Introduction

Approach and Rationale

The National Center for History in the Schools and the Organization of American Historians have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. Our units are the fruit of a collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific "dramatic episodes" in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

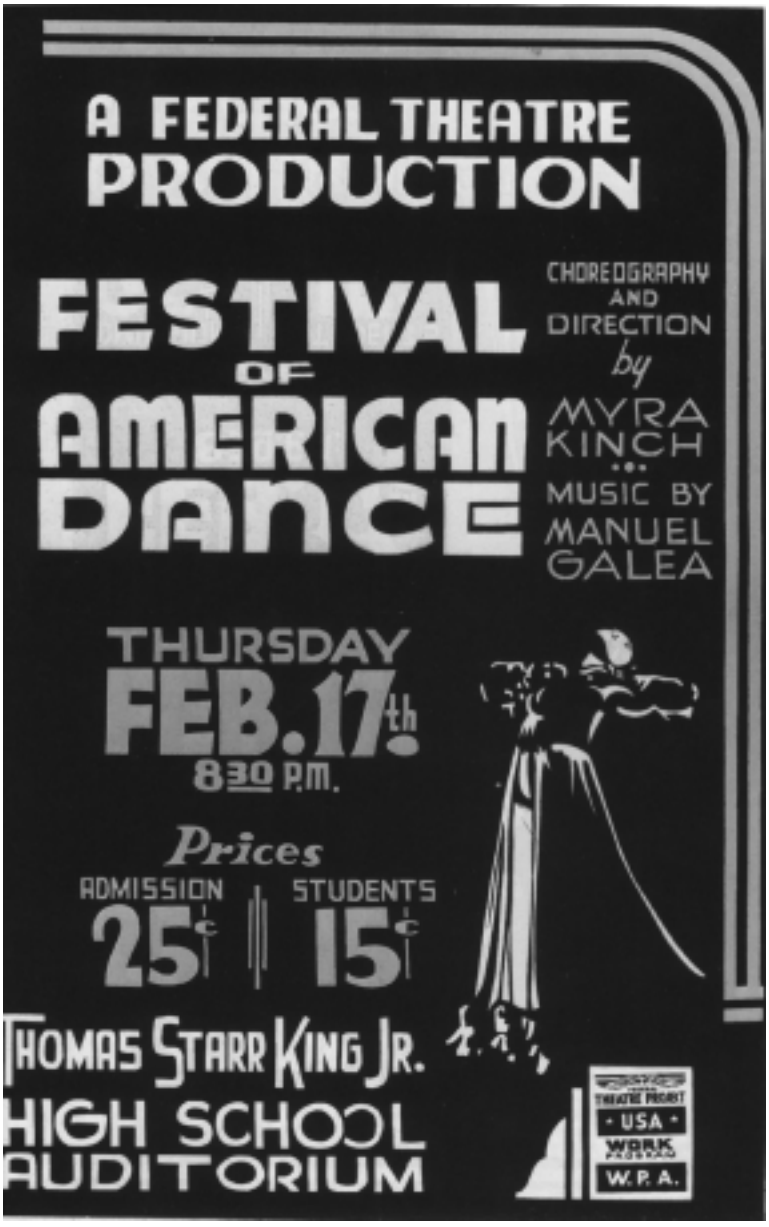
Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, and literature from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of "being there," a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

Content and Organization

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 8-12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific "dramatic moment" to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.



Los Angeles Federal Theatre Project, WPA, 1937
National Archives, Records of the Work Projects Administration

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

And then the Depression came." This familiar lament more than distinguishes one decade from another. Within its meaning are the images and realities of disaster: the crash of the stock market, the howl of the dust storms, the cry of the hungry, the silence of the shamed. Thousands of Americans watched their destinies evaporate. The horizon of prosperity looming "just around the corner" seemed to fade from view. While the Depression may have jolted many out of the American Dream, its pattern of unemployment, frustration, and despair was neither a universal nor identical condition.

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was the political response to the Great Depression. Establishing the foundation of the modern welfare state while preserving the capitalist system, the New Deal experimented with unprecedented activism in an attempt to relieve the social and economic dislocation experienced by "one-third of the nation." Federal programs extended not only into American business, agriculture, labor, and the arts; but into people's daily lives. Despite a mixed legacy with respect to recovery and reform, the political response under Roosevelt proved that economic crisis did not require Americans to abandon democracy. Moreover, American popular culture during the 1930s revealed that economic and social "hard times" did not cause an abandonment of imagination, humor, or fun.

