

How did people in Oklahoma deal with the Great Depression?

What was the Great Depression? In 1929, the stock market climbed like a rollercoaster. It plunged to its bottom on October 29. That day it sold a record sixteen million shares on the exchange floor and stock prices fell an average of forty points each. Historians generally consider the market's "crash" the beginning of the Great Depression for this country. It had existed for a while in Europe and the rest of the world.

Oklahoma, in fact, had been in an agricultural depression since the World War. Farmers then produced more crops to feed the armies and the people of Europe. They continued to produce more after the war, but devastated European countries could not buy much imported produce. When prices fell, farmers could not cover debts they had incurred during the war. Some returned to farming just for themselves. Others moved into the cities to seek industrial jobs.

The Great Depression put an end to many of those jobs. Farmers found their problems getting worse. During the first two years of the Depression, farm prices fell 30 percent, but the taxes farmers paid and the costs for necessities stayed high. A bad situation became impossible for a lot of farmers. Nationwide, between 1930 and 1935 more than 750,000 farms were lost through foreclosures and bankruptcy sales.

The end of the war and the start of the Great Depression gradually hit the petroleum industry, but later. Peacetime armies use far less fuel than wartime armies, and at first, the industry felt only a pinch from that. Soon, automobile sales rose and other mechanical inventions began to raise the market again. The number of registered automobiles increased from nine million in 1920 to twenty-seven million in 1929. Oil exports also increased — from seventy-seven million barrels in 1920 to 153 million barrels in 1929. Oklahoma was producing more than 24 percent of the nation's oil. Companies like Skelly Oil Company (now Getty) and Phillips Petroleum Company gave the credit for their skyrocketing success to Oklahoma in the Roaring Twenties. They never expected the situation to be "too much of a good thing."

What was the Wild Mary Sudik? During those years, several fields



started producing oil in north-central Oklahoma, including the Oklahoma City Pool in 1928. The most productive of the wells in that pool was on the Sudik family's farm. The wife's name was Mary. People soon called the oil well the Wild Mary Sudik. Starting with a roar in March 1930, it *spewed* gas and oil so high that it sprayed houses in Norman, eleven miles south. When the wind shifted, homes some twelve miles away in Nicoma Park got sprayed. The amazing *gusher* threw an estimated 200 million cubic feet of gas and twenty thousand barrels of crude oil into the air daily for eleven days. Oil soaked hundreds of acres of farmland. Ponds and lakes bore a thick film on their surfaces.

Meanwhile, the derrick was invisible, hidden by the gushing. The fire marshal announced hazard zones and prohibited any use of fire in the danger area.

The Wild Mary Sudik turned into a national novelty, with radio stations everywhere reporting on her every day. Spectators gathered as closely as they could. Firefighters stood by, ready to put out even the smallest of threatening flames. There were several attempts to bring the well under control. Workers struggled to fasten the "Shaffer rant" to the well casing. Finally, on April 4, 1930, at 6:15 p.m., workmen battling tons of pressure turned the valve on the "Shaffer rant," and the rumbling fountain died.

Gushers were not unusual at that time, but this one *spewed* more gas and oil and endangered more property than any other well in the state's history. After it was under control, the wind quickly blew away the dangerous pockets of gas, diluting them

in the air. Farmers plowed under the oil-covered topsoil. However, the state fire marshal kept a strict *blockade* of the area for several days.

The Wild Mary Sudik helped to glut (overfill) the oil market in the early 1930s. Manufacturers had cut back production. Auto sales had fallen. People and companies simply had less money to spend, and the petroleum markets did not need the entire product from the Oklahoma. Oil companies refused to cut back on their own production, however, and the market dropped drastically. By July 22, 1931, a barrel of oil was worth twenty-two cents.

Who was Governor William H. Murray? Although farmers



The Wild Mary Sudik was the highest producing well in the Oklahoma City field in 1930.
Oklahoma Historical Society

across the state and nation were suffering in the Great Depression, William H. Murray believed that the only lasting society was an *agrarian* society.

Born in 1869 in the farming community of Toadsuck, Texas, William Henry David “Alfalfa Bill” Murray believed in the family farm, the *yeoman* farmer, the values of Thomas Jefferson, and the greatness of the Democratic Party. He believed in equal distribution of land suitable for raising crops. He also favored laws to keep corporations and foreign owners from accumulating large tracts of land.

