

What Was Life Like During the Great Depression? - Lesson Plan

- [Go to the Michigan Historical Museum home page](#)
- [Go to our Great Depression online exhibits](#)

Background Notes

Doing oral histories is a wonderful way for students to learn firsthand about past times. By asking questions and listening to stories from older relatives and friends, students can understand how much life has changed since the 1930s and establish special relationships with another generation.

Life during the Great Depression was difficult for everyone. Some workers risked their jobs by going on strike. Because of the severity of the Great Depression people began to support federal relief programs and to think differently about those who accepted charity. People worked for government programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program set up to give unemployed youth an opportunity to do conservation work in exchange for food, lodging and a small stipend.

Objectives

1. Students will interview an individual about his/her life.
2. Students will present an oral report based on an oral interview (rather than from books).
3. Students will explain the Great Depression as described by someone who lived in that era.
4. Students will compare and contrast people's experiences in the Great Depression depending on their age and circumstances based on classmates' reports.
5. Students will compare and contrast living during the Great Depression and living now.

Michigan Social Studies Curriculum Content Standards

This lesson presents an opportunity to address, in part, these standards:

- 1.2.5. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: Summarize the sequence of key events in stories describing life from the past in their local community, the state of Michigan, and other parts of the United States.
- 1.2.7. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: Recount the lives and characters of a variety of individuals from the past representing their local community, the state of Michigan, and other parts of the United States.
- 1.3.4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: Use primary sources to reconstruct past events in their local community.

Materials Needed

Pen, paper; if available: audio or video tape, tape recorder or video camera

Directions

Spend some time discussing the Great Depression with students. Use the [I Remember . . .](#) stories and [Then and Now: Prices](#) activity as background. Help students identify people who remember the 1930s. You may want to work with a retirement center to identify people to interview. (If they will tape the interviews, have them practice using tape recorders and asking each other questions.)

Then ask students to prepare an oral report based on an interview with a relative or friend who lived during the Great Depression. Have them take notes and tape the interview if they can. In that way, if they missed a point, they can go back and listen to the tape.

Here are some sample questions for them to ask:

1. How old are you?
2. Do you remember the Great Depression?
3. Where did you live during the Great Depression?
4. How old were you during the Great Depression?
5. How did you get to school or work during the Great Depression?
6. Did you know anyone who lost their job during the Great Depression?
7. Did you know anyone who worked for one of the federal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps?

8. Who was in your family then?
9. What was the hardest part of living then for you?
10. What did you usually eat during a day?
11. What did you do for fun?

Work with students to develop their own additional questions.

Have the students present an oral report based on their interviews.

Questions for Discussion or Research

1. What differences and similarities do you see between the lives of children, teenagers and adults at the time?
2. How was life different living in rural and urban areas?
3. Compare life during the Great Depression and now.
4. Read and discuss *Bud, not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (Delacorte Press, 1999) with your class (especially the Afterword, pages 237-243). This fictional story of a boy's search for his father in 1936 presents glimpses of life in Michigan during the Great Depression.

At the Museum

- Watch the short video program about the 1936-37 sit-down strike in Flint.
- Listen to the song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"
- See the bungalow from the 1930s and listen to old radio broadcasts in the bungalow.
- Learn about the different government programs by examining the numerous artifacts from this era.
- See the lighthouse lens, Michigan's Natural Resources mural and the red roadster built from parts from different cars.

Vocabulary

- Alphabet Soup Programs: Nickname given to New Deal programs initiated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and approved by Congress to provide relief and reform measures during the Great Depression. They were usually referred to by their initials, e.g., WPA for Works Progress Administration (later, Work Projects Administration) and CCC for Civilian Conservation Corps.
- Great Depression: The greatest depression (period of low economic activity and high unemployment) in American history. It is commonly considered to have begun with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, and lasted until the end of the 1930s.
- Oral History: Historical information consisting of personal recollections usually in the form of a tape-recorded interview; the gathering and preservation of such data.

References

- [American Life Histories. Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940.](#) (American Memory, Library of Congress)
- *Cobblestone, The History Magazine for Young People.* "Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1882-1945" (April 1995) and "The History of Labor" (October 1992).
- Stein, R. Conrad. *The Great Depression, Cornerstones of Freedom (A Series).* Chicago: Children's Press, 1993.
- [Using Oral History](#) (American Memory, Library of Congress)
- Zimmerman, Bill. *How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies, Recording Your Family's Life Story in Sound and Sight.* NY: Bantam Books, 1992.

[Contact the Michigan Historical Museum.](#)

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