

African Americans During the Great Depression 1929-1939

Great Depression

- 12 million workers (1/4 of workforce) unemployed
- banks closed; people lost their life savings
- Americans lacked food, shelter, clothing
- Depression affected countries world-wide

Dust Bowl

- Result of severe droughts in Great Plains
- Made worse by poor farming practices (over grazing, over-planting, soil erosion)
- Dust storms and failed harvests caused food shortages

Discrimination against African Americans

- Jim Crow laws (prevented Blacks from voting; required segregated schools, restaurants, movie theatres, sections on buses and trains)
- Lynching or hanging Blacks
- Unemployment of Blacks was twice as high as for rest of Americans
- Whites who lost their higher paying jobs took jobs from Blacks

Teenagers in Great Depression

- 250,000 teenagers left home—to find work; to help their family not have to feed or clothe them; to escape abuse; to find adventure
- Schools closed, 4 million of 10 million teenagers of high school age were out of school; only 30% of school age children attended school
- African American teenagers on the road twice as long as whites
- 98% of Black youth looking for work compared to 85% of white teenagers

President Franklin Roosevelt New Deal (1932-1944)

- Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC): young men **of all races** under 23 worked outdoors in national parks and forests
- Works Progress Administration (WPA) men and women **of all races** worked in construction of buildings, roads, and in the arts

True Stories by African American Teenagers

in the Great Depression

Source: Uys, E.L. (2003). *Riding the rails: Teenagers on the move during the Great Depression*. New York: Routledge.

Culture and Cultural Diversity

1. Kids were hungry all the time, going two or three days without anything to eat. A big meal was a piece of bread.
2. The Mexicans were poorer than we were, but they'd always share what they had with you.
3. She lived with relatives, who would be gone for days at a time looking for work. When she was seven, she began hopping freight trains with her cousins, two boys who were eight and ten years old. She tied up her hair and dressed like a boy. Unlike boys who begged for food and water, people would try to keep African American girls and make them work for no pay.
4. In the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), every race, creed, and color worked together. Once, some leaders asked the white workers if they would like the African Americans be sent to a different camp. The white workers considered the African American workers to be their buddies, and wanted them to stay.

Time, Continuity, and Change

5. Many teenagers were sent away from their homes because their parents could no longer support them. It was often years before they saw their families again.
6. Kids would get homesick, and lonely, but would have the determination to go on. They wanted to do better so they could go back home and help their families. One young man earned ten dollars a week, but gave seven dollars to help his family.
7. We never thought about being teenagers. All we thought about was surviving.
8. There was no time to play. We weren't allowed to go to school. We woke up at 3 in the morning to work all day long as sharecroppers.

Interactions among Individuals and Groups

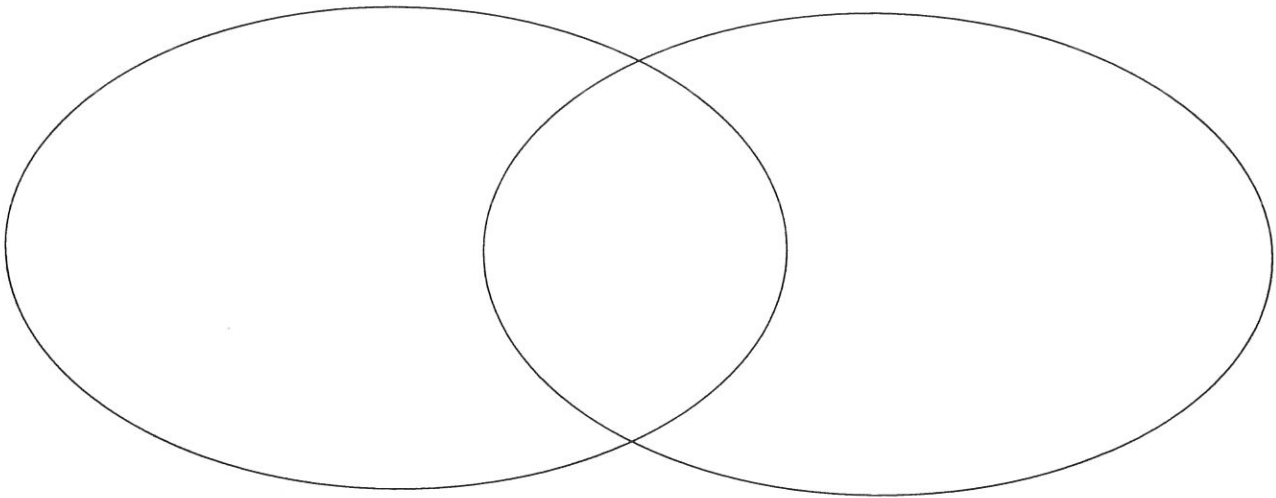
9. A white teenaged hobo hopped off a train in rural Mississippi. He hadn't eaten in days. An elderly African American couple, obviously very poor, gave him food.
10. A white teenaged hobo climbed into a freight train car. There was an African American man already there. In the middle of the night, some men started to go through the white teenager's clothes looking for money. The African American man tackled them and got them out of the car. To the white boy, it was incredible that an African American man who didn't even know him would come to his rescue.
11. When we needed new clothes, we would get off the train and go to an African American neighborhood. We looked for a home where a woman took in washing. We'd steal clothes off a line and hop the next train.
12. A white farmer hired a white teenaged hobo to work on his farm, but paid him much less than expected. He yelled at him for playing cards with the African American workers. One of the African American men brought him food for his journey.

Civic Ideals and Practices

13. As African American kids from the North, they had heard about racial discrimination, but had not had actual experiences. Not understanding the meaning of a "Whites Only" drinking fountain, they took a drink, and were run out of the train yard by angry white people. Local African Americans gave them a lecture about the ways of the South.
14. Before radios were common, people had very little knowledge of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Traveling on the railroad showed me that justice was not for all.

Life as a Teenager: Great Depression and Now

Depression experience



I wonder . . .
