America in the 1930s

Concerning the Great Depression:

“...the American dream had become a nightmare. What was once the land of opportunity is now the land of desperation... Instead of advancement, survival became the keyword.”
At the beginning of the 1930s, more than 15 million Americans—fully one-quarter of all wage-earning workers—were unemployed.

Homer Sharer and his family in Estherville, Iowa (December 1936) Sharer was employed as a hired hand for 16 months, but was on unemployment relief at the time of this photo.

President Herbert Hoover did not do much to alleviate the crisis: *Patience and self-reliance, he argued, were all Americans needed to get them through this “passing incident in our national lives.”*
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

A. Selling household items to pay living expenses

B. Give up Your Telephone
   A. Telephone service declined from 20 million to less than 17 million in 3 years (‘30 – ’33).
   B. Long Distance phone calls dramatically decreased.
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

C. Give up Your Car: The bicycle becomes a popular choice for transportation.

During the Great Depression, this bicycle store owner in California became a hero to hundreds of boys and girls because they could buy a bike on time from Jones for as little as 50 cents down and 25 cents every payday.

But what about traveling across country?
Music and History

Perhaps you went to the rails....

*Let’s listen:  **Big Rock Candy Mountains**

http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/water_07.html

Hopping on a moving freight train was a dangerous act, but in the 30s hundreds of thousands of men and women did it. Used by permission: Saskatchewan Interactive. Click for Web site.
Big Rock Candy Mountains

It is a song about a hobo's idea of paradise

Heading out to Utah...
Just north of Marysvale, Utah, near the Fishlake National Forest, stands a cluster of brightly colored hills named the "Big Rock Candy Mountain".

However, the song was written before the mountain got its name; in 1928, after the song had been released, some Utah residents jokingly placed a sign at the base of the hills labeling it the "Big Rock Candy Mountain", along with a sign next to a nearby spring proclaiming it "Lemonade Springs"
Riding the Rails

• FIRST – it was **Illegal**

• More than **two million** men and perhaps **8,000** women became hoboes.
  – At least **6,500** hoboes were **killed** in one year either in **accidents** or by railroad "bulls"

  • Def: brutal guards hired by the railroads to make sure the trains carried only paying customers.
Because of the Bulls

- Hoboes couldn't just go to a railroad yard and climb on.
  - Most would hide along the tracks outside the yard.
    - They'd run along the train as it gained speed, grab hold and jump into open boxcars.
    - Sometimes, they missed.
      - Many lost their legs or their lives.

As the train was reaching its destination, the hoboes had to jump off before a new set of bulls to arrest them or beat them up.
Hopping freights became so common that in 1933 Warner Brothers studio produced a film called "Wild Boys of the Road"

• Purpose – Trying to scare young people away from riding the rails. In the film, a boy falls on the track and loses his leg to an oncoming train.
Hobo’s concern – find a safe place to sleep

**Personal Account:**

“An **empty** cattle car which sometimes could accommodate over **fifty** riders was always a Godsend. Sometimes there was room enough to squeeze into a space where a car could be carrying some freight or livestock. My mind was constantly concerned where to find safer places to sleep.”

There were alternatives – all dangerous.

– 1. Wedge beneath the iron rods underneath a RR car.

– 2. Swiftly scoot up a ladder and stretch out on the boards on top of the speeding freight carrier and sleep.

– 3. If it was a passenger train, stand between the blinds, with elbows bent around the rods which held the thick, black leather shades (barriers against a howling wind)
**“If mileage and a specific destination was not a goal there were always hobo jungles where one could nap to a warming fire or share a meal. However, hobo jungles were always at the mercy of the local police or the railway patrolmen.”**
**The Personal Account...**

From a man named Lawrence A. Stessin

- Worked for New York Times and Forbes Magazine

Shortly before his death, he confided to a friend that he had "killed a man" who jumped him in an open box car when he had fallen asleep eating a sandwich. As Larry struggled with his knife-wielding assailant, the attacker fell backward out of the box car. When the train pulled into the next town, Larry learned that a body had been found beside the tracks
Almost every town or farm area had **vagrancy** laws, legislation to keep the unwanted, the shiftless, the beggars.

