

Riding the Rails

Teacher's Guide

Suggestions for the Classroom

Time Period: 1929-1941

Themes: the Great Depression, the New Deal, railroads, economics, homelessness

At the height of the Great Depression, more than a quarter million teenagers were living on the road in America, many criss-crossing the country by illegally hopping freight trains. This film tells the story of ten of these teenage hobos; from the reasons they left home to what they experienced, all within the context of depression-era America.

Before Watching

1. What do students know about homelessness today? What are some of the reasons for homelessness? Why do you think people were homeless in the 1930s? Would teenagers have different reasons for being homeless than adults, both in the past and today?
2. What do students think of when they hear the word "hobo"? How do they define hobo? Are there still hobos today?

After Watching

1. Compare the attitude of people towards hobos in the 1930s and the homeless today. Do you think they are treated differently? Why might that be?
2. Have students research the impact of the Great Depression on the American family. You may also wish to view the AMERICAN EXPERIENCE film "[Surviving the Dust Bowl](#)"

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(www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/dustbowl/) to help students get a more complete picture of the problems facing families in different parts of the country during the 1930s. Consider the economic challenges facing families and look at the various aspects of the New Deal that tried to address these problems. To what extent were they successful? In what ways did they fail?

3. Write a diary entry or letter from the point of view of a teenager during the 1930s who has run away to ride the rails. Explain why you left and what you are experiencing. What are your hopes? What are your fears?

4. Find out about the life of present-day hobos. Read *Rolling Nowhere: A Young Man's Adventures Riding the Rails with America's Hobos* by Ted Conover (Penguin, 1987). Conover hopped freight trains as a college anthropology student in the 1980s. How is his account similar to and different from that of the hobos presented in the film? Consider the types of people who are hobos, their reasons for riding the rails, conditions on the road, the ways they get money, the types of support and assistance available, etc. For other titles about hobos and youth in the depression, see the [Further Reading](#) section.

(www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/further-reading/rails-further-reading/)

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