



## The Great Depression

The prosperity of the 1920s was not well distributed. Proportionally, too much of the national income was in profits and too little in wages, and therefore America's capacity to produce exceeded its capacity to consume. During the 1920s American individualism had too often degenerated into irresponsibility and greed. One manifestation of this trend was the urge to get rich quickly and easily by gambling in the stock market. Millions of speculators bid up the prices of corporate stocks to levels that bore less and less meaningful relation to their true value. The result was the great crash of October 1929, which marked the beginning of the worst and longest depression in American history.

The depression soon spread from Wall Street to San Francisco's Montgomery Street and then to many a small town's Main Street. (See Color Plate 14.) With the onset of mass unemployment in both city and country, the number of Californians dependent on public relief in 1934 amounted to about *one-fifth* of the whole population of the state. But no mere statistic can convey the real meaning of the great depression. Its meaning was in the suffering, anxiety, and grief of the millions whose lives it blighted.

In California politics, reaction to this disaster came slowly at first. Then it became extreme and frantic. Through the whole decade of depression that followed the crash, politics and government in California remained confused, demoralized, and ineffectual.

### "Sunny Jim"

The choice of a governor in 1930, the first year of the depression, represented politics as worse than usual. James Rolph, Jr., had been mayor of San Francisco for 19 years, since his first election in 1911. His early career as mayor was quite creditable, but in 1918 he lost the fortune that he had made in the shipping business, and

his health and efficiency began to decline. During the 1920s he still commanded great popular affection, mainly because of the convivial folksiness of his innumerable appearances as the city's official host, greeter, and master of ceremonies. In that "era of wonderful nonsense," he seemed a highly successful large-city mayor, but as governor he was unable to cope with an emergency on the scale of the great depression.

Rolph's most important policy as governor was his opposition to tax reform. His views on taxation were those of the most conservative wing of the business community. Rolph was heavily in debt to one of San Francisco's leading bankers, who was also one of his closest political advisers. The legislature of 1933 adopted a sales tax, with Rolph's approval; but when the legislature also passed an income tax measure, Rolph vetoed it. The burden of the sales tax fell heavily on the poor, and the inclusion of food among the items subject to the tax was especially resented. Corner grocers, ringing up small sales, bitterly reminded their customers that they must add "a penny for Jimmy."

In a desperate and deluded attempt to regain his popularity, Rolph made the worst mistake of his career. He openly abetted and defended a lynching. There had been more lynchings in California than in any state outside the south, and more lynchings of white men than in any state whatever. Between 1875 and 1934, Californians participated in 59 lynchings—an average of one per year. At the urging of Delilah Beasley, an African American reporter for the *Oakland Tribune*, black assemblyman Frederick M. Roberts sponsored an antilynching bill in the state legislature following his election in 1918.

Meanwhile, throughout the country in the early 1930s, there was a wave of kidnappings, including that of the Lindbergh baby in 1932. At San Jose, on November 26, 1933, two men who had confessed to the kidnapping and murder of the son of a wealthy local merchant were being held in the county jail. When there was talk of mob action, Governor Rolph made a public promise that he would never call out the National Guard "to protect those two fellows." A few hours later, with this open incitement from the governor, a mob broke into the jail, beat the sheriff unconscious, and hanged the two prisoners from trees in a nearby park.

Rolph then asserted in another public statement that "this is the best lesson California has ever given the country." He promised to pardon anyone who might be arrested for "the good job" and added that he would like to release all convicted kidnappers from the state prisons into the hands of "those fine, patriotic San Jose citizens who know how to handle such a situation." The lynchers, Rolph theorized, were men with "pioneer blood in their veins," who "were probably reminded of the metage of justice by the vigilantes in the early days of San Francisco's history." As the *New York Times* remarked in a scathing editorial, Judge Lynch had always been a shadowy, unidentified figure. Now there was an actual and visible Governor Lynch.

In 1934 Rolph began another of his picturesque election campaigns. In burnished leather boots and a red sash, he inaugurated every fiesta, parade, and rodeo. But he collapsed during a precampaign tour and died on June 2. Lieutenant Governor Frank Merriam, a Long Beach real estate agent, succeeded him as governor.