

SECTION
4

Culture in the 1930s

MAIN IDEA

Motion pictures, radio, art, and literature blossomed during the New Deal.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The films, music, art, and literature of the 1930s still captivate today's public.

Terms & Names

- *Gone With the Wind*
- Orson Welles
- Grant Wood
- Richard Wright
- *The Grapes of Wrath*

One American's Story

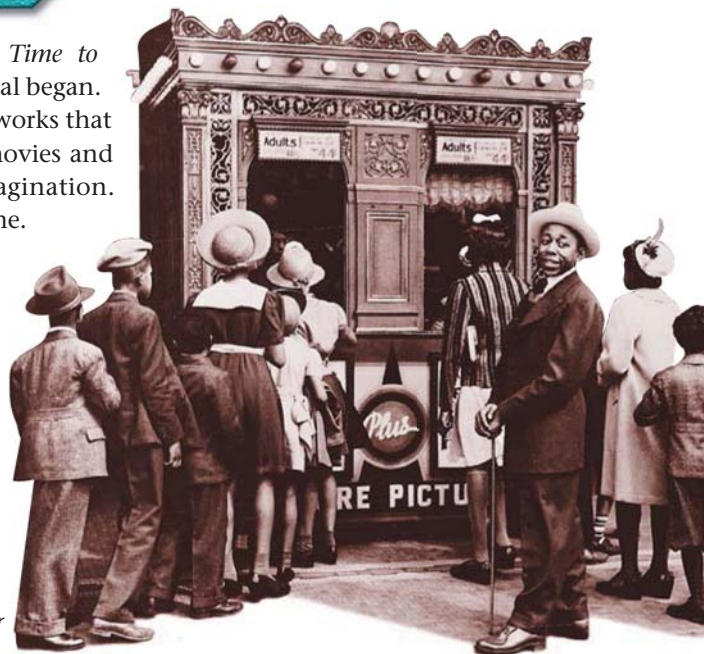
Don Congdon, editor of the book *The Thirties: A Time to Remember*, was a high school student when the New Deal began. While many writers and artists in the 1930s produced works that reflected the important issues of the day, it was the movies and radio that most clearly captured the public imagination.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



▲ People line up to get into a movie theater during the Great Depression.

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. **A**

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



▲ Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh starred in *Gone With the Wind*, a sweeping drama about life among Southern plantation owners during the Civil War.

MAIN IDEA

Developing Historical Perspective

A Why do you think movies were so popular during the Depression?

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

WAR OF THE WORLDS

On October 30, 1938, radio listeners were stunned by a special announcement: Martians had invaded Earth! Panic set in as many Americans became convinced that the world was coming to an end. Of course, the story wasn’t true: it was a radio drama based on H. G. Wells’s novel *The War of the Worlds*.

In his book, Wells describes the canisters of gas fired by the Martians as releasing “an enormous volume of heavy, inky vapour. . . . And the touch of that vapour, the inhaling of its pungent wisps, was death to all that breathes.” The broadcast, narrated by Orson Welles (at left), revealed the power of radio at a time when Americans received fast-breaking news over the airwaves.





▲ The comedy couple George Burns and Gracie Allen delighted radio audiences for years, and their popularity continued on television.

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.” **B**

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

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

B Why did the New Deal fund art projects?



► This detail is from the mural *Industries of California*, painted in 1934 by Ralph Stackpole. It decorates San Francisco’s Coit Tower, one of the best preserved sites of WPA mural projects.

History Through Art

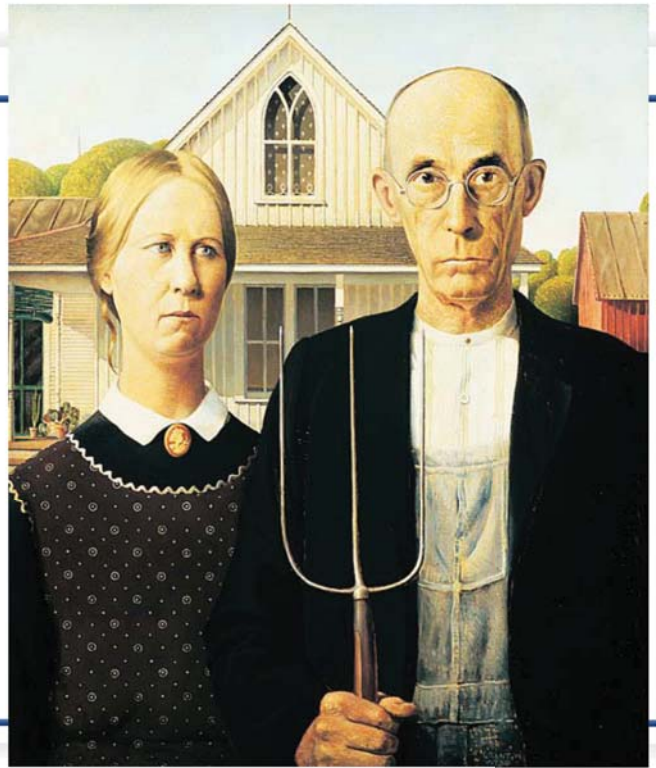
AMERICAN GOTHIC (1930)

Grant Wood's 1930 painting, *American Gothic*, became one of the most famous portrayals of life in the Midwest during the Great Depression. Painted in the style known as Regionalism, Wood painted familiar subjects in realistic ways. The house in the background was discovered by Wood in Eldon, Iowa, while he was looking for subjects to paint. He returned home with a sketch and a photograph, and used his sister and his dentist as models for the farmer and daughter in the painting's foreground.

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Visual Sources

1. What is the message Wood portrays in this painting? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think this painting is representative of the Great Depression? Why or why not?

 SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R23.



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*

American Gothic (1930), Grant Wood. Oil on beaver board, 30 11/16" x 25 11/16" (78 cm x 65.3 cm) unframed. The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection [1930.934]. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago/All rights reserved by the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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”

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Woody Guthrie

Guthrie wrote many songs about the plight of Americans during the Depression. His honest lyrics appealed to those who suffered similar hardships.

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

 In what ways did the New Deal deliver art to the public?

Walker Evans took this photograph of a sharecropper for the influential book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.



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. **D**

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.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

D How did the literature of the time reflect issues of the Depression?

SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

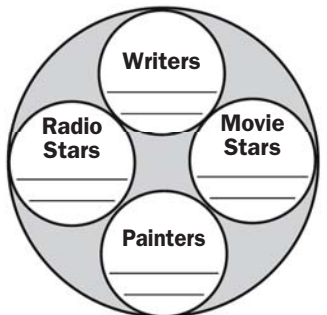
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name below, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Gone With the Wind**
- Grant Wood**
- Richard Wright**
- The Grapes of Wrath**
- Orson Welles**

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES Create a web like the one below, filling in the names of those who contributed to each aspect of American culture in the 1930s.

Cultural Figures of the 1930s



What contribution did each group make?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. HYPOTHESIZING What type of movies do you think might have been produced if the government had supported moviemaking as part of the New Deal? Use evidence from the chapter to support your response.

4. ANALYZING EFFECTS How did the entertainment industry affect the economy?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS In your opinion, what were the main benefits of government support for art and literature in the 1930s? Support your response with details from the text. **Think About:**

- the experiences of Americans in the Great Depression
- the writers who got their start through the FWP
- the subject matter of WPA murals and other New Deal-sponsored art