, state forests, and campgrounds. They fought fires, planted trees, and prevented stream bank **erosion** (wearing away). They also built trails, fire lookout towers, and campgrounds. Young men earned \$30 per month (equal to about \$467 today), kept \$5, and sent \$25 home to their families. By the time the program ended, in 1942, it had employed nearly 3 million young men around the country.
- **NIRA (1933) and Wagner Act (1935)**—The National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Act guaranteed workers the right to organize unions. Anaconda Copper Mining Company workers took advantage of these laws, striking for higher wages in 1934.

“When you listened to Franklin D., you were listening to hope.”

—JOHN C. HARRISON OF THE JUDITH BASIN, WHO WAS 16 WHEN THE GREAT DEPRESSION BEGAN

FIGURE 18.9: The WPA—Works Progress Administration—created projects to put people to work and improve their communities. The WPA sponsored bookmobiles like this one in Fairfield. Trucks from town libraries drove to neighborhoods and rural areas carrying library books, which residents could check out and return the next time the bookmobile came through.



We Learned to Drive on the Fort Peck Project

“Erick Olson, who went to work on the Fort Peck Dam in the mid-1930s, recalled that he ‘never knew what a tractor was till I got to Fort Peck.’ A superintendent came up to his crew one day and asked, ‘Is there any man here that can drive a pick-up?’ And there never was a hand that had lifted and he went on to the next crew and do you know there was not a man that could drive a pick-up.’ Olson learned to drive on the Fort Peck job.”

—MARY MURPHY, *HOPE IN HARD TIMES* (2003)

- **PWA (1933)**—The Public Works Administration built large projects designed to improve the **infrastructure** (basic facilities, such as roads, bridges, water, sewer, and communications) of the nation. In Montana, the PWA built sewage-disposal plants, hospitals, and its largest project, the Fort Peck Dam.
- **WPA (1935)**—The Works Progress Administration—like the PWA—was designed to put people to work. The WPA hired 20,000 people to build roads and bridges, schools, airports, water systems, and sewers. It built 10,000 new **privies** (outhouses) in rural areas. This program also sponsored artistic and cultural projects for writers, musicians, and photographers.

Of all these programs, the CCC, the PWA, and the WPA put the most Montanans to work. CCC crew members built many of our parks and campgrounds. Women in WPA sewing rooms sewed more than 800,000 garments, curtains, bedspreads, and rugs for the relief program. The WPA paid dentists, doctors, and nurses to provide health care. Every day we drive over roads and bridges built by the WPA, though no one still uses the privies they built.

Other WPA workers created remarkable, lasting works that are important records of twentieth-century America. Writers and photographers contributed unforgettable artworks documenting many cultures and aspects of life. Culture committees began recording oral histories and stories of Indian tribes.

FIGURE 18.10: Indian Civilian Conservation Corps crews, like this Blackfeet logging and forestry crew, provided needed jobs on the reservation.



New Deal Projects Brought Jobs to the Reservations

On Indian reservations, many people were already so poor that the Depression made little difference. When New Deal programs brought jobs to the reservations, many families began to rise out of poverty.

An American Indian Division of the CCC hired young men on the reservations to build water reservoirs, dig wells, fight fires, and help with other federal projects. CCC jobs gave workers housing, food, and a small salary, which they would not have had otherwise.

Crow tribal historian Joe Medicine Crow later said that even though the pay was low, the CCC jobs were important to Crow men. “Up to that time there were no jobs for Indians here,” he said. “The Crow found work, employment from the government—maybe only \$30 a month. Dollar a day. But they are making money. Something new. They learned to become professionals in carpentry and heavy equipment operating.”

Fort Peck Dam: Enduring Symbol of the New Deal

President Roosevelt owed Montana senators Burton K. Wheeler and Thomas J. Walsh a favor for helping him get elected. That favor became the biggest PWA project in the country: the Fort Peck Dam.

Construction started in 1934 on the Missouri River just above the mouth of the Milk River. When it was finished, in 1940, it was the largest earth-filled dam in the world. It created the fifth-largest human-made lake in the country—16 miles wide and 134 miles long. The dam stands 258 feet at its highest, and stretches 2 miles wide.

