

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

From Farm to Factory



NORTH CAROLINA
MUSEUM OF HISTORY

History Happens Here

Objectives

- *Through primary source photograph analysis, students will learn about the difficult lives of farmers and farm families during the Great Depression; they also will learn how photography can be a powerful tool in communicating an idea or problem and affecting change.*
- *Note: Curriculum standards for this lesson are listed under the “Lesson Plans and Curriculum Standards” tab.*

Introduction

Over the course of nine years during the Great Depression (1930s), eight photographers were employed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to take more than 80,000 photographs. These images documented the lives of Americans, particularly those living in rural parts of the country, and depicted the struggles and uncertainties farm families faced during that time. Originally, the collection fostered a foundation of public support for New Deal programs—many of them, a direct benefit to rural farmers in North Carolina.

Historical Overview

While much of the country was enjoying economic prosperity throughout the 1920s, farmers and farm families were suffering through an agricultural depression that only grew worse after the nationwide financial crash of 1929. Their basic frame houses (often just slabs of wood thrown together with no insulation, no trim or siding, and no finished floor); a lack of sanitary conditions; and an absence of electrical service in rural North Carolina were just a few of the continuing hardships farmers had to face. In the 1930s, securing everyday necessities—clothing, shelter, and food—became everyday struggles, especially for farmers: clothes had to be worn and passed along until items could not be worn anymore, and families had to fight to keep the homes and shelters they did have.

In addition to the running agricultural depression and the difficulties of country living, unsustainable farming practices and other production issues led to a loss of farm income. Also, overproduction of some crops and a lack of demand for others, especially cash crops like tobacco, forced many single-crop farmers to transition to subsistence farming so they could provide additional sources of food for their families. Without proper nutrition, diseases and deficiencies, such as rickets, became more rampant.

During his first term in office as president of the United States in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt offered the nation a “New Deal,” a series of programs that were implemented partly to help revive the economy and provide support for the unemployed. One of the New Deal’s most influential programs for farmers was the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. The AAA offered payments, or subsidies, to farmers who reduced their crop production, which, in turn, caused the prices of crops to rise. Other programs that benefitted farmers included the Civilian Conservation Corps (which brought a variety of service buildings to nonurban areas and improved rural road networks), the Rural Electrification Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Resettlement Administration (which became part of the Farm Security Administration).

Time

One or two 45-minute sessions

Materials

Items in activities notebook

- “A Look Through the Lens: FSA Photographs” by Emily Catherman; from *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 49:2 (Spring 2010).
- Teacher Information Sheet: Analyzing Photographs
- Transparency (Image 1)
- Photographs (9; Images A–H)

Items that need to be provided by teacher

- Copies of the *THJH* article “A Look Through the Lens: FSA Photographs,” as needed, for individuals or each group
- Copies of the Photograph Analysis activity sheet, as needed, for each group
- Blank sheets of 8½" x 11" paper cut into quarters

Procedure

Photograph Analysis

FROM FARM TO FACTORY

1. Introduce this lesson by projecting the enclosed transparency of Image 1 or by passing around Image 1 while students listen to or read the article “A Look Through the Lens: FSA Photographs.”
2. Using the transparency as an example, cover the photograph with all four quarters of a sheet of paper that has been cut into quarters. Uncover one quarter of the photograph and ask students to look at it closely. Discuss what they see. Continue the process, uncovering one additional section of the image at a time. Do they see different things as different parts of the image are unveiled? What things change?
3. Have students divide into small groups. Provide each group with one or more of the eight images (Images A–H). Hand out sections of the quartered paper sheets and a copy of the Photograph Analysis activity sheet for each group to complete. *Note: students can complete this exercise individually as long as they have copies of the photographs.*
4. Allow students enough time to analyze the photographs—quarter by quarter and as a whole—in their groups or on their own. When enough time has passed, have each group or student share what was learned from their analysis. *Note: Use the Teacher Information Sheet to help guide them—some information will be easily discovered and understood, but some of what they see might need identification and explanation.*
5. After all groups and/or students have presented, show all the photographs to the class and ask for additional thoughts and reactions. To spur conversation, consider asking the following:
 - a. Has their understanding of the Great Depression or agriculture in North Carolina during the 1930s changed as a result of viewing these photographs?
 - b. Do they think photographs like these helped farmers in North Carolina during the Great Depression? How? What kind of social impact might these photographs have had?
 - c. Ask students to think of photographs they have seen in newspapers or magazines that helped them become more aware of, or better understand, a current local, national, or global issue.

Writing Activity Number 1

FROM FARM TO FACTORY

1. Have students bring in a photograph of their family or their favorite place.
2. Have them trade photographs with a partner whose photograph they have not seen before.
3. Have students analyze each photograph, quarter by quarter, and make observations about it, writing a short narrative about what they think is important about the photograph or what they think is happening in the photograph.
4. After they have completed their narrative, have each student share it with their partner. Then, have the partners reveal what they know about the photograph they brought in.
5. Ask the students how accurate or inaccurate their narratives were after finding out “the real story” from their partner. *Note: Make sure students understand this concept: photographs may tell us a lot about the time and place in which they were taken, but even photographs have limitations on the amount of information we can obtain from them alone.*

Writing Activity Number 2

1. Have students work in groups or individually to write an article as a photojournalist. Have them choose a topic related to this lesson, to agriculture, to the environment, or to another theme that correlates with your curriculum goals. Depending on the topic chosen, it can be an informational article, an opinion article, a letter to the editor, a promotional article, or some other type of article. Ask that students conduct research on their topics using reliable Internet *and* library resources; interview at least one person; and find three to five photographs to use in their article to help tell their story.
2. Have them present their articles and photographs to the class.

Additional Resources

For more photographs from the Farm Security Administration, including color photographs of the 1930s and 1940s, visit the following links:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>
http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/sets/72157603671370361/