Bill Murray had worked as a salesman, a teacher, a news reporter, and an attorney when he moved to Indian Territory. He married Mary Alice Hearrell, becoming an intermarried Chickasaw citizen. An expert in constitutional law, Murray had been active in politics since the Sequoyah convention. He was president of the state’s constitutional convention. He ran for governor in 1918 and lost to J.B.A. Robertson.

In 1924, the Murrays led a group of Americans, mostly Oklahomans, to Bolivia, where they tried to set up an *agrarian* colony. They returned to Oklahoma in 1929 after their project failed. Without funds, Murray borrowed \$40 from a Tishomingo bank and started another campaign for governor. He drove a used car, eating his lunch from a paper sack and talking politics on street corners. He was often unshaven and *unkempt*, but many unemployed workers and tenant farmers identified with him. The candidate advertised himself as “the common man,” a man of the people, and he won the election. Then he borrowed \$250 to go to his own inaugural ball — a square dance with himself as the caller.

Numerous members of the Oklahoma House of Representatives had won their seats on the party ticket with Murray. They stood behind his policies. The Senate, however, had quite a few members who had served under Holloway, who had been involved in the Johnston impeachment, and who stood faithfully against the new governor’s policies.

Tax reform was the foundation of Murray’s campaign. He created the State Tax Commission during his term of office. It succeeded in bal-



**Governor
William H. “Alfalfa
Bill” Murray
Oklahoma Historical
Society**

ancing property values and in lowering *ad valorem* (property) taxes by almost one-fourth. This was a major step for Murray toward keeping his campaign promise of tax relief for farmers and home owners.

What was the Great Red River Bridge War? During Governor Murray's term, he called out the National Guard twenty-seven times and declared martial law thirty-four times. His first use of the Guard occurred during the bridge war between Oklahoma and Texas in July 1931.



Governor Murray visits troops during "The Great Red River Bridge War" with Texas.
Oklahoma Historical Society

In cooperation, the two states had built three bridges across the Red River — at the Terral-Ringgold crossing, the Marietta-Gainesville crossing, and the Durant-Denison crossing. They were replacing toll bridges with free ones. Two of them had been completed when the owners of a toll bridge at the Durant-Denison crossing obtained a federal court injunction. It barred the use of the new free bridge at that crossing. Texas Governor Ross Sterling ordered barricades across the entry

to the Texas side of all three free bridges. He felt no one should use them till the matter was settled.

Murray believed strongly in states' rights. He believed the court order infringed on the rights of both states involved. He cited the Eleventh Amendment, stating that a private citizen could not enjoin a sovereign state in a federal lawsuit. On July 16, 1931, Murray defied the federal court injunction and issued a *proclamation* opening all three free bridges to the public. The Highway Department crews removed the barricades and opened the two completed bridges. Then they blocked the approaches to the toll bridges, sending for tractors with which to plow across them.

Sterling responded by sending the Texas Rangers to close the south side of the bridges.

By July 17, Oklahoma highway crews were blocking traffic on the toll bridges at the Durant-Denison and Terral-Ringgold crossings. Traffic was flowing across the free bridge at Terral-Ringgold, but Texas

Rangers were blocking traffic at the Durant-Denison free bridge. The toll bridge was operating at the Marietta-Gainesville crossing. So, two of the crossings were open to traffic on one bridge or another, but the Durant-Denison crossing was cut off to travelers.

The bridge war gained national attention, and Murray's popularity rose. He became a national figure as a champion of the people. On July 19, the *Daily Oklahoman* reported that the *Houston Press* had said:

Governor Murray of Oklahoma may be ignorant, uncouth and all else you have heard about him, but somehow you have respect for a man who thinks his state is bigger than private interests....In Texas, we must wait until the lawyers quit wrangling before the people get their rights.

Spectators flocked to the Durant-Denison crossing, along with the press. On July 23, expecting further court interference, Murray declared martial law. He called out the Oklahoma National Guard to block the approach to the toll bridge.

On July 25, Federal Judge T.M. Kennerly removed the original injunction that barred Texas from opening the free bridges. Next, Federal Judge Colin Neblett issued a new injunction barring Texas from opening the free bridges. Then Neblett issued another injunction barring the Oklahoma National Guard from blocking the toll bridge approach.

Traffic was already flowing across the free bridge, however. Neblett's injunction angered Murray, and he told the Guard to ignore it. He then headed for Durant, where he personally took charge of matters.