The Fort Peck Dam brought 11,000 workers from all over Montana and elsewhere into Valley and McCone Counties at the southwest edge of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Little towns like Wheeler, New Deal, and Delano Heights (Delano was Roosevelt’s middle name) sprang up to house, feed, and entertain laborers. Many of those people, newly trained in skilled jobs, stayed in Montana to raise their families after the dam was complete.

The dam’s **turbines** (motors powered by water) created 185,250 kilowatts of electricity that provided power to the region. The dam also gave the Army Corps of Engineers the ability to manage the Missouri



FIGURE 18.11: The Fort Peck Dam was an immense example of American muscle and engineering know-how. It immediately became a symbol of America’s recovery from the Great Depression.

FIGURE 18.12: One of the goals of the Fort Peck Dam project was to put unemployed Americans back to work. But not everyone pictured in this November 25, 1936, photo is actually working. The officials in hats on the upper left have come to observe, and some of the workers on the upper right just want to be in the picture.



River's flow by holding or releasing water as needed to prevent flooding downstream. More than anything else, the dam became a powerful symbol of hope and strength to a nation that had almost lost faith in itself.

Unions Regain Strength

The 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act revived unions in western Montana. Unions had lost strength during World War I, when patriotism and industrial production were more important than workers' rights. But during the Depression, more people supported the labor unions.

In May 1934 the International Mine, Mill and Smelterworkers Union went on **strike** (an organized protest in which workers refuse to work) against the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. They demanded higher pay, a 40-hour workweek, and safety improvements. They also demanded that Anaconda hire only union members for its laborers. Eleven other unions joined the walkout. Even state leaders agreed with the strike.

FIGURE 18.13: During the 1930s government photographers traveled across the country documenting the effects of the Depression and the success of New Deal programs. This picture was taken in Teton County.



In previous strikes, the Company had been able to call on the government to force laborers back to work. But this time the public strongly supported the unionists. Anaconda agreed to many of the union's demands. The strikers' victory began a new day for Montana's unions, whose political and economic power grew in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

The "New Deal" for American Indians

In the 1920s many Americans complained to the government that the Indian reservations had been appallingly mismanaged. So many people spoke out that the government decided to study the matter. In 1926 the government sent out a team of researchers, led by Lewis Meriam, to see what life was like on Indian reservations. For two years they visited reservation homes, schools, hospitals, and agencies across the West.

Meriam's 800-page report strongly criticized the federal government for its treatment of American Indians. It told of Indian people struggling against the worst poverty in the nation, living on unfarmable land with no jobs and no opportunities. American Indians, the report said, made less than one-tenth the

average income of most Americans. They were malnourished and sick with curable diseases. Their children were still being sent off to faraway boarding schools. Meanwhile, the report said, the government misused tribal funds and ignored the needs of Indian people.

The Meriam Report called for immediate, widespread changes in federal Indian policy.

The Indian Reorganization Act

Roosevelt appointed John Collier as commissioner of Indian affairs. Collier was an outspoken **advocate** (supporter) of American Indian rights. He called the earlier federal policy to erase tribal cultures and to **assimilate** (to absorb into the majority culture) Indian people “a crime against the earth.”

When he took office, Collier learned that since the Allotment Act of 1887 (also known as the Dawes Act), Indian lands had shrunk from 138 million acres to 47 million acres. Tribal funds had shriveled from \$500 million to \$12 million. Most of these funds had gone to government expenses and corruption—not to help the tribes.

Collier pushed Congress to pass new laws that would give tribes more say over their own future. He called for Congress to “stop wronging the Indians and to rewrite the cruel and stupid laws that rob them and crush their family lives.”

In 1934 Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA). Montana senator Burton K. Wheeler cosponsored the act, so it was also called the Wheeler-Howard Act.

The IRA radically changed U.S. policy toward American Indians. Instead of trying to destroy tribal cultures, federal policy now gave tribes some limited powers of self-government and encouraged them to strengthen their cultures.

The IRA was one of the most important laws affecting Indian tribes since the Dawes Act. It put an end to the allotment system, which had removed so much land from Indian ownership (see Chapter 11). It also returned some land back to tribes.

The IRA also established several important rights for American Indians:

- The right to establish tribal governments with their own **constitutions** (documents that set rules for government)—still subject to the approval of the federal government, however.

FIGURE 18.14: Even after Montanans went back to work, they remembered the lessons of the boom-and-bust cycle. Some families moved into nicer houses, but others—like the Butte owners of this new automobile—spent money only on things they could take with them if the bust came again.





FIGURE 18.15: After the Indian Reorganization Act was passed, tribes across the West could once again hold Sun Dances and other religious ceremonies without being punished by the government. Here Northern Cheyenne families bring food offerings to a medicine lodge during a Sun Dance in the 1930s.

- The right to form business corporations and to get federal loans so they could participate in the economy.
- The right to practice their own religion (the government prohibited Indian religious ceremonies in the early reservation years).
- An immediate end to federal funding for off-reservation boarding schools.
- More influence within the Bureau of Indian Affairs so American Indians could have a bigger say in their own future.

Some tribes objected to the IRA because it required tribes to set up their governments like the U.S. government, with representatives and constitutions. It did not allow the tribes to return to their own traditional forms of government. The Bureau of Indian Affairs wrote a standard constitution for all the tribes to adopt. Even though the IRA gave tribes more powers, the government still supervised everything they did.

In the end 181 tribes accepted the IRA, created tribal governments, and adopted the constitution given them. Most of these tribes have revised their constitutions over the years to better suit their people and traditions.

About one-third of the Indian tribes in the country rejected the IRA. The Crow tribe was one. The Crow people wrote and adopted their own constitution in 1948 that more closely reflected tribal traditions.

In the first 15 years after the IRA passed, more than 70 tribes used federal loans to set up businesses—and paid off the loans. The number of Indian-owned cattle ranches doubled. The death rates on reservations dropped in half. And to the joy and relief of Indian parents nationwide, 16

boarding schools closed (or turned into day schools) and 84 day schools opened in reservation towns.

The IRA did not improve everything. It did not restore to the tribes the millions of acres of land lost in allotments. And it did not allow tribes to return to their traditional methods of government. While tribes struggled to rebuild their cultures after 50 years of forced **assimilation** (when one culture is absorbed into the majority culture), they still had to follow government rules. Many Indian people found this very frustrating.

A New Montana Emerges

In 1937 the drought broke. Rains fell, crops grew, and Montana's economy slowly began to come alive again. Businesses expanded and hired more people in permanent jobs. Stronger labor unions brought improved working conditions for laborers and craft workers.

A new Montana emerged from the Great Depression. Telephones and electricity came to many rural areas, making life easier and improving communication. Nearly half the farms had gas-powered trucks and tractors. Roads and automobiles brought people together and brought crops to market.

New Deal projects had changed farmers into skilled industrial workers. Many young men saw no future in farming or had lost their land. They learned new skills building the Fort Peck Dam or engineering bridges and roads, and never went back to the farm.

Thousands of acres of farm and ranch land had changed hands. The drought had wiped out all but the most successful farms. The people who remained bought up abandoned farmland for pennies—sometimes 45 cents an acre. By 1940 the average farm had increased from 360 acres to over 1,000 acres. Larger farms and ranches stood a better chance of surviving Montana's weather cycles.

FIGURE 18.16: State government expanded to provide more services to the people—including building and maintaining state parks. This artful poster from the 1930s advertised Montana's state parks to tourists and campers.



The Depression and the New Deal changed life for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. A stronger state government—and stronger labor unions—limited the Company's power over Montana. The Fort Peck Dam and federal electrification programs directly competed with Anaconda's sister company, the Montana Power Company. The government regulated electricity prices and railroad rates. And, in 1933, the Company's forceful leader, John D. Ryan, died.

The Company remained extremely powerful in Montana. It still owned many of the state's newspapers and still employed more workers than any other single business in Montana. It remained one of the strongest political forces, too. But after the New Deal, the Company had to learn to work with other organizations.

