Culture in the 1930s

One American’s Story

Don Congdon, editor of the book *The Thirties: A Time to Remember*, was a high school student when the New Deal began. While many writers and artists in the 1930s produced works that reflected the important issues of the day, it was the movies and radio that most clearly captured the public imagination. Congdon remembers the role movies played at the time.

**A Personal Voice** DON CONGDON

“Lots of us enjoyed our leisure at the movies. The experience of going was like an insidious [tempting] candy we could never get quite enough of; the visit to the dark theater was an escape from the drab realities of Depression living, and we were entranced by the never-ending variety of stories. Hollywood, like Scheherazade [the storyteller] in *The Thousand and One Nights*, supplied more the next night, and the next night after that.”

—*The Thirties: A Time to Remember*

During the Great Depression, movies provided a window on a different, more exciting world. Despite economic hardship, many people gladly paid the 25 cents it cost to go to the movies. Along with radio, motion pictures became an increasingly dominant feature of American life.

The Lure of Motion Pictures and Radio

Although the 1930s were a difficult time for many Americans, it was a profitable and golden age for the motion-picture and radio industries. By late in the decade, approximately 65 percent of the population was attending the movies once a week. The nation boasted over 15,000 movie theaters, more than the number of banks and double the number of hotels. Sales of radios also greatly increased during the 1930s, from just over 13 million in 1930 to 28 million by 1940. Nearly 90 percent of American households owned a radio. Clearly, movies and radio had taken the country by storm.
MOVIES ARE A HIT  Wacky comedies, lavish musicals, love stories, and gangster films all vied for the attention of the moviegoing public during the New Deal years. Following the end of silent films and the rise of “talking” pictures, new stars such as Clark Gable, Marlene Dietrich, and James Cagney rose from Hollywood, the center of the film industry. These stars helped launch a new era of glamour and sophistication in Hollywood.

Some films made during the 1930s offered pure escape from the hard realities of the Depression by presenting visions of wealth, romance, and good times. Perhaps the most famous film of the era, and one of the most popular of all time, was Gone With the Wind (1939). Another film, Flying Down to Rio (1933), was a light romantic comedy featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, who went on to make many movies together, becoming America’s favorite dance partners. Other notable movies made during the 1930s include The Wizard of Oz (1939) and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), which showcased the dazzling animation of Walt Disney.

Comedies—such as Monkey Business (1931) and Duck Soup (1931), starring the zany Marx Brothers—became especially popular. So did films that combined escapist appeal with more realistic plots and settings. Americans flocked to see gangster films that presented images of the dark, gritty streets and looming skyscrapers of urban America. These movies featured hard-bitten characters struggling to succeed in a harsh environment where they faced difficulties that Depression-era audiences could easily understand. Notable films in this genre include Little Caesar (1930) and The Public Enemy (1931).

Some commentators believed that several films, such as Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936) by director Frank Capra, presented the social and political accomplishments of the New Deal in a positive light. These films portrayed honest, kind-hearted people winning out over those with greedy special interests. In much the same way, the New Deal seemed to represent the interests of average Americans.

RADIO ENTERTAINS  Even more than movies, radio embodied the democratic spirit of the times. Families typically spent several hours a day gathered together, listening to their favorite programs. It was no accident that President Roosevelt chose radio as the medium for his “fireside chats.” It was the most direct means of access to the American people.

Like movies, radio programs offered a range of entertainment. In the evening, radio networks offered excellent dramas and variety programs. Orson Welles, an actor, director, producer, and writer, created one of the most renowned radio broadcasts of all time, “The War of the Worlds.” Later he directed movie classics such as Citizen Kane (1941) and Touch of Evil (1958). After making their reputation in
radio, comedians Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and the duo Burns and Allen moved on to work in television and movies. Soap operas—so named because they were usually sponsored by soap companies—tended to play late morning to early afternoon for homemakers, while children’s programs, such as *The Lone Ranger*, generally aired later in the afternoon, when children were home from school.

One of the first worldwide radio broadcasts described for listeners the horrific crash of the *Hindenburg*, a German zeppelin (rigid airship), in New Jersey on May 6, 1937. Such immediate news coverage became a staple in society.

