

The Impact of the Great Depression, 1928-1940

Having a job that paid a living wage, with perhaps a little left over for pleasurable spending or socking away for retirement: this is the least that Canadians expected of life early in the twentieth century. The extent to which this dream all went so dreadfully adrift in the 1930s forms the substance of this chapter.

To start this Maptour, navigate to the chapter page for:

The Impact of the Great Depression, 1928-1940

Browse > Defining Episodes - Social >

The Impact of the Great Depression, 1928-1940



Work Camps



Try This:

- Open the interactive map "Unemployment Relief Work Camps, 1932-1936."



Notice ...

- Work projects varied with region: airfields in northern Ontario, roads in southern BC, military installations in the St Lawrence valley.
- Large parts of the Prairie Provinces ecumene appears to have been beyond the range of Work Camps, unlike any other part of Canada.



Try This:

- Under LAYER CONTROLS, turn off the checkbox for "Work Camps."



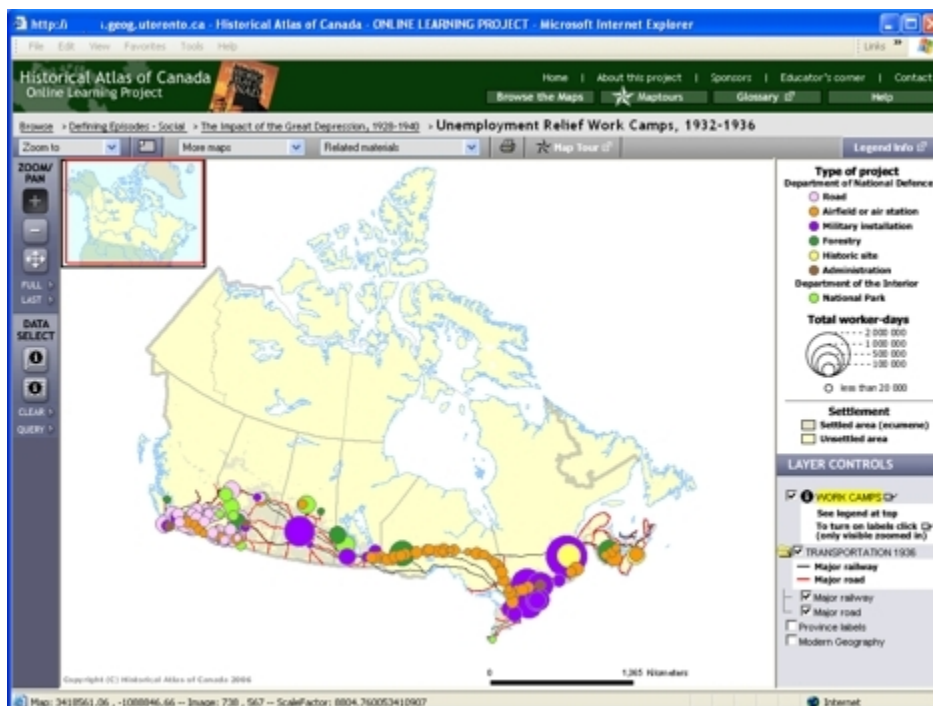
Notice ...

- Work camps were established only within the railway network area.
- Railways provided the only domestic, overland link between eastern and western Canada in the 1930s.



Consider!

- The 1930s was the age of bush pilots and small propeller planes with flying range of no more than a few hundred kilometres.
- Only the national government had the money to undertake public projects beyond the primary settled area.



National Historic Sites



Try This:

- **Keep open** the map "Unemployment Relief Work Camps, 1932-1936."
- Under **LAYER CONTROLS**, **turn on** the checkbox for "Work Camps."
- On the **ZOOM/PAN** toolbar, **click on** the **Zoom in** button and use it on the map to **zoom in** to Southern Québec and the Maritimes.
- On the **DATA SELECT** toolbar, **click on** the **Table** tool and use it on the map to **drag a rectangle** that includes Québec City and Halifax.



Notice ...

- A table pops up, in which the projects selected are tabulated by type and labour input, and these are highlighted on the map. (You may have to drag the table aside to see the map without obstruction.)
- Restoration of historic sites at Québec and Halifax are among the largest single, government-sponsored projects of the Depression era.



Try This:

- On the **DATA SELECT** toolbar, **click on** the **QUERY** button to pop up the Query box. Under "Type of Project," **select** "Historic Site;" in the other two boxes **select** "Do not include in query." Then **Submit Query**.



Notice ...

- The Québec City and Halifax projects are the only historic sites anywhere in Canada that were supported by the Work Camps program.



Consider!

- Celebration of military and political history has been a Canadian priority, one French and one English, even in hard times.
- Historic sites were under the supervision of the Department of National Defence.