- The average penalty if caught and convicted was **three** months in jail.
- However...rumors spread in the boxcars that vagrancy laws were not being enforced in most of the country.
  - **Why?** Cities and towns by the hundreds – because of the depression, did not have the **will** or the **budgets** for the shiftless by jailing them for months at a time.
Finding food was also a constant problem.

- Hoboes often begged for food at a local farmhouse.

If the farmer was generous, the hobo would mark the lane so that later hoboes would know this was a good place to beg.
Walter remembers the Depression getting so bad that his family didn't have enough to eat so he rode the rails.

- Surprisingly, after all the danger and the rough conditions, Walter enjoyed the experience:

"I loved it," he said. "It'll get in your blood. You're not going anywhere, you don't care, you just ride... You're going to eat, that was more than you was doing at home, probably."
Perhaps “railroad hopping” wasn’t for you and your family...

- **Hitchhiking** was legal and slightly safer

When the Depression hit, the numbers of hitchhikers exploded

By 1937, one writer estimated that at least one man in 10 had hitchhiked once in his life
Hitchhiking con’t but a backlash followed...

• By the end of the decade, there were stories in the press about how motorists would pick up hitchers – *an act of friendship* – and then have their kindness betrayed by *criminal acts*.

• A number of laws were introduced to "*protect motorists*." – In fact, most of these laws were sponsored by *transportation companies* that were losing money when hitchers got free rides.
Hitchhiking
- Got the attention of Hollywood

- Films like "Sullivan's Travels" and "The Grapes Wrath" featured characters who had to hitch to get around.

- But perhaps the 1934 masterpiece "It Happened One Night" did more than any other movie to popularize the practice.
  - In the film, Clark Gable demonstrates what he considers his best thumbing techniques – all to no avail as car after car rushes by.
  - Then the female says she'll show him how it's done.

She steps to the side of the road and hikes up her skirt to adjust her stocking. The next vehicle passing by screeches to a stop.
D. Family Members Work to Supplement Income: This included mowing lawns, shoveling snow, delivering newspapers, baby-sitting, shoe-shining, passing out ads, selling door-to-door, mining, etc.

E. Repair Your Clothes with Objects around the House:
- Shoes were often repaired with cardboard and scotch tape
- Coats were lined with blankets
- Used socks as gloves
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

F. Eat Food from the Wild:
   A. Blackberries, dandelions, and wild game (country but not in the city)
   B. Others → gathered corn kernels from fields and roasted them over fires, or picked fruit from people’s trees

G. Substitute Other Things for Meat:
   A. Families ate more of beans, macaroni and cheese, pancakes, and other gut-filling foods that were less expensive than meats.
      1. One type of meat that became popular was sardines: introducing the mashed sardine and mayonnaise sandwich.

MacDuffie Family (Irwinville, Georgia)
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

2. People made clothes by hand and grew their own food in rural areas but farmers continued to lose their land because they couldn’t pay debts.

3. Urban poor – scoured for food (digging in trash cans); begging; Soup Kitchens and Bread Lines.
Blogger talks about his father, Bill

Bill remembers the food as he was growing up...

“...in the late 1920s... a lot of foods were becoming packaged and chicken houses were disappearing from backyards. Food was still very cheap. A loaf of bread cost 10¢.”

He goes on and says how his family was middle class, but the Depression affected everyone:

“Food and jobs were hard to get and many people stood in lines for government hand-outs. A lot of people lived on powdered milk, dried beans, and potatoes....

In Chicago, a crowd of men fought over a barrel of garbage -- food scraps for their families.”
4.25 Today

Bread Line

$4.25 Today

Bread Line
Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial
Washington, DC

Its four open-air rooms represent each of the four terms of office to which he was elected.

1 room – Great Depression

A statue depicting a Great Depression bread line by sculptor George Segal.
Let’s get back to the game.

• 1930
Many rich people felt no impact at all, and were oblivious to the suffering of others.

Up to forty percent of the country never faced real hardship during those times. The Great Depression did not affect everyone the same way.
There was a large difference in the lifestyles of the rich and the poor.

