**TOPIC: RIDING THE RAILS DOCUMENTARY**

**Discipline**

Language Arts, History, Economics, Art, Performing Arts

**Grade Level**

9 – 12

**Context**

* 1930, The Great Depression

**Type of Activity**

Individual, Small Group, Pre-reading, Cumulative, Writing

**Objectives**

* Students will develop a more personalized understanding of the impact of the Depression and the Dust Bowl
* Students will connect the experiences of individuals during the Great Depression with the experiences of characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*

**Overview**

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl uprooted hundreds of thousands of Americans. At its worst, the Depression saw 25% of the work force unemployed. People lost not only their jobs, but their homes, their land, and any savings they might have had.

The average person struggling to survive the Depression is a common theme in the writings of Steinbeck. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Depression and the Dust Bowl are virtually characters in the novel, shaping the lives of the Joads and others around them.

Several hundred thousand people fled North and West during the 1930s. Yet these regions were not immune from the effects of the Depression. This activity is meant to expand students’ analytical skills and to give them a greater understanding of life during the Great Depression. The experiences that they will see and read about are those of teenagers during the 1930s. Like the Joad family, these teenagers are on the move finding temporary work where they can.

**Materials Needed/Preparation**

* Review what students know about the Great Depression and the migration that it caused.
  + If your history book is insufficient, read [The Great Depression](http://sits.sjsu.edu/context/historical/hist_context_1930s/index.html) article on the Steinbeck in the Schools site.
* A copy of the PBS American Experience documentary “Riding the Rails.”
  + As an alternative, “Riding the Rails” can be streamed online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/rails/>
* Copies of “Letters from boxcar boys and girls of the Great Depression”
* <https://erroluys.com/letter1.html>
* Copies of pre-documentary journal/discussion topics (optional)
* Copies of post-documentary journal/discussion topics (optional)

**Estimated Time**

* 72 minutes to view the documentary
* 1 – 3 class periods for activities

**Procedures**

* Prior to watching the documentary:
  + Journal entry/discussion: What is homelessness? What prejudices are there about the homeless? Why are people homeless?
* Watch the documentary.
* Post documentary:
  + Journal entry/discussion: Why were teenagers homeless during the Depression? Why did they ride the rails? What was life like for teenage hobos?
  + Individually or in small groups:
* Have students create a list of everything their parents provide for them (essentials as well as luxuries).
* Have students brainstorm what life would be like with no one to care for them. What would they have to do in order to survive? Assign or have students do one of the following:
  + - * Write a diary entry about a day in their life on their own. Consider allowing students to do this in the style of postings to social networking.
      * Write and perform a one act play about a day in their life on their own.
      * Write and perform an interview about a day in their life on their own.
      * After having listened to period music, have students compose their own song, poem, etc. about a day in their life on their own.
      * Have students create a poster, drawing, or some other artistic rendition about a day in their life on their own.
  + Allow time for sharing, critiquing, and discussing what students produce.
  + Writing/discussion topic: how do the experiences of hobos in “Riding the Rails” compare with the experiences of the Joad family?

**Post Activity/Takeaways/Follow-up**

* Post Activities
  + See “Migrant Workers and the Great Depression – Leaving Home”
  + See “Migrant Workers and the Great Depression – Why California?”
  + See “The American Dream”
  + Have students research information on homelessness and then compare and contrast homelessness today and homelessness as seen in “Riding the Rails” and *The Grapes of Wrath*.
* Takeaways
  + Students should come away from this activity with a sense of how the Great Depression affected teenagers. The idea is for them to be able to relate to George and Lennie in a more personal way.
  + Students should have a stronger understanding of life as a migrant farm worker while reading *The Grapes of Wrath*.
  + Students should have a greater awareness of homelessness today.

**Assessment**

* How well do students understand the life of teenage hobos as seen in “Riding the Rails?”
* For writing assignments, evaluate how well students adhered to the proper style for their prompt.
* Quiz on “Riding the Rails”

**Standards Met**

* History and Social Science Content Standards 11
  + Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government: 3
* History-Social Science Content Standards 6-8
  + Research, Evidence, and Point of View: 1, 4
* Reading Standards for Literature 6-12
  + Key Ideas and Details: 1, 2, 3
  + Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 7, 9
* Reading Standards for Informational Text 6-12
  + Key Ideas and Details, 1, 2, 3
  + Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 7
* Writing Standards 6-12
  + Text Types and Purposes: 1, 2, 3
  + Production and Distribution of Writing: 4, 5, 6
  + Research to Build and Present Knowledge: 8, 9
* Speaking and Listening Standards 6-12
  + Comprehension and Collaboration: 1, 2
  + Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: 4, 5, 6
* Language Standards 6-12
  + Conventions of Standards of English: 1, 2
  + Knowledge of Language: 3
* Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12
  + Key Ideas and Details: 1, 2, 3
  + Craft and Structure: 6
  + Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 7, 8, 9

**Riding the Rails**

**Thinking about Homelessness**

1. What is homelessness?
2. What prejudices are there about homeless people?
3. Why are people homeless?

**Riding the Rails**

**Thinking about Homelessness**

1. When I think of homelessness, I think it means:
2. When people think of the homeless, they automatically assume:
3. I think that most people are homeless because:

**Riding the Rails**

**Thinking about Homelessness**

Use what you learned from the documentary to answer these questions.

1. Why were teenagers homeless during the Great Depression?
2. Why did they “ride the rails?”
3. What was life like for teenage hobos? Give a few examples.

**Riding the Rails**

**Thinking about Homelessness**

Use what you learned from the documentary to answer these questions.

1. Teenagers during the Great Depression were homeless because:
2. Teenagers during the Great Depression “rode the rails” because:
3. Three things that often happened to teenage hobos were: