

Name _____



Home Sweet Home - Life in Hooverville

By Toni Lee Robinson

Americans were proud of their self-reliance. But a crisis like the Depression had never before hit the U.S. Millions were jobless. For many, life began to topple like a grim game of dominoes. With no income, they were unable to make rent or house payments. Many were kicked out of their homes.

By 1930, thousands were homeless. What can you do when you can't afford a place to live? Many people thought the government should help. But there were no official programs to provide for the needy.

President Herbert Hoover had worked hard for his own success. He believed that self-reliance made people strong. He also believed the Depression would quickly pass. He tried to encourage the American people, telling them the hard times would soon be over.

Hoover believed aid programs would make people weak and dependent on the government. He didn't think the government should step in. He urged cities and local agencies like churches to care for the poor in their areas.

These agencies did a great deal to help people. But there were just too many people in need. The local charities couldn't provide for all of them. Some homeless families were able to move in with relatives. But for many people, there was no place to go.

In an attempt to find shelter, people built shacks from anything they could scrounge. Cardboard boxes, old bits of wood or tin, even old car bodies were used. Some built quite sturdy houses of stone or cast-off brick. Tents or old water mains were home to others.

More and more people were forced into makeshift housing. Rickety villages sprouted around the edges of cities. Larger cities had acres and acres of "shanties" on their doorsteps. One "shantytown" even grew in New York's Central Park.

People in these dire circumstances were angry at President Hoover. How could he refuse to help them? They were sure that if Hoover had

to live like they did, he would feel differently about helping the poor. They named the ramshackle towns "Hoovervilles."

Some camp-dwellers worked together to make the best of their plight. A 1930 news article described such a village in Philadelphia. Visitors could take tours, guided by residents. Donations, the article stated, would be shared among the villagers. One Seattle reporter wrote of shanties there with flowers planted out front.

Still, conditions in the shanty camps were very primitive. The houses were usually set on bare dirt. This meant dust in dry weather and mud when it rained. There was no running water or electricity. Residents cooked over open fires or crude tin stoves.

Hoovervilles were an ideal setting for the spread of disease. Trash piled up and blew around. Most shacks couldn't keep out heat, cold, or bugs. In some camps, crime was a problem. Gangs roamed among them, taking what little the residents had.

Many cities resented the camps on their outskirts. They despised the ugly shacks, the garbage, and the smells. At times, sheriffs raided shantytowns. Vigilantes also harassed some Hoovervilles. They attacked with baseball bats, hoping to drive the people away.

Many Americans blamed Hoover for the whole economic mess. They saw him as more interested in big business than in poor people. To them, his self-help policy was just a lack of concern for those in need. People vented their frustration in bitter humor. An old newspaper was called a "Hoover blanket." An empty pocket turned out was known as a "Hoover flag."

America struggled with the dark cloud of poverty that had swept the nation. As dreary days turned into years in Hoovervilles, many of the homeless felt like they had lost the battle.



Name _____

Home Sweet Home - Life in Hooverville

Questions

1. Many people who lived in Hoovervilles had only months before had jobs, homes, and lives we would describe as normal. How would their lives be different after they became homeless?

_____ 2. Why didn't Hoover set up government programs to help the homeless?

- A. He thought the government would go broke, and he would lose his job.
- B. He really didn't care about the poor people.
- C. He felt people would become dependent on the government.
- D. His cabinet wouldn't allow it.

3. What materials might a shanty be made of?

- _____ 4. The shantytowns were called Hoovervilles because:
- A. Homeless people blamed Hoover for their plight.
 - B. The people hoped that such a mark of respect might move the President to visit them.
 - C. The people loved Hoover so much.
 - D. Government aid to build the houses was supported by Hoover.

5. Describe conditions in a typical Hooverville.

6. Explain why city-dwellers might resent the Hoovervilles.

7. Why were people living in Hoovervilles vulnerable to crime and violence?