The public praised the state's commander-in-chief for what they saw as his defense of the people. But on the morning of July 26, without explaining, Murray ended the war. He went along with the federal order to allow traffic to pass over the toll bridge. He stationed his guardsmen at the free bridge to ensure that it stayed open, and he returned to Oklahoma City.

In his fight to open the bridges, Murray had claimed that the federal courts were protecting the Red River Bridge Company, a group of businessmen, at the expense of citizens. He had also claimed that Oklahoma had the right to open the bridges because Oklahoma held title to both sides of the river. A later court decision examined the boundary question once again. The federal court reaffirmed that Oklahoma's boundary included the south bank of the Red River.

Why did Governor Murray declare martial law in the oil fields?

In 1931, Oklahoma oil producers were producing more and more oil while prices for that oil were steadily falling. The Corporation Commission issued “proration orders” to avoid waste of crude oil and disastrously lower prices. These orders set a maximum of production per well and limited production to the amount which could be sold.

Some companies had voluntarily slowed or ceased production. On July 27, 3,000 oilmen assembled in Tulsa to call for a shut-down of all operations. Other companies refused to comply with the proration orders, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Corporation Commission did not have the power to limit production.

On August 4, just a few days after the Bridge War, Governor Murray declared martial law in the oil fields, instructing the Oklahoma National Guard to stop production. Guardsmen shut down more than 3,000 wells. Murray announced that, when they opened again, production would be limited to 77,000 barrels per day. He claimed that he was preventing the “exhaustion and waste” of the state’s natural resources. He believed the large oil companies were jeopardizing the state and national economy and using the situation to get total control of the industry. Oklahoma’s oil fields did not operate for two months.

Calling a series of meetings with the governors of Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico, Murray encouraged them to take similar steps. He also asked President Herbert Hoover to urge the limitation of oil production around the country. The other officials took action and oil prices rose.

The state legislature passed a petroleum conservation law which granted the Corporation Commission the power to *enforce* its rules and regulations. This was the beginning of the *regulation* of the petroleum industry in Oklahoma.

What else happened during Governor Murray’s administration? Murray asked for a graduated tax beginning with 2 percent on earnings of \$1,800 annually and rising to 10 percent on earnings of \$3,600 and over. His proposal passed the House in record time. But the Senate refused to act on it. Instead it passed other tax laws which were less effective in bringing in *revenue*.

The Governor sought help from various pressure groups, asking them to support the income tax. The most effective of those groups, the teachers’ organization, did not respond, and the governor was finally forced to compromise with the Senate. It passed the income tax law,

Do You Know?

NEXRAD (Next generation weather radar) was invented by a pair of professors on the faculty of the University of Oklahoma’s School of Meteorology. The Operational Support Facility for the NEXRAD program is located at the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Norman, on the campus of the University of Oklahoma.

but at a much lower rate than Murray had originally designed. It placed taxes on corporate income, as Murray had asked, but left out insurance companies and building and loan associations. The Senate also granted depletion allowances to oil companies.

Voters approved a *referendum* legalizing the sale of 3.2 beer (not in excess of 3.2 percent alcohol). The state earmarked \$369,000 for building a prison at Atoka, to relieve the crowding at the McAlester prison.

Governor Murray had all sorts of conflicts while in office. Several times he tried and failed to re-organize the Highway Department. He succeeded in creating jobs through that department, however, when he ordered the building of farm-to-market roads and set a minimum wage of \$2 per day for their employees.

Murray could be combative toward higher education, insisting that the “frills” be removed. He believed university professors should teach “eight hours a day, six days a week, twelve months a year,” and that “attendance at professional meetings was a waste of time.” He referred to the University of Oklahoma’s new student union building as a “country club for students.” He got involved in replacing teachers and college presidents. In 1931, he even sent the National Guard to collect tickets at the Oklahoma-Nebraska football game, claiming mismanagement of ticket money at the University of Oklahoma.

How was the Depression affecting Oklahoma? Depression conditions were growing worse. Cotton prices dropped from sixteen cents to six cents per pound, and eastern Oklahoma depended on the cotton crop. Wheat prices dropped from one dollar a bushel to thirty-eight cents a bushel. Western Oklahoma depended on the wheat crop. Soon the roads filled with farmers and their families looking for agricultural work. The governor asked for legislative funding to give free seed and emergency food rations to the needy. He was instrumental in forming the National Council for Relief, which met for the first time at Memphis, Tennessee, in the summer of 1931.



