

Dustbowls and Football Bowls: Economic Depression and the Origins of the Sugar, Cotton, and Sun Bowls

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This paper focuses on the beginnings of football bowl festivals in three middle-sized southwestern cities during the 1930s. Groups of businessmen in El Paso and New Orleans initiated the Sun and Sugar bowls in 1934, while a Tyler Texas oilman created the Cotton Bowl Classic three years later. Despite hard times, the business community in the three cities under study was able to raise substantial funding to provide physical facilities for the games, and prizes for the participating teams. Large crowds attended the initial events, although much of the working populace in these areas was unemployed.

The bowl events stemmed from the depression atmosphere in two ways. First of all the physical improvements involved with the games helped stimulate local businesses, providing work for some of the labor force. In addition, particularly in the case of New Orleans, the games brought in some tourist trade, most of it from neighboring areas. Thus the games served the function of a private sector WPA-style project, boosting a weakened economy, although on a limited scale.

The bowl festivals and games also had a “bread and circuses” effect during a period of economic depression. Done in a “booster” spirit still reminiscent of the more prosperous twenties, the games encouraged an atmosphere of both civic cooperation and festival gaiety. Business and laboring sectors of the local populace could join together to promote this new local enterprise. The bowl games helped battle the potential for class bitterness in these three southwestern urban areas.

The beginnings of these three bowls illustrate several points about the way in which American society operated in times of economic stress. A first point is that class consensus—on the value of sport and of civic cooperation—rather than class conflict marked these undertakings. Also, the bowl operations demonstrated that, even in the New Deal period, the private sector expected to take up a good deal of the slack in the economy. The Cotton, Sugar and Sun Bowls, which today provide spectacles of extravagance and affluence, had their origins in the most difficult period in recent American economic history.