



BHH Curriculum Units Fourth Grade The Great Depression

This unit introduces 4th grade students to several basic concepts of the Great Depression of the 1930's, and to historical analysis processes. Following a trade book and video documentary overview of the 1920's and 1930's, the unit asks students to examine photos, letters, maps and literary readings that describe many people's experiences during the Depression. The unit activities are designed to generate (1) historical empathy, (2) a feeling that studying history is fun, (3) a basic competence in analyzing historical sources, and (4) a rudimentary knowledge of some causes, hardships and responses (individual, collective and government) to the Great Depression.

As you progress through the unit, it may be useful occasionally to begin or end activities with a KWL discussion. The KWL may evolve and change constantly in the course of the unit, and can serve as a solid touchstone for students as they immerse in the unit's diverse material.

Finally, words that require definition may become evident on a frequent basis. Please be alert to those terms that you suspect elude your students' comprehension, and take a moment to define and discuss them as they emerge.

Pre-Unit Preparation:

- Discussion on what is history, and what are primary and secondary sources.
- Discussion of the unit end-goal – students eventually will use all of the daily assignments to create their own histories of the Depression.
- Distribute history journal folders (these may be simple manila file folders if pocket folders are too expensive), and ask students to decorate them as they wish. Students will keep all completed history activity papers in these folders, as well as their Dust Bowl diary entries.



Activity 1/ Life in the 1920's and 30's.

This activity begins with a 20 minute video documentary excerpt on the 1920's. After the video, the teacher may distribute the movie impressions worksheet to students and lead the class through the brainstorm exercise. The class may conclude by suggesting 1920's events to fill-in the timeline. The second day, the same process may be followed for the 1930's film clip. The class may conclude with a brief journal exercise and an update of the timeline. Because all of the classes will be sharing the same timeline, the different classes may personalize the line by adding to it one or two icons that represent the events. (For example, one class may draw a flapper for the prosperity of the 20's, while another may draw a pile of gold coins.) Please see further unit details below.

Content Goals:

- Students form general impressions about U.S. life in the 1920's and 30's.
- Students learn that after a period of relatively good times in the 1920's, created by general economic prosperity, many people encountered tough times during the 1930's. The widespread hardship was generated by natural and economic disasters.

Process Goals:

- Students learn to identify main historical concepts from a video documentary.
 - Students learn to brainstorm these concepts together as a class.
 - Class begins a timeline for the Great Depression.
- Centerpiece – Documentary Video of 1920's and 30's. Iowa teachers may wish to use the online video “The Great Depression and the New Deal”. This is available via the [Grant Wood AEA video streaming](#) web service.
 - Content – Generalizations of Life in the 20's and 30's.
 - Process – Teacher-Led analysis of the video.
 - ✧ As the movie is shown, pause the video at strategic places to help students identify key concepts.
 - ✧ Movie Impressions Sheet – Student Worksheet (distribute a copy to each student.)
 - ✧ As a class, students brainstorm for main concepts.
 - ✧ Compare and Contrast these main observations about the 1920's and 30's with life today.
 - Formative Assessment – Film analysis exercise. Completed worksheets go into student folders.



- Journal: “Would you rather have been a child during the 1920’s or during the 1930’s?”

- Timeline. Begin constructing a class timeline for the Depression. Use butcher paper. With the students, delineate some of the dates from the movie; for example, the Crash of 1929. If there is time, students may draw pictures to illustrate the timeline entries.

Resources:

- Movie Impressions sheets
- Video – *The Great Depression*

Activity 2/ Children of the Depression: What their letters tell us about their experience

This activity begins with a teacher-led discussion that asks students to consider if they have ever written a letter asking for something. This conversation leads to an analysis of children's letters that ask Mrs. Hoover and Mrs. Roosevelt for help during the Depression. To prepare students for the analysis, refer back to the video documentaries on the Depression, and ask students to keep in mind what they have already learned about the 1930's. You should also explain that Mrs. Hoover and Mrs. Roosevelt were the presidents' wives during the Depression.