1. Many small businesses went **bankrupt**.

2. Shopkeepers often gave **credit** to unemployed people although they had **little income** for themselves.

3. Some landlords were unable to **collect rent**.

4. Many grew all their food in their own backyards.

5. Unemployment, poverty, etc...
Cartoons

• "The Working Clawss"

• It is called Clawws deliberately as he is just relaxing as usual while others have to work for little pay.

A rich man bathing in a tub of milk.
Why had people invested all their savings? Based on eight years of continued prosperity leading up to 1929...

• Presidents and economists alike confidently predicted that America would soon enter a time when there would be no more poverty, no more depressions — a “New Era” when everyone could be rich.

• Instead it was the rich who became richer.
Take for instance...Jesse Livermore

- A Wall Street insider, drove around town in one of six yellow Rolls Royces.

His daughter-in-law describes his two yachts, private railway car and five homes, including an apartment on Fifth Avenue he bought to have a place where he could change clothes for the theater.

Before the crash, the success of men like Jesse convinced small investors that the stock market was a sure thing, that Wall Street was the smart place to put one’s money.
Or “Get Rich” talk...

In an article entitled *Everybody Ought to be Rich* John Raskob claimed that by investing $15 a month in stocks and shares it would be possible to make $80,000 over the next 20 years.

Another investor, Will Payne, stated in 1929 that it had become so easy to make money on the Wall Street Stock Exchange, that it had ceased to become a gamble.

- He went on to say that a gambler wins only because someone loses, when you invest in stocks and shares, everybody wins.
There was a large difference in the lifestyles of the rich and the poor.

Many rich people were in the stock market, and if that was their major asset, they were very suddenly broke.

Ex: Ivar Kreuger –
Lost between $50 million and $100 million

However If people had other assets--land, gold, and particularly cash, they didn't lose everything and in fact bought assets from those who had no cash (cars, land, etc.).
There was a large difference in the lifestyles of the rich and the poor.

They spent their time at garden parties, balls and went on overseas holidays.

Many men and women joined charity organizations while others involved themselves in fund-raising activities like charity balls and concerts.
CNN – People who made money during the Great Depression

- Baseball star Babe Ruth, who made $80,000 a year in Depression-era dollars

- Robber John Dillinger, who raked in more than $3 million in today’s dollars
  - Chicago – most organized and deadly bank robbing gangs

- Film star James Cagney, one of the top money-makers in Hollywood in the mid-1930s.

- Charles Darrow, creator of the Monopoly game, who became the world’s first millionaire game-designer.
CNN – 10 people who made money during the Great Depression

- King of Swing Glenn Miller who would play to standing-room only crowds, radio broadcasts and recordings, in movies

- Howard Hughes, the aviator, real estate, and Hollywood producer, died a billionaire (1950s – ranked one of the world’s richest men)

- Singing and movie star Cowboy Gene Autry (died in 1998 - estimated worth $320 million).

- Joe Kennedy Sr., the patriarch of the Kennedy’s made his money...well it’s not clear exactly, though it involved stock speculation, real-estate, liquor and movies
Let’s go back to the other side of America and just trying to survive
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

H. Make Use of your Neighbor and Vice Versa:
- After many people’s water was shut off, they looked to neighbors to give them buckets or pails of water for cooking, washing up, etc.
- People also traded clothes with neighbors.

I. Live/Sleep Elsewhere and/or move in with another family:
People who found themselves without a home, apartment, or bed travelled the streets, slept on other people’s couches, in other people’s garages, in barns, lived in caves, and generally slept wherever they could.

Living conditions declined because multiple families had to crowd into small houses or apartments.
What else….they built “Hoovervilles”

- def: were settlements of shacks (made from scrap metal or lumber) usually located on the outskirts of cities

Hooverville between Penn and Liberty (Strip District) in PITTSBURGH

- Named after scapegoat President Hoover
Personal Account - Alice [10 yrs old] lived far from Hooverville

“Grandma and Grandpa would squeeze all of us kids in a car and drive us down to a Hooverville by the river. It made our hearts ache to see how bad off other kids were. Even if we only got sweets or fruit once a month, it made us think how lucky we were.”
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?
What about the children?