FIGURE 18.17: The New Deal sent many Montanans back to work. But it was World War II that really revved up Montana's economy, especially by boosting industries that provided materials used in the war, like Anaconda's smelter.

A Government Presence Everywhere

The Great Depression and the New Deal changed Montana's personality. The state now depended on the federal government for its economic

stability. New Deal projects had brought \$381.5 million in aid, plus another \$142 million in loans, into Montana. Because of the state's large land base and small population, it received the second-largest aid package in the nation **per capita** (person). It totaled \$974 in aid and loans (about \$14,300 today) for every man, woman, and child in Montana. To this day, Montanans cherish their independence yet depend on government programs to make life better.

Farmers came to rely on federal farm **subsidies** (financial help from the government) to survive in an ever-changing market. Counties and state government relied on federal road-building programs to provide money and jobs. And many people came to depend on other New Deal programs like Social Security, which provided old-age **pensions** (retirement pay) for workers, the blind, and people with physical disabilities. This program helped thousands of Montanans survive if they could not work.

The state and federal governments also began managing and preserving wildlife. Americans had become alarmed



at the loss of wildlife during the Depression. State fish and wildlife agencies worked to restore wildlife populations.

State government expanded dramatically, forming new agencies and offices to handle all the money and programs. State offices became more professional and **bureaucratic** (concerned with official procedure) to minimize opportunities for corruption.

By 1940 the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and the railroads no longer dominated Montana. Federal and state government became an equally important presence.

The New Deal Changed Montana Politics

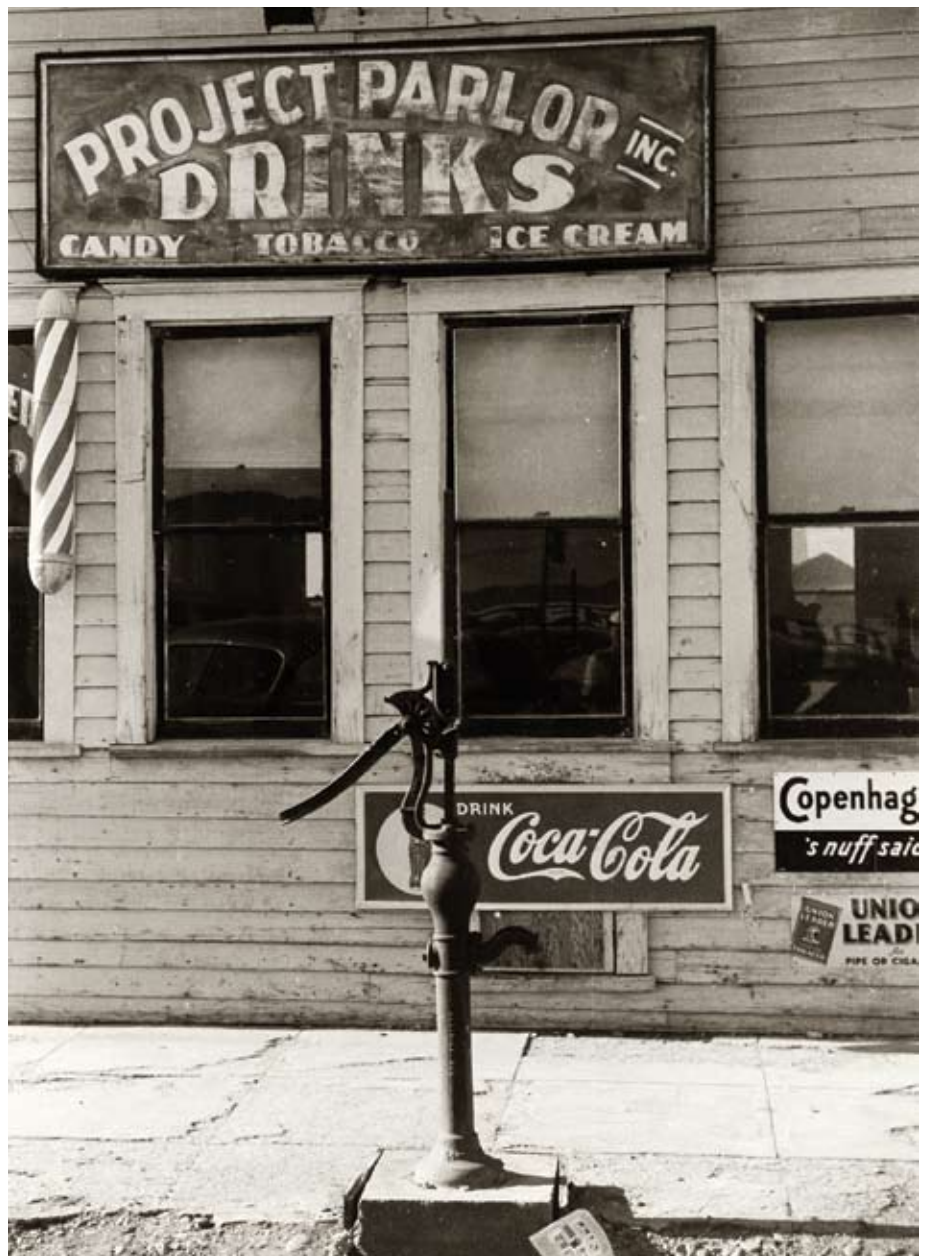
The struggles and changes in this period brought big changes to Montana's politics. Remember the election of 1932, in which Franklin Roosevelt challenged Herbert Hoover? These two candidates presented two very different views of the responsibilities of government. Hoover was conservative, while Roosevelt was liberal. These terms have many meanings and they have changed over time. But generally these terms describe two opposite forces in our country's political life.

