



Chicago Historical Society



FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE GREAT DEPRESSION

How Hard Were the Times?: Investigating the Meaning and Significance of the Great Depression

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: Seven class periods

Specific topic: The Great Depression

Subtopic: Studs Terkel's oral history interview transcripts for his book *Hard Times*

Teacher background information

America's "Great Depression" is frequently defined as the period between 1929 and 1939. During that time, approximately 25 percent of the country's workers were unemployed. This statistic, however, tells us little about the dramatic impact of the Great Depression. What was life like for the people who lived through those years, and how do our times relate to their experiences? Through exploration of both primary and secondary sources, students will prepare oral and written analyses of the Great Depression while finding answers to the question: Just how hard were the hard times?

This lesson is best used in conjunction with Studs Terkel's website. Preview the website, *Studs Terkel: Conversations with America* at www.studsterkel.org, before using the lesson plan. Although optional, it is also a good idea to have a copy of Terkel's *Hard Times* to use as a resource during this lesson.



Key concepts

Historical sources have strengths and weaknesses. In order to form an opinion or reach a conclusion about historic events, you must investigate various sources. History repeats itself in subtle and unusual ways that require thoughtful exploration and reflection.

Key questions

How can the past be used to understand the present? How are people of the past the same or different from people today? How can I know whether or not what I read, see, or hear about the past is true? Do current movies and television programs accurately portray events and people of the past? Could the Great Depression happen again?

Goal of this lesson

To provide students with a progressively insightful understanding of the depression era through the study of the people who experienced it.

Objectives

This lesson aims to help students:

1. Understand the value of obtaining information from a variety of resources, including personal accounts.
2. Draw conclusions and construct effective arguments defending those conclusions.
3. Apply historical understanding to their lives.
4. Gain a general understanding of America's Great Depression, its causes and effects, and its significance on twentieth-century American life.

Men warm their hands over a fire under Michigan Avenue in Chicago, 1930

5. Analyze the value of various types of historical information, particularly information derived from primary sources.
6. Learn to summarize information succinctly and provide them with note-taking experience.
7. Relate the events, issues, problems, and solutions of the past to the present.
8. Practice presenting an argument through both oral and written reports.

Materials

Master copies of the “Biography of Studs Terkel” and applicable interview excerpts are provided. You may want to ask students to keep a folder or small notebook to organize their notes and research.

1. “Biography of Studs Terkel”
2. Excerpts from Studs Terkel’s interviews with John Beecher, Dorothe Bernstein, and Kitty McCulloch
3. Paper and pens



Procedures

Day 1

Discuss the facts of the Great Depression—including population, life expectancy, average salary, unemployment, food and car sales and prices, and lynching—and what these facts tell us about the era. Which one of these depression-era “facts” tells us most about the era? Then use an almanac to compare the depression-era figures with current-day statistics. For sources of information about depression-era facts, see the “Additional Resources” list at the end of this lesson.

Day 2

Days 2, 3, and 4 are designed to build the students’ general knowledge of the scope of the Great Depression. Begin by recapping the class discussion from Day 1 to illustrate how a particular point or fact may help to describe an era.

Ask students to prepare two-minute oral presentations on notable individuals, groups, things, or terms from the era (see suggested topics below). Explain to students that they will be evaluated based on the scope of their research and their abilities to explain the relationship of their topic to the Great Depression. Remind students to cite their sources. This part of the lesson is best completed as homework.

Suggested topics: Richard Byrd, Dale Carnegie, Amelia Earhart, Herbert Hoover, John L. Lewis, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Shirley Temple, Grant Wood, flappers, Hoovervilles, fireside chats, the *Grapes of Wrath*, *Monopoly* (the board game), the dust bowl, laissez-faire economy, the Social Security Act, and the *War of the Worlds*

Days 3 and 4

During Days 3 and 4, have each student present his or her findings in both written and oral form. Evaluate students based on pre-established criteria, including the scope of their research and their ability to explain the relationship of their topic to the Great Depression.

Conclude Day 4 with a discussion. Begin by clarifying the difference between primary and secondary sources. Ask students about the types of sources they used and the advantages and limitations of using one

type of source over another. Then move the discussion to the presentations. Ask students to consider the following: Collectively, what did the presentations tell us, or not tell us, about the Great Depression?

Optional activities:

1. Ask students to take notes while listening to other students’ presentations. Students should record important information about the period and then use this information to participate in the end-of-class discussion.
2. Have other students critique their peers’ presentations according to the pre-established criteria.

