

The Great Depression and New Deal

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources

Michael Hutchison, Writer

Dr. Aaron Willis, Project Editor
Kerry Gordonson, Editor
Christina Trejo, Editorial Assistant

Social Studies School Service
10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232

<http://socialstudies.com>
access@socialstudies.com
(800) 421-4246

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10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232
United States of America

(310) 839-2436
(800) 421-4246

Fax: (800) 944-5432
Fax: (310) 839-2249

<http://socialstudies.com>
access@socialstudies.com

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Introduction

Primary sources are the building blocks of history. Using these sources to introduce students to historical periods offers students the opportunity to become historians themselves—to analyze the evidence, form hypotheses, and learn how to support arguments based on evidence. They learn what it means to interpret the past in ways that provide meaning for the present. Textual primary sources can often be difficult for students to engage with because they are often couched in unfamiliar language from a different historical era. Visual primary sources can prove more appealing and accessible to students, and they also involve different types of “reading” skills.

How to Use This Product

This PowerPoint® presentation is designed to walk students through the process of primary source interpretation. Slides help to focus students’ attention and train them how to “read” visual primary sources. Targeted questions and enlarged insets from images help to train students to see deeper into the historical record, to uncover evidence that, though plainly before their eyes, is not always obvious at first glance.

The posters provide visual reinforcement for the images analyzed in the presentation. Use them before or after the PowerPoint® analysis for either pre- or post-reading activities. In addition, we have provided extra images on each disc so that once the students are trained in the skills of analyzing visual primary sources they can further hone their skills. You can print them out and distribute as handouts for in-class or independent study, or you can import the images into PowerPoint® for students to analyze individually or with the class as a whole.

Let Us Know What You Think

At Social Studies School Service, we always strive to provide the best supplemental curriculum materials at a superior value. If you have feedback that could help us improve this product, requests for other titles in this series, or stories of how it has helped your students, please let us know. You can e-mail us at access@socialstudies.com.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Dr. Aaron Willis
Chief Education Officer
Social Studies School Service

The Great Depression and New Deal



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While many Americans reveled in the “ballyhoo” years of the 1920s, ominous signs showed an impending financial catastrophe. Farm prices were plummeting, businesses were producing goods at a level far exceeding demand, and investors were involved in risky speculation in real estate and stocks. The financial house of cards fell beginning with the stock market crash in October of 1929. Soon, many factories and businesses closed due to the crash. Unemployment soared. Banks had over speculated as well; the crash caused many of them to fail, taking with them the life savings of their depositors.

Herbert Hoover, elected in 1928 on a promise to maintain the prosperity of the 1920s, found himself unable to solve the problems of the Depression. He lost the 1932 presidential election to Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York who promised a “New Deal” for the American people. Soon, Americans found themselves in a flood of “alphabet agencies” designed to provide relief, recovery, and reform. Social Security provided old age pensions as well as benefits for the unemployed and disabled. The Tennessee Valley Authority built dams that provided flood control and cheap hydroelectric power. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation protected individual bank deposits. The economy began to improve and FDR easily won reelection in 1936. However, it was not the New Deal that finally solved the Depression, but the coming of World War II. Even with the full employment that the war brought, several New Deal programs continued until the second year of American involvement in the war.

The legacy of the New Deal persists to this day. The Roosevelt Administration’s response to the Depression led to what many today consider a “welfare state” in which the government takes care of citizens from cradle to grave.

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City Life During the Depression

- Many city dwellers lost their jobs and homes
- Charities and churches were overwhelmed
- Government relief efforts were inadequate early on
- “Hooverilles”
- Breadlines and soup kitchens

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The Depression hit city dwellers hard. The stock market crash caused factories and businesses to close or lay off large numbers of workers. Unable to find work, many found themselves relying on charities such as churches or private agencies who were often overwhelmed by the demands of caring for thousands of the homeless and hungry. Even state and local governments could not provide the needed relief. Often, homeowners could not pay mortgages and were evicted. They frequently found themselves living in shantytowns--also known as “Hooverilles.” The unemployed and displaced often had to rummage through garbage cans to find a meal; if they were lucky, they might receive food at one of the many breadlines or soup kitchens in major American cities.



City Life During the Depression

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Allow students approximately one minute to view this image, then proceed to the following slides.

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What is this a picture of?

How can you tell?

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Based on the signs, as well as on the line of people waiting for a handout, it is obvious that this picture is either of a soup kitchen or some type of relief station for the unemployed.

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources



What things were advertised as being available in this building?

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Based on what can be seen in this picture, the building provides handouts for men who are unemployed. The larger sign indicates that “free coffee and doughnuts” are available for the unemployed. The smaller sign (which is partly obscured by the men in the picture) says “Free Soup” with an ampersand. The bottom portion of the sign is covered. It could possibly say “sandwiches,” but it is impossible to tell from the photograph.

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources



- Describe the appearance and the clothing of the men in this picture.
- What do the men have in common?

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While it is evident that the men in this picture are hungry and unemployed, they seem to be dressed relatively nicely considering their situation. It may be that these people had only recently been affected by the Depression; perhaps they had just been laid off from factory jobs or evicted from their homes and only now had to resort to seeking handouts of food. If not for the signs on the building offering coffee and doughnuts for unemployed persons, some who would see the men might not know they were waiting in line for what might have been their only hot meal of the day.

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources

- Approximately how many men can be seen in the photograph?
- How would you describe the expressions and postures of the men in the picture?



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While the full view of some people in the photograph is obscured, there are approximately 35–40 visible people in the photograph. The expressions of the men appear to show fear and despair. None of the men are smiling and many have a look of discouragement. In some instances, the men are not looking at the camera, but are looking down at the pavement, as if they do not want to be identifiable.

In some instances, their posture suggests that they are “beaten down.” Some of the men are slouched or huddled together, possibly to hold their place in the line for a handout. Another likely reason is that they may have felt broken and without hope.

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources



Note that there are at least two African Americans standing in line.

Speculate as to the significance of their presence.

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It could be said that the Depression was a great “integrator” that affected workers of all colors with an equally harsh manner. The fact that blacks, who might normally be segregated in areas such as employment or schools, were now on an “equal footing” with white workers shows that a wide range of Americans were devastated by the effects of the Depression.

Why do you think there aren't any women in this picture?



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The absence of women in the soup line is probably due to the common belief of the era that the man was the head of the household; husbands would have been more likely to go without food in order to feed their family. It is possible that some of these men did not want to subject their wives and children to the indignity of standing in a soup line; they might have reserved what little “private” food they had for their families and obtained their own food from soup kitchens. Therefore, men might have been more likely to be in soup lines than women. In addition, soup kitchens might have been considered an “unseemly” place for a woman to be—a reason for their absence.