Conservatives favor big business, because business drives the economy, and small government, because taxes and government regulations restrict business activities. People who are wealthy, own businesses, or have ties to the military or to evangelical churches tend to be conservative.

Liberals favor strong government, because the government represents the voice of the people against powerful corporations. They favor more restrictions on corporate activities that might harm people, society, or the environment. Traditionally, scholars and intellectuals and people who earn lower or middle incomes, are members of labor unions, or belong to a nonwhite ethnic group tend to be liberals.

The Depression Era changed how Montanans voted. They often elected conservative leaders at home and sent

FIGURE 18.18: When the Depression ended, Montana was a mix of old and new. This Fairfield sidewalk, photographed in 1939, still had an old-fashioned hand pump where townspeople could get water. But the sign advertising Coca-Cola signals a more modern era.



liberal representatives to Congress. This was because they knew that conservative state politicians would spend less money, promote business activity, and help businesses grow. But liberal administrations in Washington, D.C., usually sponsored more generous federal aid programs, so it paid to send liberals to Washington. This somewhat odd pattern began in the early 1900s and lasted through most of the century.

War in Europe Revives the Nation's Economy

Roosevelt's New Deal did not end the Great Depression. It did keep thousands of Montanans alive, employed, and fed through the toughest years. It gave people meaningful work that improved their communities. And it helped people recover hope in the future and pride in themselves.

What ended the Great Depression was war. In 1939 Germany invaded Poland. France and England declared war on Germany. America's participation in World War II dramatically revived the Montana economy. Just as in World War I, the United States supported its allies with food and supplies. New military contracts for metals, lumber, wheat, and oil activated the economy. Montana's industries boomed again.

The next five years brought record profits to farmers, ranchers, and other Montana industries. And they brought a turning point in Montana history.



FIGURE 18.19: With crops in the ground and food on the table, many Montanans once again felt secure and hopeful about the future.

Expressions of the People

Montana's Post Office Murals

During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt wanted to create jobs, lift people's spirits, and give Americans "a more abundant life." One way was to hire artists to create and install art in public places.

Between 1937 and 1942 the government hired Montana artists to paint murals for six Montana post offices—in Dillon, Deer Lodge, Sidney, Hamilton, Billings, and Glasgow. Post offices were community gathering places where people frequently stopped to visit and do business. They made a natural choice for public art projects.