Day 5

On Day 5, students will study excerpts from three interviews Studs Terkel conducted for his book *Hard Times*. Before students begin reading the transcripts, introduce them to Terkel’s life and work using the “Biography of Studs Terkel.” You can find additional information about Terkel on his website at www.studsterkel.org.

Distribute the printed excerpts from Terkel’s original interviews with John Beecher, Dorothe Bernstein, and Kitty McCulloch to each student. If your students have Internet access, they can visit the “Hard Times” link at www.studsterkel.org to listen to the actual interviews. This lesson can be completed using either the printed excerpts or the sound recordings or by combining the mediums.

Explain to students that they will use excerpts from Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times* interview transcripts to gather information from firsthand accounts about life during the Great Depression to answer the question, “Just how hard were the hard times?” Ask them to read (or listen to) the excerpts (or sound recordings) and identify and list as many indications of “hard times” as they can by citing specific quotes from the excerpts (or sound recordings). If students are using Terkel’s website, they may have to listen to the sound recordings several times to insure the accuracy of their quotes. If students are working in small groups, remind them to share information about the excerpts (or sound recordings).



Studs Terkel among his tapes in the CHS archives.

Day 6

Students now have collected data both from the presentations given on Days 3 and 4 and the study of Terkel's excerpts (or sound recordings) on Day 5. Ask them to organize their findings into a coherent essay about the Great Depression. The following questions are guidelines for directing the focus of the student reports: What are the indicators of hard times? Which indicators of hard times during the Great Depression are similar to the hard times that some of us experience today? Which are different? How do primary sources tell us things about the Great Depression that we could not have gotten from secondary sources? Are the transcripts really primary sources? Why or why not?

Optional activity:

You may also require students to give oral presentations based on their written reports.

Day 7

Facilitate a discussion about the pros and cons of primary and secondary sources when constructing an argument or describing a historical event. You may also show the film *The Journey of Natty Gann* to summarize and bring closure to the lesson plan.

Suggestions for student assessment:

Students' written and oral work, including discussion participation and presentations, may be assessed by the completeness of each student's understanding of the meaning of "hard times," the number and validity of the indicators of hard times identified by each student, and the student's ability to relate depression-era hard times to our own times.

Additional resources

The Journey of Natty Gann (film)

Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: The New Press, 1970.

Extension activities

1. Invite someone who lived through the Great Depression to visit your class and speak about his or her experiences. Encourage students to ask questions based on their research.
2. Have students interview an older relative or family friend who lived through the Great Depression. Ask students to construct their own interview protocols and conduct recorded interviews in the style of Studs Terkel.
3. Ask students to find an editorial cartoon from a depression-era newspaper. Have students analyze the manner in which the cartoon depicts the harshness of the times or the possible causes and effects of the Great Depression. You might also encourage students to draw and analyze a political cartoon of their own.

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science

State Goal 15: Understand economic systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

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Studs Terkel. Photograph by Tom Maday.

Biography of Studs Terkel

Studs Terkel, radio broadcast personality and prize-winning author, was born Louis Terkel in New York, New York, on May 16, 1912. His father Samuel was a tailor and his mother Anna Finkel was a seamstress. He had three brothers. The family moved to Chicago in 1922 and opened a rooming house at Ashland Avenue and Flournoy Street on the Near West Side.

From 1926 to 1936, the family ran the Wells-Grand Hotel, another rooming house at Wells Street and Grand Avenue. Terkel credits his knowledge of the world to the tenants who gathered in the lobby of the hotel and the people who congregated in nearby Bughouse Square, a meeting place for workers, labor organizers, dissidents, the unemployed, and religious fanatics of many persuasions. In 1939, he married Ida Goldberg, and they had one son.

After graduating from University of Chicago's law school in 1934, Terkel pursued acting and appeared on stage, on the radio, and in the movies. He has been a playwright, a radio news commentator, a sportscaster, a film narrator, a jazz columnist, a disc jockey, and a music festival host. In 1944, he began hosting a radio show. Radio allowed him to express his own personality and to play the music he enjoyed, including folk, opera, jazz, and blues. In 1945, he debuted

his own television series, called "Stud's Place," in which he began asking people the types of questions that would mark his interview style in later years.

On "The Studs Terkel Program," which was heard on Chicago's fine arts radio station WFMT from 1952 to 1997, Terkel interviewed national and international figures who helped shape the past century. The program included guests who were politicians, writers, activists, labor organizers, performing artists, and architects. Terkel's depth of personal knowledge of the diverse subjects he explored on his program is remarkable, as is his ability to get others to do what they do best—talk about themselves. Many of the interviews he conducted for his books and for his radio program are featured on his website at www.studsterkel.org.