Content Goals:

- Students understand and empathize with the experience of impoverished Depression era children, i.e. their shortages of food, medical care, and clothing; their inadequate housing; the uncertainties of their day to day existences.

Process Goals:

- Students analyze a letter for historic content.
 - Students create a Venn diagram in order to compare different pieces of historic evidence.
- Centerpiece: Primary source -- Letters to the First Ladies of the 1930's. Book: *The Dirty Thirties: The United States from 1929-1941*
 - Content: Personal impact of the Depression on school age children of the time.
 - Process:
 - ✧ Read aloud from *The Dirty Thirties: The United States from 1929-1941*. Read-aloud chapters from *The Dirty Thirties* may be interspersed throughout the unit to provide ongoing narrative background for the unit activities.
 - ✧ Discussion: "Have you ever written a letter asking for something? What did you ask for? Was it something you needed or just wanted?" (Students may write brief answers in their history journals.)
 - ✧ Distribute Letters and NARA letter analysis guide sheets to your students. Guided by questions from the Nara sheet, the class together analyzes letters from ordinary citizens to Lou Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt. You may then have students individually fill-out a Nara sheet on one of the letters.
 - ✧ Optional activity – To compare the 2 letters, create a Venn diagram on the chalkboard.



Formative Assessment: Venn Diagram and Letter Analysis sheets. Students place the sheet(s) into their folders.

Resources:

- *The Dirty Thirties: The United States from 1929-1941*
- Copies of letters
- Nara Letter Analysis worksheet – Make 2 copies per student.

Activity 3: How did life look and feel during the Depression? What photographs can tell us

Today's activity continues to focus on building empathy in students for those who endured hardship during the Depression. By analyzing photos and comparing them with the letters that they read in the previous activity, students also may begin to understand how various sources combine to tell a story.

Content Goals:

- Students identify and empathize with some of the hardships of everyday life that many people experienced during the Depression.
- Students learn what housing and clothing looked like for many people during this time period.

Process Goals

- Students learn to analyze a historic photo, to “read” it for information about the time in which it was taken.
- Students learn that information about the same historic topic may be found in different types of sources. In this case, students may identify Depression hardships that appear in both letters and photos.
 - Centerpiece: Photos of individuals from the Depression era.
 - Content: Personal impact of the Depression on individuals.
 - Process: Teacher-directed and individual work.
 - ✧ Journal to begin the day – Ask students to write a response to these questions: “What happens when your clothes or shoes get torn or ripped or you outgrow them? How would you feel if you couldn’t replace them?”
 - ✧ Describe unemployment during the Depression. View with students the “Millions out of work” chart on an overhead.
 - ✧ Teacher-directed photo-analysis of a Hooverville photo. View the Hooverville photo on an overhead.
 - ✧ Individual photo analysis – Distribute copies of various photos so that students do not all have the same photo. Students analyze their photos using the NARA photo analysis guide sheet.



- ✧ Question for comparison: “Take out your *letter* analysis sheets from yesterday. Do you recognize descriptions in the *letters* that we also saw in *photos* today?”
 - ✧ Students re-read their analysis of the letters, and circle words or phrases that could also describe the experience of people in the photos.
 - ✧ If time allows, students share with the class what their letters and photos have in common.
- Formative Assessment: Photo analysis sheets and comparisons with letter analysis from Activity 2.

Resources:

- NARA Photo analysis worksheet
- Hooverville transparency
- “Millions out of work” transparency

Activity 4: The Dust Bowl Farmer's Experience

This activity includes a geography focus. It introduces students to the 1930's drought that resulted in the formation of a terrible "dust bowl" of drought where Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas intersect. By analyzing photos, students may get a sense of the physical experience of a dust storm. By illustrating a map of the dust bowl, students learn the geography of the drought region. And by studying a penny auction picture book, eyewitness account and photograph, students learn the drought's effect on farmers and how some communities took action to save their neighbors' farms.

