

“Hooverilles”

A Hooverville was the popular name attributed to shanty towns that sprung up throughout the United States during the Great Depression in cities and towns such as Portland, Oregon and Circleville, Ohio. The word “Hooverville” derived from the name of the President of the United States at the onset of the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover. Americans affixed the president’s name to these shanty towns because they were frustrated and disappointed with Hoover’s inability to effectively deal with the growing economic crisis. Shocked and confused by the crisis, they held Hoover personally responsible for the state of the economy.

These Hooverville settlements were often formed in unpleasant neighborhoods or desolate areas on the outskirts of cities and consisted of dozens or hundreds of shacks and tents that served as temporary residences for those left unemployed and homeless by the Great Depression. Authorities did not officially recognize these Hooverilles and occasionally removed the occupants for technically trespassing on private lands, but they were frequently tolerated out of necessity.



A Hooverville along the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon. Many of the men living here during the winter work in the nearby orchards of the Willamette and Yakima Valley in the summer; July 1936. Library of Congress.

Some of the men who were made to live in these conditions possessed building skills and were able to build their houses out of stone. Most people, however, resorted to building their residences out of box wood, cardboard, and any scraps of metal they could find. Some individuals even lived in water mains or slept on the ground. Most were forced to resort to begging for food from those fortunate enough to obtain housing during this era.



Squatter Camp, California. Nov. 1936 (Library of Congress)

Several other terms came into use during this era, such as “Hoover blanket” (old newspaper used as blanketing) and “Hoover flag” (an empty pocket turned inside out). “Hoover leather” was cardboard used to line a shoe with the sole worn through. A “Hoover wagon” was a car with horses tied to it because the owner could not afford gasoline.



Two young boys in Circleville's (located in central Ohio) "Hooverville." 1938 (Library of Congress)



Bakersfield, California Hooverville 1936 (Library of Congress)