Terkel's first book of oral history interviews was *Division Street: America*, published in 1966. In subsequent years, he wrote many oral history books covering topics such as the Great Depression, World War II, race relations, working, and aging. Terkel continues to write, interview people, work on his books, and speak in public. He is currently Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at the Chicago Historical Society.

Excerpt from transcript of Studs Terkel's interview with John Beecher

John Beecher: My father was a top executive of a southern subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation. Fortunately for me and possibly fortunately for him, he lost most of his money in the stock market crash of '29. He had a hard time recovering from it, psychologically.

I remember how, after dinner, he'd just lie on the couch in utter despair, night after night, for hours. A man who was interested in music, read all kinds of literature . . . there was this man so knocked out. We were afraid he was going to commit suicide. His close personal friend did take a header out of the fourteenth story window. He was still getting an excellent salary, but he felt—up to that time—the measure of a man's success was the amount of money he accumulated.

But he did recover. He became a kind of coolly critical intelligence. He was ready for any kind of change in the system—perhaps this system was not eternal, perhaps there should be a more cooperative society.

I had my first job in the steel mills, back in the Twenties. You could say the depression commenced in this town, Ainsley, Alabama, a steel mill suburb of Birmingham. We had the first bank to go bust in the early days of the depression. All the workingmen trusted the banker. I remember an old group of Italians, who had been brought over from Italy in the 1890s to work in this mill. They, like the blacks and poor whites, were kept at common labor all their lives and were never allowed to rise. Yet they trusted this banker with their life savings, which were swept away in that bank crash.

In '32 the plant was shut down and stayed shut for years. It became a ghost town, never quite recovered. The big plant which had employed 6,000 men when I worked there in the Twenties today employs possibly a thousand.

For eight years, starting in '34, I worked as a field-administrator [New Deal administrator] all over the South . . . with white and black, rural people, coal miners, steel workers, textile workers, fertilizer plant people, turpentine camp workers and sharecroppers.

Studs Terkel: Was theirs an attitude of resignation?

John Beecher: No, indeed . . . the people were ready, really, to take action. They, of course, didn't know which way to turn. Few people believed, in '32, that Roosevelt was going to be the answer. . . . Roosevelt surprised everyone by coming up with emergency programs which did take most of the bite out of popular discontent.

I remember in Ainsley that year, in the relief headquarters, a woman had been arguing and arguing to get some milk for her baby. You should have seen the things they were giving babies instead of milk. I remember seeing them put salt-pork gravy in milk bottles and putting a nipple on, and the baby sucking this salt-pork gravy. A real blue baby, dying of starvation. In house after house, I saw that sort of thing.

Well, this woman was determined to get real milk for her baby. She raised all the Cain she could, until the top supervisor agreed to let her have a quart. When they handed it to her, she got back as far as she could and threw it up against the wall—Pow!—and smashed it. This was the kind of spirit, you see . . .

Excerpt from transcript of Studs Terkel's interview with Dorothe Bernstein

Dorothe Bernstein: We didn't have fear because we were young and because of the Depression . . . nobody was really your enemy. These were guys who didn't work; who didn't have work. And they would probably ride the railroad. I don't know how they got where they were going or where they ended up or that. But I remember on Fridays we used to give them our lunch—all of us . . . there might have been 125 of us going off to Harrison High School carrying the same brown paper bag with mashed sardine sandwiches and mayonnaise on it . . . As I say, I was underprivileged, I was raised in a home [orphanage]. But I was very, very privileged because I had everything that a person needs to live with.

Studs Terkel: From this home, you and your friends would give sandwiches to these guys?

Dorothe Bernstein: Right. But these were—they were nice men. You would never think they would do you bodily harm. They weren't what you call hoboes or bums or that. These were hard luck guys. . . They would stay along the park, especially along this railroad track, whatever the railroad that goes somewhere along Twenty-second and Kedzie, or some place along the park there.

I went to school with kids that were not in the home, but the ones who lived with their parents. A lot of them had it real, real rough. They would live in one place for a couple of months, as long as they were able to pay the rent. Then, the next month you'd go visit the same girlfriend in a different address. Two, three months later you'd find them at a different address, but in the same locale. It's just that—I don't know . . . you . . . it's hard to say, Studs. People today, or kids today, when they talk about the good old times, I don't know if it's sentimentality. These can't be good old times when men want to work and couldn't find work. When your family or your kids wanted milk and that and you had to go scratch for it. And there was really no place . . . family life was different, too. I don't think there was any relative anywhere, I don't care what your status, that didn't have somebody who was out of a job or hadn't been put out of their apartment because they couldn't pay the rent; that didn't have somebody sleeping on a folding bed or on a couch.