J. Children quit school as young as 10 years old
Families often forced their children to quit so that they could help the family earn the money it needed to survive.

- Many of these young children did various types of labor to bring home a meager amount of money.
- Countless children were left in poor physical and emotional health as a result.
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression? What about the children?

• For the poorest of families struggling to survive, these children received no toys or playtime activities.

• At a Philadelphia nursery school, children played an “eviction game”
  – Toy furniture would be piled up in one corner of the room, then picked up and moved to another corner.
  – “We ain’t got no money for rent, so we move. Then we get the sheriff on us, so we move again.”
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?
  What about the children?

• The infant mortality rate was also at an all-time high due to lack of prenatal medical care.
  – As a result of many children not receiving medical care, disease (*rickets, scarlet fever, dust pneumonia*) increased in great numbers as well.

• Lack of dental care caused many to suffer from **tooth decay** at a young age.
How did they survive the Great Depression?

K. Some young children were forced to roam the streets to attempt to survive

• Several organizations began missions for rescuing poor and homeless children at a time because:

1) Abandoned by their parents
2) Their parents were just unemployed
   - Children would pawn anything they could find
   - United together in gangs to avoid street violence

The increasing number of gangs became a growing concern for police officers who would often arrest children as young as five-year old, putting them in jail cells with adults.
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

Between the 1890s and 1930s, many orphans were put on "orphan trains" and shipped out west to be adopted by farming families for farm labor.
As the trains pulled into towns, the youngsters were cleaned up and paraded on makeshift stages before crowds of prospective parents:

“A farmer came up to me and felt my muscles. And he says, "Oh, you'd make a good hand on the farm." And I say, "You smell bad. You haven't had a bath, probably, in a year." And he took me by the arm and was gonna lead me off the stage, and I bit him. And that didn't work. So I kicked him. Everybody in the audience thought I was incorrigible (hopeless). They didn't want me because I was out of control. I was crying in the chair by myself.”

Elliot Bobo eventually found a warm and loving home
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

Children had a wide range of experiences
- some became "another member of the family"
- others were just "hired help"
- some fled back to the east

**many children did not want to go in the first place and were forced to.**
Life for Americans
- How did they survive the Great Depression?

There were still orphanages
- However, by the 1930s, administrators had begun turning large orphanages into smaller and friendlier group homes, presided over by "cottage parents."

- Developed alternatives to orphanages such as:
  1) foster care
  2) "widow's pensions"

- was money given to mothers to help their children at home.
Other elements that affected children of the Great Depression were fear and psychological depression.

As the relentless pressure of work with little reward continued, many saw little hope at home.

Ex: Some children who were exhausted from their daily routine of laborious work ran away and hopped aboard railroad trains and box cars, and a number died in accidents as a result.

Ex: Orphaned children who had endured hardship for many years often found themselves in desperate situations as they grew into adulthood.
  - Ran away from their labor farms as they approached their teenager years
  - Become involved in criminal activities.
  - Some resorted to armed robbery and prostitution, while others spent years imprisoned for committing felonies.
Music and History

**Let’s listen: **Brother could you spare a dime?

Look up Bonus Army March

Who was involved? Where? Why called BEF?

Goal of march? Outcome?
Let’s get back to the game

- 1931
Who were the Bonus Army? Video

Connection to
*Brother can you spare a dime?
Dust Bowl
*Separate Handout

Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVoXW4YrqTs
Surviving the Dust Bowl
Many Dust Bowl farmers packed their families into cars, tied their few possessions on the back, and sought work in the agricultural fields or cities of the West - their role as independent land owners gone forever.

Music and history
*Let’s listen: **Do Re Mi**
During the 1930s, some 1.3 million Americans from the Midwest and southwest migrated to **California**, which already had a population of 5.7 million in 1930s.
But precisely because California officials feared that their state would be overrun by destitute job seekers, they began sending word that conditions in California were desperate.