Content Goals:

- Students learn about the geography of the Dust Bowl, the region hardest hit by drought during the Depression.
- Students learn how some communities staged penny auctions to save neighbors' farms.

Process Goals:

- Students learn to locate historic information on a map, and illustrate a map with representations of historic events.
 - Students practice their Venn diagram skills.
- Centerpiece: Leah's Pony, Dust Bowl photos, Auction memoir, Dust Bowl maps, Grapes of Wrath passage
 - Content: The farmer's Dust Bowl plight.
 - Process:
 - ✧ Distribute dust storm photos and read Grapes of Wrath passage.
 - ✧ Analyze Dust Storm photos as a class – discuss what's happening.
 - ✧ Where did this occur? – View the dust bowl map on an overhead. Students individually identify the dust bowl region on a map of the U.S., and illustrate the area using colors and symbols.
 - ✧ What happened to the farmers whose farms were in this area of terrible drought? Read aloud Leah's Pony. Explain that when an author writes a story like Leah's Pony based on a historic event, they look for information from the same sorts of sources we've been using to learn about the Depression – written documents and photos. To model examples, read aloud James Hearst's memory of a penny auction and view the penny auction photo on an overhead.
 - Formative Assessment: Illustrated Dust Bowl maps.
 - Timeline: Add drought years of the 1931-1937, with 1935 being the worst year of dust storms.



Resources:

- You may wish to use NARA analysis sheet to lead class discussions of photos.
- Dust Bowl map sheets
- James Hearst memory document
- Penny auction photo
- Leah's Pony
- Grapes of Wrath passage

Activity 5: The California Migrant's experience

This activity encourages children to empathize with the experience of children that migrated with their families, looking for work. Driven by desperation, and often pulled west by rumors of job opportunities, many families from states all across the southern Midwest packed whatever belongings they could fit into their vehicles and traveled to find work. Although it includes a photo analysis exercise, the lesson may best be realized by emphasizing the discussion and journaling questions.

Content Goals:

- Students learn about the great westward migration of impoverished farmers from the Dust Bowl region to California.

Process Goals:

- Mapping a historic migration route
 - Centerpiece: Migration photos, map of migration west.
 - Content: Leaving the Dust Bowl.
 - Process:
 - ◇ Begin with a class discussion focused by the following questions:
 - Have you ever moved?
 - If you haven't moved, have you ever made friends with someone who moved into town or had a friend who moved away?
 - What did you leave behind?
 - Did you make new friends in your new home place?
 - Was it hard to make friends?
 - ◇ Distribute migrant photos.
 - ◇ Analyze photos. Fill-out a NARA photo analysis sheet individually or as a class.
 - ◇ Mapping – students take-out their illustrated dust bowl map from Activity 5. Today they illustrate the westward migration to California on their maps.
 - ◇ Journals -- students create a diary as a dust bowl child migrating from home. They may use the migration photos as their guide.
 - How did it feel to leave home? (Diary entry from the night you leave.)
 - What is the trip like – are you clean or dirty, do you have enough to eat and drink, is it hot, what time of year is it, who is traveling with you (family, friends)?
 - What do you think you will find when you reach your destination?



Formative Assessment

- Illustrated maps – Migration routes to California added
- Migration diaries

Resources

- NARA photo analysis sheet
- Migrant photos
- History folders – Dust Bowl maps.



Activity 6: Dorothea Lange – Photos of the migrants’ plight

This activity follows-up the migration lesson by briefly examining what happened to many of the Dust Bowl migrants when they reached California. A video excerpt on Dorothea Lange provides a poignant glimpse of the desperation that continued for families that fled west seeking work, and instead found themselves stranded without jobs in squalid labor camps.