. . . The kids today can't imagine when there's so much, when even with wars and poverties or whatever—it was nothing like that period.

I remember one girlfriend I went to the store with, and she was real ashamed because they had something like food stamps must be today, and you would go to the grocery and you would give them that. And I remember how apologetic she was to me. It kind of embarrassed her. She said, You want to wait outside? And I remember going in with her and she said, well, we have these. I don't have money, but I give this to the grocer and you get your food in exchange. I guess the government must have taken care of x number of dollars or whatever it was. It was, as I say, for people it was rough sledding.

Douglas Park, at that time I remember we used to go ice-skating and we went boating in the summertime. I mean, you didn't have money to do things with, you did what . . . you made treasure hunts, you went looking for old things through the park and that . . . a lot of the stores and bakery shops would have day-old or maybe two-day-old [bread]. The older, the cheaper it became. I had one girlfriend I went to school with, her mother would make a terrific bread pudding out of this stuff . . . and this was a real treat. With a few raisins, but lots and lots of bread, lots of stale bread went into it.

[I'd] work six days to support a family, and if I couldn't cut it on six days, I'd work the seventh. You want for your kids, you want them to the little bit better than you didn't have . . . But you say to a kid . . . I mean any parent if they would say to a kid: well, when I was young, you didn't have this. Who asked for a dollar? You took back pop bottles and went around looking for milk bottles that you got two cents for. And if you saved enough of it maybe you were lucky enough on a Saturday afternoon to go to the movies. And if you tell this to a kid, they would say: well, I mean, it would be like unbelievable. Like I wonder if in their mind it would flash: oh they must be dramatizing it, it couldn't possibly be like that . . . Of course the way I feel, kids shouldn't know from these things. I mean, if they're hungry there should be stuff for them to eat.

Excerpt from transcript of Studs Terkel's interview with Kitty McCulloch

Kitty McCulloch: [The Great Depression] meant a lot of heartaches. But I think, truthfully, we were happier then than we are now. I'm a nurse—which was very fortunate for me. Cause when the depression came along instead of having to call a doctor, I did the work that should have been done. I had one little girl. She was six years old, and then the crash came. We were living very nicely on Washington Boulevard, and we had our little savings in the bank.

There were many beggars, who would come to your back door, and they would say they were hungry. I wouldn't give them money because I didn't have it. But I did take them in and put them in my kitchen and give them something to eat.

This one man came in—it was right before Christmas. My husband had a very nice suit, tailored. It was a black suit with a fine white pin-stripe in it. He put it to one side. I thought he didn't like the suit. I said to this man, "Your clothes are all ragged. I think I have a nice suit for you." So I gave him this suit.

The following Sunday, my husband was to go to a wake. He said, "Where's my good suit?" And I said, "Well, Daddy, you never wore it. I—well, it's gone." He said, "Where is it gone to?" I said, "I gave it to a man who had such shabby clothes. Anyway, you got three other suits and he didn't have any. So I gave it to him." He said, "You're the limit, Mother."

One elderly man that had white whiskers and all, he came to my back door. He was pretty much of a philosopher. He was just charming. A man probably in his sixties. And he did look like St. Nicholas, I'll tell you that. I gave him a good, warm meal. He said, "Bring me a pencil and paper and I'll draw you a picture." So he sketched. And he was really good. He was an artist.

[Laughing] A man came to my door and I could smell the liquor a little. He said, "You don't suppose you could have a couple of shirts you could give me, old shirts of your husband's?" I said, "Oh, I'm so very sorry, my husband hasn't anything but old shirts, really. That's all he has right now and he wears those." He said, "Lady, if I get some extra ones, I'll come back and give them to you." I said, "Go on, mind your own business."

And another one, I smelled liquor on *his* breath, too. He wanted to know if he could have a few pennies. I said, "Are you hungry?" He said, "I haven't any food. I'd like some money to buy some food." I said, "I'll make you a nice sandwich." So I made him a sandwich with mayonnaise and chicken and lettuce, a double sandwich, put it in wax paper. He gave me a dirty look and he started down the alley. I watched him when he got, oh, two or three doors down, he threw it down on the street.

Money doesn't mean anything to them [young people] now. You're just . . . even a parent doesn't mean anything to a child if they haven't quite a lot to offer. . . . Well, when I didn't have very much and my little daughter was growing, and I tried to make her unselfish. That was one thing I expounded on . . .