A billboard along Route 66 near Tulsa announced in bold letters:

NO JOBS in California
If YOU are looking for work—
KEEP OUT
6 men for every job
No State Relief available for Non-residents
Life for Americans in the Great Depression
John Steinbeck - *The Grapes of Wrath*

- Published in 1939
- Set during the Great Depression, the novel focuses on the Joads, a poor family of tenant farmers driven from their Oklahoma home by drought, economic hardship, and changes in the agricultural industry forcing tenant farmers out of work.
- Due to their nearly hopeless situation, and in part because they were trapped in the Dust Bowl, the Joads set out for California.
Escapism and the Great Depression
Movies provided entertainment 1930s to 1948

GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD

Wizard of OZ
Gone with the Wind
Snow White
Frankenstein
King Kong
Scarface

At an average price of $.27 a ticket, movies offered a relatively inexpensive way to vacation from reality.
Like other industries, Hollywood was hit hard by the Depression, but managed to recoup its profits through a variety of methods.

One favorite way was to offer sweepstakes and drawings at the theater for prize money. Even the promise of just a little bit of money was a big draw for impoverished Americans.
Other ways...

- Merchants in small towns decided to show free movies to draw country folks in to town on Thursday evenings.
- They projected the film on the wall of a downtown building.

Helen Bolton remembers going to town for the free outdoor movies. "They had this big screen outside, and they had benches that people could sit on. You know, it'd really draw a crowd. I think they had band music, too, in the middle of the street. It was pretty nice, we went to town, you got to see all your friends ... and it was a happy time."
Movies provided an escape from the hardships of the Great Depression, allowing a glimpse into high society life, so far from rural life.

People were fascinated by the movies themselves and by the glamorous lives of the men and women who starred in the films.

For example, the movie "My Man Godfrey" told the story of a man who lost his entire fortune in the 1929 stock market crash. To make a living, he became a butler for a rich family, and he ended up saving the family.
Candy helped people escape

Why Candy?
1 - sugar lifts spirits dragged low by the languishing economy.
2 - candy also provides a nostalgic reminder of better times
3 - it is relatively cheap.

Popular 1930s Candy:

Penny Candy (Hard Candy)
Rock candy
Licorice Ropes
Chocolate Bars like...
Homework – 10 points  DUE: Monday, Dec. 9th
Find 1 other specific type of game played/invented during the 1930s
Word Document Include: Picture of Game, Name, Date, Description of the point of the game *(how do you win?)*
Other entertainment

- **Children** - *Action Comics* and *Newspaper comics* strips

**BONUS OPPORTUNITY** - *5 Points*    **Due: Monday, Dec 9th**

Visit the following site:
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/PRINT/comic/cartoon.html

1 - Pick one of the six comics

2 - In a Word Document:
Which comic did you pick?
What happened in the comic strip?
What theme(s) from the time period (1930s) do you see in the comic?

- **Adults** - read about the exciting lives of rich people in big cities. Newspapers ran stories and pictures about high society events.
Radio - Nation’s first mass medium

1 - Linked the country and ended the isolation of rural residents.
2 - Provided free entertainment (after you bought the radio)
3 - Connected people (county) to world events.

- Walter Winchell and Lowell Thomas were popular news commentators on the radio.

- Families laughed at comedians: Jack Benny, Fred Allen, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Amos and Andy, and Fibber McGee and Molly.

- Radio featured daytime soap operas.

- In the evening, people listened to the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, The Shadow, and Jack Armstrong.

- Singers Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers, as well as Guy Lombardo's orchestra and the Grand Ole Opry were popular.

- Families listened to baseball, cheering for stars like Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio. Nearly 40 million people listened to the horserace between Seabiscuit and War Admiral in Maryland.

- Orson Welles broadcasted "War of the Worlds," a radio play about Martians landing on Earth. Millions of people didn't understand that the story was fiction. They panicked and tried to leave town.

Radio was so important that the 1930 Census asked if the household had a radio.
Personal and Social Life...

Depending on where you lived, young people in the 1930s dated and double-dated by going to movies, getting something to eat, going for ice cream, driving around, spending time with friends, and going to dances.

However, many people put off getting married because there was no money to start a home and family.
The Last Topic...

AMERICA GETS BACK TO WORK

FDR’s New Deal