Proj.	Province	Location	Project type	Person-days
1	QC	Valcartier Training Centre	military installation	1324410
2	QC	Québec Citadel	historic site	812269
3	NB	Collier's Sliding	roadway	485243
4	NS	Malcolm Fort	historic site	329141
5	NB	Saint John HQ	airfield or air station	174005
6	NS	Dartmouth Air Station	airfield or air station	104859
7	NB	Cambridge	airfield or air station	87076
8	NB	Upper Broadway	airfield or air station	25146
9	NB	Shawville	airfield or air station	3722

British Columbia: Many Little Projects



Try This:

- **Keep open** the map "Unemployment Relief Work Camps, 1932-1936."
- Under LAYER CONTROLS, **turn off** the checkbox for "Work Camps."
- **Click on** the "Zoom to" drop-down menu and **select** "British Columbia".




Notice ...

- The ecumene (settled area) in B.C. is restricted, compared with the spacious expanse it occupies in Alberta.



Try This:

- Under LAYER CONTROLS, **turn on** the checkbox for "Work Camps," and click on the  icon following to turn on work camp labels.
- Use the **Zoom in** tool to **zoom in** on Southern BC, by clicking twice in succession.



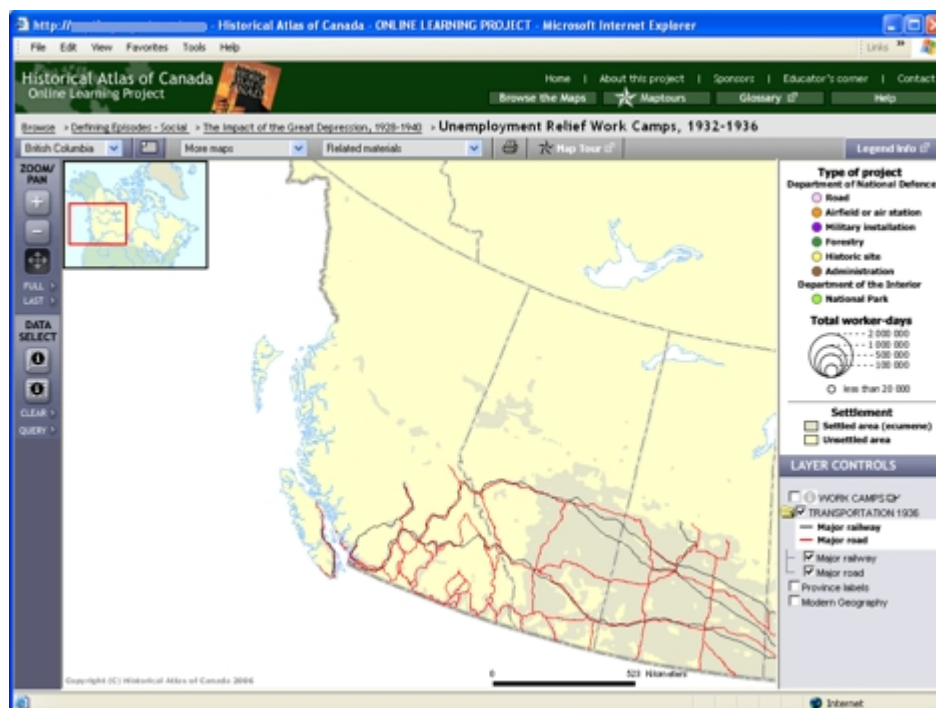
Notice ...

- The majority of BC work camps were for road construction.
- Airfield construction was close to the American border.
- The number of places named increases with each magnification.



Consider!

- Good transportation facilities were scarce in British Columbia's mountainous terrain, and expensive to build.
- Canada in the 1930s was moving from the railway age into the automobile age.
- There was a national defense aspect to airfield construction.



Nelson Thibault's Story



Try This:

- Open the interactive map "Trek in Search of Work, 1928-1939."
- Under LAYER CONTROLS, turn off "General movement of transients" and turn on "Railways in 1929."



Notice ...

- Throughout six years Nelson Thibault was constantly trekking across Canada, coast to coast, unable to secure steady work. The numbers indicate his stops along the way.



Try This:

- On the DATA SELECT toolbar, click on the Identify tool and then click on one of the green circles on the map to pop up the itinerary for Nelson Thibault.
- Under LAYER CONTROLS, turn off all the checkboxes for "NELSON THIBAUTL", then turn on 1934, 1935, 1936, etc., each in turn, to see where he went each year.
- If you Zoom in farther, to Southern BC for example, Thibault's stops are annotated on the map. Use the Pan tool to follow him around the country. Another time, do the same for the other trekkers shown on the map.



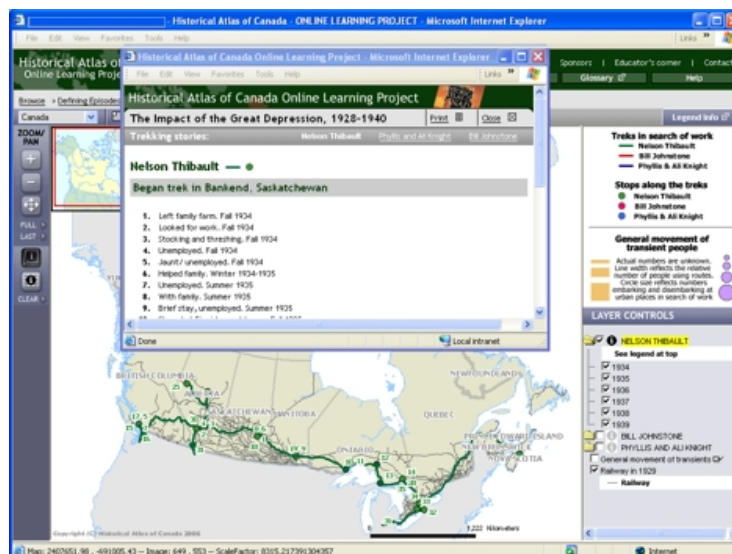
Notice ...