When people traveled during the Depression, they often set up tents beside the road rather than spend money on lodging.
Western History Collections University of Oklahoma Library

Murray encouraged farmers to increase production. Then he sent truckloads of men without jobs into the rural areas to work for the farmers in exchange for produce. He gave ten unemployed men permission to grow vegetables on the land between the governor's mansion and the Capitol building. He insisted that all state officials practice *stringent* (rigid) economic measures, and he saw funding markedly reduced to state institutions.

Americans elected Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) president in November 1932. He took office in early 1933. He focused on shaping his New Deal program — putting citizens back to work and paying them with government funds until the economy recovered.

By 1933, the banking situation was severe. That year, after hundreds of banks across the country had failed, several eastern states declared a temporary general bank closing. This meant Oklahoma banks could not use funds they held in those eastern banks, and depositors grew restless. To avoid runs (people withdrawing too much money) on the state's major banks, Murray declared a moratorium: All banks in the state were to close, beginning March 2, 1933. Two days later President Roosevelt ordered a national bank closing for more than a week. When he lifted the moratorium, the Treasury Department had new standards. Only banks meeting them standards could reopen. Some were allowed to issue limited amounts of cash. Still others never opened for business again.

Despite his concern for the poor, Murray opposed FDR's New Deal policy. He tried hard to keep it out of the state. He personally disliked the President and allowed those feelings to interfere with carrying out national policies.

William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray was the most colorful, controversial figure in state government. Many loved him. Many hated him. Few were indifferent. He was nominated for President of the United States at the National Democratic Convention in 1932. He believed in the benefits of an *agrarian* society to the extent that he rejected any build-up of industry or cities. He opposed centralizing governmental power. Yet he used the power of his office more fiercely than any preceding governor of Oklahoma.

Although he failed in some areas, he succeeded in making the state government financially sound during the worst economic crisis in national history.

What was the Dust Bowl? By 1933, a drought had hit western

Oklahoma. Year by year, the high winds of the Great Plains had turned that part of the state and parts of Texas and Kansas into the “Dust Bowl.” Extreme heat, clouds of sand and dirt, and swarms of grasshoppers and locusts plagued the Panhandle. The wind carried off tons of topsoil and scattered them across the country. Seeds got buried under sand dunes or, if they sprouted, died in the hot sun.

Because the dust got into food, kitchen cupboards, and bed sheets, people in the Midwest and Plains called this time the Dirty Thirties. Families could not make ends meet. Just as their parents or grandparents had migrated for a better life, they migrated, too.

Desperate, and courageous, they loaded their belongings onto cars. They drove west to look for jobs in the fruitful fields of Arizona, New Mexico, and California. By 1935, hundreds of thousands left their homes. From 1936 to 1940, about 309,000 Oklahomans moved to other parts of the country in the second stage of the “Okie” migration.

Large numbers of migrants were from Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Missouri, but all were called “Okies.” *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel by

John Steinbeck, was a best-seller about the Joad family, migrants from Oklahoma. Published in 1939, it won the Pulitzer Prize in literature. Through its popularity, the name Okie is now a permanent part of the American vocabulary. Many Oklahomans felt the book was demeaning and resented its author. Nevertheless, the name stuck. Nowadays, many people in Oklahoma are proud to call themselves Okies.

Who was Woody Guthrie? During the second half of the Depression, about 100,000 Oklahomans settled in California. Ninety percent of them blamed the drought or unemployment for their move. The average male was thirty-three years old, married to a woman of similar age, and



This Land Was Made for You and Me, a portrait of Woody Guthrie, hangs in the Oklahoma Capitol.
Charles Banks Wilson

the father of two children.

One of the migrants of the thirties was a singer named Woody Guthrie. Born in Okemah in 1912, he was named for President Wilson. Woody was seventeen when the stock market crashed and later went to California to eke out a living. Over time he became a social troubadour (poet or musical spokesman) for working people — even when they lost their jobs. Suspected of being a communist, Woody never had the popularity in Oklahoma that he reached in other parts of the nation, but for generations his folksongs gave a voice to the ordinary people. He composed songs such as *This Land Is Your Land*, *Riding in My Car*, *California Blues*, *Pretty Boy Floyd*, *Tom Joad*, and others. The Library of Congress asked Woody record his Dust Bowl ballads in 1940.

Who were Will Rogers and Wiley Post? In the mid-1930s, Will Rogers was an internationally known humorist, actor, and journalist. His father had been a representative during the writing of the state constitution. A member of the Cherokee tribe and a native of Oologah, Rogers was a natural entertainer. He eased the pain of the Depression with his jokes about social and political situations. He performed on stage, in film, and on radio. He also wrote a daily newspaper column that was syndicated in more newspapers than any other column of that time.