Content Goals:

- Students learn the Dust Bowl migrants found themselves living in crowded work camps with only low-paying jobs available to them.
- Students learn Dorothea Lange’s photos raised public awareness of the Dust Bowl refugees’ plight in the California camps.
 - Centerpiece: Dorothea Lange excerpt from *The Great Depression* video
 - Content: What the migrants found in California
 - Process:
 - ✧ Read aloud *Children of the Dust Days*
 - ✧ Watch the video excerpt.
 - ✧ Discussion: How did Dorothea Lange help the “migrant mother”?
 - ✧ Journal – Write about arriving in California as a member of migrant family. What did you find in California? Was it what you expected? What is life like for you and your family? What do think will happen next?
- Product – Journal diary entries

Resources:

- Dorothea Lange excerpt from *The Great Depression* video
- *Children of the Dust Days*



Activity 7: A New Deal: How the government helped people during the Depression

This activity introduces the New Deal programs that the Roosevelt administration and congress created to address the Depression's problems. The acronyms that name the federal agencies can become confusing and generate a sense of irrelevance, so discussions of the agencies may best focus on the relief they provided. Ultimately, the programs were not actually large enough to jump start the economy and completely end the Depression. The WW II economy accomplished that. But you may introduce students to the idea that New Deal programs established government financial safety nets that U.S. citizens still rely on today.

Content Goals:

- Students learn about some of the government programs that were created during the Depression to help people survive the hard times.
- Students learn about some of the projects that people did in those programs.
- Students learn when wages to farmers and workers increased, business income increased as well because these groups could then buy more goods.
- Students learn certain groups were given greater power over their own well-being during the Depression. In particular, students learn the labor unions and collective bargaining process helped workers influence their pay and benefits.

Process Goals:

- Students practice document analysis skills.
- Students learn negotiation skills.
- Centerpiece: WPA, AAA, CCC documents; Mock Collective Bargaining activity.
- Content: Gov't response to the Depression – Works Progress Administration, Wagner Act, Agricultural Adjustment Act
- Process
 - ✧ Teacher-led discussion of New Deal programs. Display a map of major project sites throughout the U.S and photos on an overhead.
 - ✧ Hang WPA Poster Art for students to view.
 - ✧ Wagner Act -- Mock Collective Bargaining activity. See separate directions for this activity.

Resources:

- Overhead photos
- Overhead map
- Mock Collective Bargaining kit
- Depression game

Activity 8: Mind Maps of the Great Depression.

Mind Maps provide a format for students to synthesize what they have learned. Students may use any available art materials (magazines for picture clips, construction paper, glitter, glue, markers, watercolor paints, etc.) to create their maps. Whatever the materials used or the artistic quality of the map, however, the main goal of the activity is student ownership of what they have been studying. If the teacher feels the activity may be too difficult for students working individually, the mind maps may be created by students working in pairs, preferably with the teacher assigning the pairings.

Content Goals:

- Students review their knowledge of the Great Depression.

Process Goals:

- Students design symbol pictures to represent historic events or figures.
- Students create a mind map that represents their knowledge of the Great Depression to date.
 - Centerpiece: Resources/documents/books to date, and student history journals.
 - Content: Review of course to date.
 - Process:
 - ✧ Students place the contents of their history folders around themselves in a web shape. Class as a whole brainstorms Great Depression themes.
 - ✧ Students draw mind maps (symbol stories) of what they've learned, creating symbols for the Depression themes.
 - ✧ Hang maps on bulletin boards or in the school hallway, if there is available space.

Formative Assessment: Mind Maps.



Final Activity: Great Depression Autobiography

In the final activities, students create and assume a Depression-era identity or persona for themselves and construct a narrative of their experience during the Depression. Each student may choose his or her own story format. You may suggest some possible story forms: a written story, a cartoon strip, a play, a song, a poem, a painting...?

Content Goals:

- Students review all they have studied during the unit, and construct imaginary Great Depression autobiographies incorporating their learning.

Process Goals:

- Students synthesize information from various sources.
- Students organize this information in order to construct a story from it.
- Students construct a historical narrative by creating an account of their experience as a fictional child of the Depression.
 - Centerpiece – Unit resources, students' history folders, unit books
 - Process
 - ✧ Students assume an imaginary 1930's identity and create the story of their life during the Depression.
 - ✧ Students share their narratives with the class.