- Thibault gradually drifted further and further from his Saskatchewan home.
- He chose southern BC or California for the winters.



Consider!

- Thibault's experience should be seen as a lifestyle common to thousands.
- Home was both a refuge and a practical destination for an unemployed man.
- Thibault managed all this travelling on virtually no money.
- People have the urge to record their stories, even under difficult circumstances.
- Letters and diaries of Canadian experiences gather dust in grandparents' attics.



Relief in the Cities



Try This:

- Click on the “Related Materials” drop-down menu and select select **Graphs** - "Relief by Selected Urban Areas."



Notice ...

- Vancouver’s relief effort was consistent with that of B.C. as a whole.
- St. John’s relief support was smaller than the total population would suggest.
- Montréal and the Nova Scotia cities were swamped with Depression refugees.



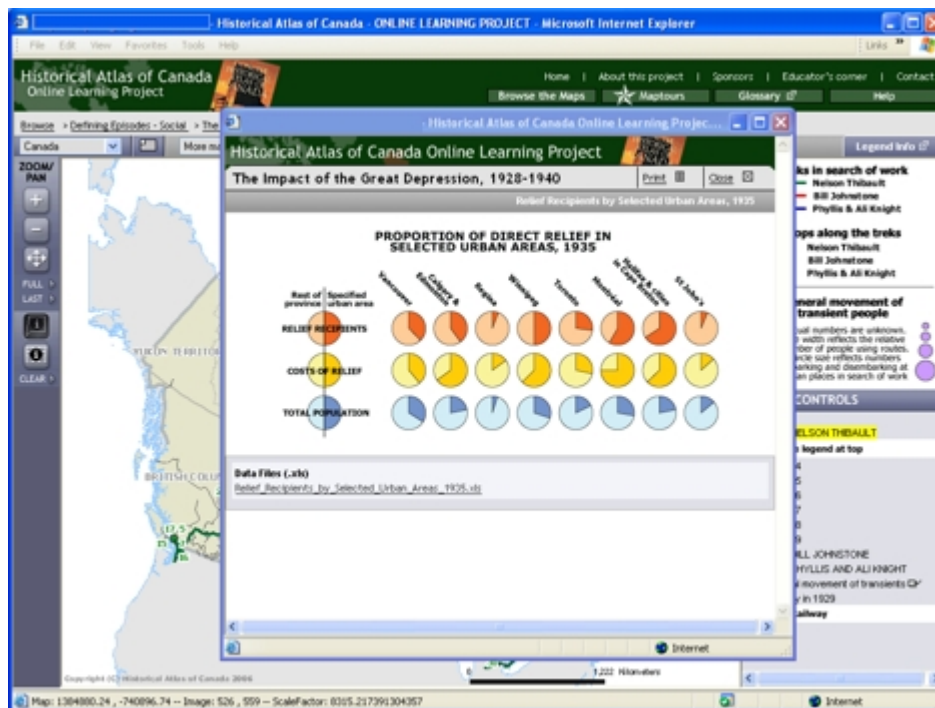
Consider!

- Vancouver, Regina and St. John’s are all cities in resource-based, non-industrial provinces, where people were inclined to stay home to survive.
- Footloose people in Ontario and Québec, without vegetable gardens and root cellars, ran to the cities and became burdens upon them.
- Selecting only one city in a province like Ontario, with many big cities, introduces an irregularity into the meaning of the data.



Try This:

- Click on the file under "Data Files (.xls)" if you wish to see the numbers upon which these pie-charts are based.



The Dimensions and Timing of Relief



Try This:

- On the Browse topbar, click on "The Impact of the Great Depression, 1928-1940" to return to the chapter page. Then open the static map: "Relief Recipients by Province, 1930-1940."



Notice ...

- The maximum number of welfare recipients in Saskatchewan and Ontario is similar (right scale, red line), but Ontario had four times the size, so welfare has only one-quarter the impact (left scale, yellow and green bars).
- Relief in Ontario and Québec peaked early in the 1930s, whereas on the Prairies it reached at peak later in the decade.
- The relief system in Newfoundland (not part of Canada in the 1930s) was very different from that found in Canada.



Consider!

- Newfoundland demonstrates that the Depression was an international phenomenon.
- An economic downturn hurts a dependent, urban society more suddenly than it does more self-sufficient, rural people.



Try This:

- Click on the file under "Data Files (.xls)" if you wish to see the numbers upon which these graphs are based.

These are just a few of the questions that these maps and data can address. If you have ideas for other questions, please use our Feedback page to send them in, and they may be posted on the website in the future.