The material in this unit is designed to impress upon students the varying effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on the lives of ordinary Americans. The unit's focus is primarily (but not exclusively) on the people rather than the policies, especially their fears, uncertainties, resilience, commonality of suffering, and survival. Individual lessons ask students to make inferences and to develop historical perspectives based upon evidence. The New Deal's documentary impulse and funding for the arts provide a unique opportunity for students to expand their skills in "reading" the visual and literary records of the 1930s. Still, it is important to note that the exercise of documenting the Great Depression gained momentum as the crisis wore on. What students see and read as records of life in the thirties tells only part of the story.

II. Unit Context

This unit concerns artistic and political responses to the worst economic crisis in American history. These lessons fit into the context of a larger unit on the Great Depression. Teachers should introduce these lessons after examining the causes of the Great Depression. Students will then be offered not just an experience (however limited) of depression-era life, but historical antecedents for contemporary debates over the proper role of government in business, labor, agriculture, the arts, and individual's lives.

This is an excerpt from an OAH-NCHS teaching unit entitled *The Great Depression and the Arts: A Unit of Study for Grades 8-12* by Robert Gabrick, Barbara Markham and James Curtis. The complete teaching unit may be purchased online from the Organization of American Historians: http://www.indiana.edu/~oah/tunits/ or by calling (812) 855-7311.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

This unit is designed to correlate with Era 8: Standard 1B of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). In seeking to "understand how American life changed during the 1930s" students will utilize materials and activities which provide opportunities to (a) "explain the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on American farm owners, tenants, and sharecroppers," and (b) "explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art, literature, and music, and evaluate the government's role in promoting artistic expression."

This unit cannot provide all of the possible ways to understand how American life changed during the 1930s; nor all the ways the New Deal addressed the Great Depression. It does offer a variety of documentary source materials--plays, literature, public record, and writings--to enable students to analyze significant aspects of life in the 1930s and some New Deal responses. This unit also provides a variety of options enabling teachers and students to go beyond the documents provided and extend the lessons.

Lessons provide active learning strategies. Reading, writing, role playing, and creating visual exhibits are some of the activities which challenge students to think on a variety of levels utilizing different approaches for different learning styles.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- To explore the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on ordinary Americans.
- To understand how some aspects of American life changed during the 1930s.
- To explain aspects of the cultural life of the Depression years and debate the government's role in promoting artistic expression.
- To identify cultural trends of the 1930s by analyzing the documentary expression in the arts.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Documentary Film—"The Plow that Broke the Plains"
2. Documenting the Migrant Experience
3. Film Study of the Grapes of Wrath
4. The New Deal's Federal Theater Project