The government often asked artists to paint scenes from local history. The murals emphasized themes that would appeal to the whole community. Painter Elizabeth Lochrie chose to depict a varied group of Indians, cowboys, and travelers gathered around a mailbox in Frying Pan Basin, along the stage route between Dillon and Butte. Her painting, *News from the States*, emphasized the importance of mail from the outside during the early territorial days.

Artist Henry Meloy painted *Flathead War Party* for the Hamilton post office, showing a war party preparing to attack the Blackfeet, with Mount Como in the background. For

FIGURE 18.20: Montana painter Elizabeth Lochrie smiles at the camera while she and two unidentified assistants install her mural, *News from the States*, in Dillon. Postmaster Harry Andrus, on the floor, was a great fan of Lochrie's work.



the Deer Lodge post office, Verona Burkhard painted *James and Granville Stuart Prospecting in Deer Lodge Valley—1858*.

Townpeople watched the artists' progress as they stopped by the post office to pick up mail each day. Sometimes they commented on the paintings. In Glasgow a women's group complained about artist Forrest Hill's painting, *Early Settlers and Residents and Modern Industries*. The painting originally included a gambler drinking whiskey. But after intense pressure from the women's group, Hill painted in a woman carrying a Bible instead.

But usually the paintings excited locals. Verona Burkhard wrote to the local postmaster, "People of Deer Lodge surprised me by their great interest in the mural."

Painter Leo Beaulaurier, who created a mural in the Billings post office, said the program was a great help to Montana artists. "It was a hard time for the arts," he said. "People could barely afford necessities, much less paintings."

Today all six post office murals still hang in their original spots. Five of the six have been cleaned and restored. These paintings capture important moments in Montana history. They also remind Montanans how important public art can be—in good times and bad.

FIGURE 18.21: Montana artist Henry Meloy (1902–1951) was born in Townsend. He studied art in Chicago and New York and later taught art at Columbia University. His mural, *Flathead War Party*, shows the tribe getting ready to attack the Blackfeet in the Bitterroot Valley.



CHAPTER 18 REVIEW

► CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify: (a) New Deal; (b) National Industrial Recovery Act; (c) Meriam Report; (d) Indian Reorganization Act
2. Define: (a) initiative; (b) malnourished; (c) work relief; (d) infrastructure; (e) subsidies; (f) pension; (g) bureaucratic; (h) conservative; (i) liberal
3. Why did hard economic times arrive earlier in Montana than in the rest of the nation?
4. What hopeful, if short-lived, sign of better times occurred in the mid-1920s?
5. What major Montana industries were affected by the stock market crash of 1929?
6. Why were people in rural areas better able to cope during the early years of the Great Depression than people in cities?
7. What was one of the main issues of the 1932 presidential election?
8. Describe the three goals of the New Deal.
9. How did the New Deal help people living on reservations?
10. How did the Fort Peck Dam project boost Montana's economy?
11. What federal legislation made it easier for Anaconda Copper Mining Company employees to organize unions?
12. What did the Meriam Report conclude about federal Indian policy?
13. Describe the Indian Reorganization Act.
14. Why did some Indians disagree with parts of the Indian Reorganization Act?
15. What are some of the main differences between liberals and conservatives?
16. What international event helped end the Great Depression?

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Think about the reasons the text gives to explain why some tribes opposed the Indian Reorganization Act. Do you think these are understandable concerns and disagreements? Why or why not?
2. How did the presidential candidates of 1932 reflect the traditional viewpoints of conservatives and liberals?
3. Look at the map on page 359. Which counties were hardest hit by the Depression? Which were the least affected? Form a hypothesis to explain your findings. What further research could you undertake to test your theory?
4. If you had been an eastern Montana farmer during the 1930s, do you think you would have wanted to stay on your farm? What would you lose by leaving? What would you gain?

► PAST TO PRESENT

1. The government programs put in place to help people during the Great Depression were wildly popular. Today, programs aimed at helping the poor sometimes generate more controversy. What accounts for this change in attitude?
2. Do you think Montana could experience such hard economic times again? Why or why not?