**The Arts in Depression America**

In contrast to many radio and movie productions of the 1930s, much of the art, music, and literature of the time was sober and serious. Despite grim artistic tones, however, much of this artistic work conveyed a more uplifting message about the strength of character and the democratic values of the American people. A number of artists and writers embraced the spirit of social and political change fostered by the New Deal. In fact, many received direct support through New Deal work programs from government officials who believed that art played an important role in national life. Also, as Harry Hopkins, the head of the WPA, put it, “They’ve got to eat just like other people.”

**ARTISTS DECORATE AMERICA** The Federal Art Project, a branch of the WPA, paid artists a living wage to produce public art. It also aimed to increase public appreciation of art and to promote positive images of American society. Project artists created posters, taught art in the schools, and painted murals on the walls of public buildings. These murals, inspired in part by the revolutionary work of...
Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera, typically portrayed the dignity of ordinary Americans at work. One artist, Robert Gwathmey, recalled these efforts.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  ROBERT GWATHMEY**

"The director of the Federal Arts Project was Edward Bruce. He was a friend of the Roosevelts—from a polite family—who was a painter. He was a man of real broad vision. He insisted there be no restrictions. You were a painter: Do your work. You were a sculptor: Do your work. . . . That was a very free and happy period."

—quoted in *Hard Times*

During the New Deal era, outstanding works of art were produced by a number of American painters, such as Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and Iowa’s Grant Wood, whose work includes the famous painting *American Gothic*.

The WPA’s Federal Theater Project hired actors to perform plays and artists to provide stage sets and props for theater productions that played around the country. It subsidized the work of important American playwrights, including Clifford Odets, whose play *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) dramatized the labor struggles of the 1930s.

**WOODY GUTHRIE SINGS OF AMERICA** Experiencing firsthand the tragedies of the Depression, singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie used music to capture the hardships of America. Along with thousands of people who were forced by the Dust Bowl to seek a better life, Guthrie traveled the country in search of brighter opportunities, and told of his troubles in his songs.

**A PERSONAL VOICE  WOODY GUTHRIE**

"Yes we ramble and we roam
And the highway, that’s our home.
It’s a never-ending highway For a dust bowl refugee

Yes, we wander and we work
In your crops and in your fruit,
Like the whirlwinds on the desert,
That’s the dust bowl refugees."

—"Dust Bowl Refugees"

Guthrie wrote many songs about the plight of Americans during the Depression. His honest lyrics appealed to those who suffered similar hardships.
DIVERSE WRITERS DEPICT AMERICAN LIFE Many writers received support through yet another WPA program, the Federal Writers’ Project. This project gave the future Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow his first writing job. It also helped Richard Wright, an African-American author, complete his acclaimed novel Native Son (1940), about a young man trying to survive in a racist world. Zora Neale Hurston wrote a stirring novel with FWP assistance—Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), about a young woman growing up in rural Florida.

John Steinbeck, one of this country’s most famous authors, received assistance from the Federal Writers’ Project. He was able to publish his epic novel The Grapes of Wrath (1939), which reveals the lives of Oklahomans who left the Dust Bowl and ended up in California, where their hardships continued. Before his success, however, Steinbeck had endured the difficulties of the Depression like most other writers.

Other books and authors examined the difficulties of life during the 1930s. James T. Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy (1932–1935) provides a bleak picture of working-class life in an Irish neighborhood of Chicago, while Jack Conroy’s novel The Disinherited (1933) portrays the violence and poverty of the Missouri coalfields, where Conroy’s own father and brother died in a mine disaster.

Nevertheless, other writers found hope in the positive values of American culture. The writer James Agee and the photographer Walker Evans collaborated on a book about Alabama sharecroppers, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941). Though it deals with the difficult lives of poor farmers, it portrays the dignity and strength of character in the people it presents. Thornton Wilder’s play Our Town (1938) captures the beauty of small-town life in New England.

Although artists and writers recognized America’s flaws, they contributed positively to the New Deal legacy. These intellectuals praised the virtues of American life and took pride in the country’s traditions and accomplishments.