His friend, Wiley Post, was also internationally famous. In 1933, he was the first man to fly solo around the world. His spirit of adventure had put pride into the hearts of Oklahomans during difficult times. In August 1935, the two were in a plane crash near Point Barrow, Alaska. Oklahoma mourned its two favorite sons and looked for ways to honor them. For many, it seemed that the only bright spots of the decade were gone.

What was the Marland administration? Ernest W. Marland succeeded Alfalfa Bill Murray in the governor's mansion. Born in Pennsylvania, Marland had come to Oklahoma and had founded an oil empire at one time worth \$85 million. The 1930s decreased his wealth seriously, though he was able to pay his debts. He was inaugurated as an *avid* New Deal governor in 1934.

By then, the state had 150,000 people out of work and 700,000 people drawing relief (government financial aid). Marland had devised a relief plan nicknamed the Little New Deal. A hostile legislature, however, refused to pass Marland's major bills and they greatly altered the rest, claiming that they were too expensive. At the same time, they

launched a spending spree that was so large and so *notorious* that the sixteenth legislature became known as the “Spending Sixteenth.”

State relief boards were set up to cooperate with federal agencies, however, and the state gave \$7.6 million to match federal relief funds. County boards distributed the money. Unfortunately, the membership of county boards had been filled through the *patronage* system (hiring friends and relatives of public officials). Great abuses occurred under their supervision. For instance, the number of retired people receiving aid to the needy exceeded the total number of seniors in all income brackets. Investigators found this happened in at least three counties.

Despite the problems between the governor and the legislature and despite the abuses of those programs, many relief programs were successful. Almost ninety thousand people worked on 1,300 Works Projects Administration jobs in the state. The WPA built public buildings, laid sidewalks, and performed other jobs in the public’s interest.

Marland succeeded in developing the Interstate Oil Compact. It was an agreement among several state governors to organize a council to advise oil companies. The council was to help regulate the industry and keep it stable. Marland served as the first president of the group.

During Marland’s term, the state formed the Planning and Resources Board, and laid groundwork for starting the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. Josh Lee, the great orator of Norman, won an election to the United States Senate in 1936. While he was serving as governor, Marland himself ran for senator in both 1936 and 1938. He lost those races.

Who was Governor Leon Phillips? Nine candidates ran for governor in 1938, including two former governors, Jack Walton and William H. Murray. (The law did not prevent a person serving multiple terms in the governor’s office as long as they were not back-to-back terms.) Voters elected Leon Phillips, whose main priorities were economy and solvency.

Born in 1890 in Worth County, Missouri, Phillips came to Oklahoma



Will Rogers and Wiley Post were killed in Point Barrow, Alaska, on August 15, 1935. Oklahoma Historical Society

Territory with his family as a child. He attended Epworth University (now Oklahoma City University) and later the University of Oklahoma, where he played football and studied law. He had studied for the ministry at Epworth and taught school for a year before entering law school.

Leon “Red” Phillips served three terms in the State House of Representatives, and he was Speaker of the House during Marland’s term of office. He led the fight against Marland’s New Deal policy. When he took office as governor, he was fully aware of the state’s twenty-six-million-dollar debt. His first step to remedy the situation was to persuade the legislature to issue \$35 million in bonds. This brought the debt under control and provided a small surplus for the operations of government. Phillips signed laws to raise taxes on gasoline, automobiles, tobacco, and other items. Legislators adopted an amendment to stop the state from spending more money than it received in tax revenues. It also cut funding for education and public institutions by one-fifth.

Most political limitations against women holding office were removed during Phillips’s term. This made women eligible for all offices in the state, including that of governor. The proposal was defeated in 1940 but was re-submitted and passed in 1942.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identify “Wild Mary Sudik” and tell why “wild” was attached to the name.
2. Explain how William H. Murray’s personality, beliefs, and actions affected his administration as governor.
3. What was the Great Depression? What does “Dirty Thirties” mean?
4. What were the causes of the Depression?
5. Name three famous Oklahomans (not politicians) from this era. Explain why they were famous.
6. Which state industries were hit hard by the Great Depression?
7. What were the state’s two most important crops in 1931?
8. Try to locate the CCC camp nearest to you.
9. What is a bank run and how was it prevented in the 1930s?
10. What does “relief” mean in relation to the Great Depression?