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ARTS

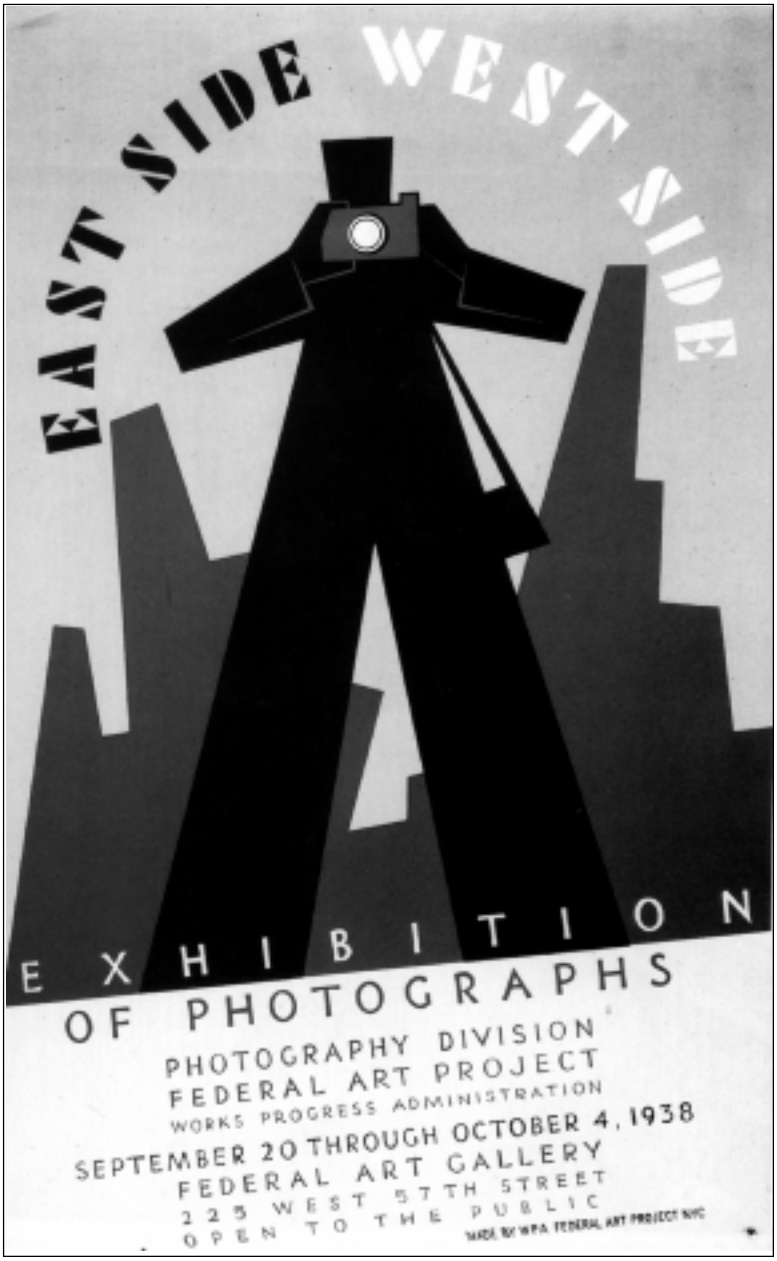
The 1930s marked the worst economic collapse experienced by this nation. Unemployment peaked at nearly 25% and hovered above 15% throughout the decade. Many a "forgotten man" disappeared into the Depression. Wavering confidence in the nation's political and economic institutions called for bold experimentation and compelling leadership. Although Roosevelt's New Deal measures never brought the country to complete recovery, government activism that produced Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), direct relief, labor reform, work projects, housing, and agricultural subsidies was unprecedented. Many saw Roosevelt as a savior who genuinely cared about the American public. To them, his voice over the airwaves gave reassurance that the values defining the American political experiment and cultural identity would prevail.

Under the New Deal, the notion of work expanded beyond the construction of roads, bridges, dams, and buildings. Government patronage for the arts inspired creativity, provided entertainment, and promoted American culture. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) became the New Deal's largest employment agency. Under the WPA the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Music Project employed thousands of artists, writers, actors, film makers, musicians, and dancers. Other government agencies also supported aesthetic endeavors. The Resettlement Administration (RA), later absorbed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), produced documentary photographs, and the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture commissioned post office murals. Not only did this New Deal for the arts put Americans to work, it also celebrated American workers, the nation's history, its talents, and its diversity. Arts projects did not necessarily ennoble ordinary lives, but these lives became the subjects for plays, interviews, murals, and photographs, producing a documentary record of how the Great Depression affected them.

Like other New Deal remedies, however, the arts programs endured controversy. Critics charged that these programs were wasteful, amateurish, or that they flagrantly promoted the New Deal agenda and radical politics. At the same time, independent artists such as John Steinbeck and John Ford, who found creative inspiration in these socially conscious times, came under fire from forces who saw their work as leftist dogma disguised as art. However, the America that wasn't on the breadlines generally embraced the trend by artists to record the American that was. And even those who eked out a living on government relief sometimes found it possible to listen to the radio, go to the "pictures" (movies), enjoy "the funny papers," or read popular fiction from the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The New Deal had its weaknesses. It failed to alleviate the protracted poverty of migrant workers and urban poor, and either excluded or restricted access to relief agencies by racial minorities and women. Roosevelt's "court packing" scheme threatened to undermine the system of checks and balances. Even the Keynesian

experiment of deficit financing, which fueled the successful war economy, resulted in reliance on government spending as policy, rather than careful application of deficit spending as an emergency action. Nevertheless, at a time when fascism seemed to some like the most expedient solution to economic crisis, the New Deal proved that capitalism and democracy could adapt and survive.



East Side West Side Exhibition of Photographs
Anthony Velanis, New York City Federal Art Project, WPA, 1938
Library of Congress