► MAKE IT LOCAL

1. What organized charities exist in your hometown? Are these charities able to help everyone in need?

► EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Research the building of the Fort Peck Dam. Create a poster or PowerPoint presentation on one aspect of the dam's story.
2. Learn more about the New Deal work programs (the CCC and the WPA). What permanent projects did they create? What nonpermanent services did they provide?
3. Research some of the arts projects created under the Works Progress Administration. Compare these projects with projects produced by the National Endowment for the Arts. Analyze the differences and similarities between these programs and then debate their worth to society.
4. The Farm Security Administration (a New Deal program) sent four photographers to Montana as part of a larger documentary photography project. Research the project and analyze some of its Montana images. Then update the FSA project by creating a photography project to document your community today.
5. Write a diary entry or letter, set during the 1930s, from one of the following points of view: an eastern Montana farmer; an Indian living on a Montana reservation; a worker on the Fort Peck Dam project; an artist hired to paint a post office mural; or a young man from the city who has taken a job with the CCC in the national forest.
6. The New Deal increased Montana's dependence on the federal government. Research the federal presence in Montana today, including the amount of federal money spent in the state. Discuss the pros and cons of this situation.

Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana-Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

Chapter 18

- FIG. 18.1** *No Place to Go*, Maynard Dixon, 1935, oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 inches, courtesy Brigham Young University Museum of Art, part of Harold R. Clark Memorial Collection
- FIG. 18.2** Charles McKenzie's sheep ranch, Garfield County, photo by John Vachon, 1942, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-064965-D
- FIG. 18.3** Mrs. Ballinger, Flathead Valley, photo by John Vachon, 1942, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-065186-D
- FIG. 18.4** Cricket traps, Big Horn County, photo by Arthur Rothstein, 1939, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-027411-D
- FIG. 18.5** Salvation Army, Butte, 1935, photo by L. H. Jorud, MHS PA PAc 74-37
- FIG. 18.6** *Oregon or Bust*, near Missoula, photo by Arthur Rothstein, 1936, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-005008-D
- FIG. 18.7** Percentage of Montanans on relief by county, 1935, map by MHS with information from Carol F. Kraenzel and Ruth B. McIntosh, *The Relief Problem in Montana: A Study of the Change in the Character of the Relief Population*, bulletin no. 343 (Bozeman, 1937), p. 10
- FIG. 18.8** L-R: F. D. R. with Col. T. B. Larkin, District Engineer, and George H. Dern, Secretary of War, Fort Peck Dam, 1934, MHS PA
- FIG. 18.9** WPA Bookmobile, Fairfield, MHS PA PAc 89-38 F5
- FIG. 18.10** CCC camp, courtesy Dr. William E. Farr, Missoula
- FIG. 18.11** Fort Peck Dam, photo by Donnie Sexton, courtesy TM
- FIG. 18.12** Fort Peck Dam construction, 1936, MHS PA
- FIG. 18.13** Farmer's daughter in storage cellar, Fairfield Bench Farms, photo by Arthur Rothstein, 1939, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-027311-D
- FIG. 18.14** Home and car, Butte, photo by Russell Lee, 1942, courtesy LOC LC-USW3-009706-D
- FIG. 18.15** Men and young boys at Medicine Lodge, courtesy BBHC, Jack Richard Collection PN.165.2.1
- FIG. 18.16** Poster, ca. 1935, MHS Mus. 1980.61.165
- FIG. 18.17** Anaconda Smelter workers, photo by Russell Lee, 1942, courtesy LOC LC-USW3-008534-D
- FIG. 18.18** Pool parlor, Fairfield, photo by Arthur Rothstein, 1939, courtesy LOC LC-USF33-005106-M4
- FIG. 18.19** Farm family at dinner, Fairfield Bench Farms, photo by Arthur Rothstein, 1939, courtesy LOC LC-USF34-027325-D
- FIG. 18.20** Elizabeth Lochrie installing her mural in Dillon Post Office, 1938, MHS PA PAc 80-61
- FIG. 18.21** *Flathead War Party*, mural by Henry J. Meloy, Hamilton Post Office, 1942, photo by Don Beatty, 1987, MHS PA