

Depression-Era America History 204-301

Fall, 2006
Tues. 1:30-4:30
Bennett-Fisher 322
Office Hours: by appointment

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In this course we will examine the United States in the 1930s. The Great Depression stands out as both a distinctive decade in American history and as a crucial moment in the development of modern America. In this course we will look at the 1930s from both points of view. We can – and will – study the Depression decade as a discrete moment because it was clearly delineated by unique economic, political, social and cultural circumstances. At the same time, we will explore the ways in which those circumstances highlighted a rupture with the past and helped give rise to a more familiar United States. The Depression era did much to create the United States as a nation; it shook apart older visions of America and redefined the ideal of the United States, including who would be included in that ideal; it gave rise to new conceptions of politics and a new relationship between the state and the people; it held out visions of new cultural possibilities and spawned modern mass culture. As we consider the experiences of Americans in the Depression, we will ask what challenges and changes lay at the heart of this era, in what ways this was or was not a transformative moment, and to what extent this era set the stage for the America of the rest of the 20th and perhaps the 21st centuries.

Because we are looking at a relatively narrow slice of time in this course, we are able to bring a wide range of perspectives and approaches to bear. Our goal is not to create a narrative understanding of the 1930s, but to examine many facets of the same period and to see how several themes played out within that period. To that end, we will consider the politics, society and culture of the Depression era through primary and secondary sources, including written texts, images, music, radio and film.

Your active participation is required. You will engage our subject through informed discussion, short essays, student presentations, and a research essay. Much of the course – including several of the components of the research essay – requires you to reflect on how to draw your own conclusions from primary sources. As such, this class counts toward the history department's research requirement.

Course Schedule:

Sept. 12: Introduction

Sept. 19: The Coming of the Depression

- Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, Introduction, chapters 1-4
- Michael Bernstein, "Why the Great Depression Was Great" (BB)

Sept. 26: The New Deal

- Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, chapters 6, 7, 11, 12
- Franklin Roosevelt, fireside chats 1-3, 5-8, Second Inaugural

Read all and listen to one fireside chat. Available at:

<http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/diglibrary/prezspeeches/roosevelt/index.html>

Oct. 3: Documenting the Depression

- Terry Cooney, "Facts, Photos, Values, and Myths" (BB)

** *Documentary source project: Photography, Interviews, Reporting, Literary***

Oct. 10: Ordinary People: the Depression and Urban America

- Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, Introduction, chapters 5-8, Conclusion

Oct. 17: One Nation under Radio

- Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, Introduction, chapters 1, 3-4, 6-7

** Oct. 20, 3:00: Final date to get research topic approved **

Oct. 24: The Politics of Opposition and a World Gone With the Wind

- Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, Preface, Prologue, chapters 1-7, 11

Oct. 31: I Have a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore: Rural Worlds Transformed

- John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*

** Nov. 3: Research component 1 due by noon **

Nov. 7: Art and the Public: Culture, Politics and the People

- Terry Cooney, "Writing Wrongs and Asserting Rights" (BB)
- A. Joan Saab, "Like a Farmer or a Bricklayer" (BB)
- Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, 1934
- Virginia Lee Burton, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*
- Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes*, selections (BB)
- Woody Guthrie, "Hard Traveling," "This Land is Your Land," "Jesus Christ," "Pretty Boy Floyd" (BB)

"Pretty Boy Floyd" (BB)

- Murals of the 1930s: Diego Rivera's Detroit Institute of Art - see

<http://www.dia.org/asp/search/ExecuteSearch.asp?artist=rivera%20diego%20m> -

Coit Tower - see <http://www.bacds.org/~cuccia/photos/coit/index.html> - WPA post

office murals in your home state - see <http://www.wpamurals.com/>

Nov. 14: Race in the 1930s: Scottsboro

- James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*, chapters 1-33

** Nov. 17: Research component 2 due by noon **

Nov. 21: Film

- Terry Cooney, "Popular Culture and the Dance of Values" (BB)
 - Films: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *His Girl Friday*, *My Man Godfrey*
- ** Film presentation day ****

Nov. 28: The New Liberalism

- Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, Introduction, chapters 1-7, Epilogue

**** Dec. 3: Circulate research component 3 by midnight ****

Dec. 5: Remembering and Wrapping up the Thirties

- Norman Corwin, *We Hold These Truths* (CD)
- Film: *Seabiscuit*

Discussion of student research essays

**** Dec. 12: Research papers due by 4:00 ****

Responsibilities and Evaluation:

Class participation:

Your active and intelligent participation is required in class. This is a seminar: classes will be discussions of assigned materials. That means you should come to class on time and prepared. It also means attendance is mandatory; if you cannot attend a class, let me know in advance. Class participation counts for 30% of your grade.

Short essays and presentations:

Over the semester, students will produce three formal works based on course materials, two short essays and a presentation. Details are below. Together, the short essays and presentation count for 30% of your grade.

Short essays:

Over the course of the term, students will write two 2-3-page essays, each based on a week's materials. Each essay should explore a theme from that week's materials, taking a clear analytical position. You should discuss an issue that you find significant in that week's topic. That gives you considerable freedom in picking a subject to write on, but these are not simply response papers. Make sure you narrow your topic sufficiently to address it a short essay. And be sure to state a precise argument or interpretation and support it with specific evidence from course materials. Students may choose which weeks to write on, but some will be required to write an essay for Oct. 3, the day of the documentary source project. Short essays are due in class, the day we discuss that material.

Documentary source project:

Our Oct. 3 discussion on the Depression as documented by contemporaries will be based on student readings of an array of primary sources. Students will be assigned to one of four groups, each of which will examine one type of documentary source from the 1930s: photography, interviews, reporting and literary. Students should examine the sources in their genre with two ends in mind. The first end is to present to the class an argument about the value (and limitations) of these sources as means of helping us understand the Depression. In other words, groups will help the rest of the class understand the strengths and weaknesses of these sources. Second, groups will come up with 3-5 questions for the class to discuss, keeping in mind that other groups will have looked at different sources. The questions you offer to the class should be rooted in your own research and sense of what themes, insights and problems your sources offer, but also should be open enough so that your classmates can draw upon their own documentary materials to discuss them. Questions may address either the nature or the sources or the conclusions the sources allow you to draw about America in the 1930s.

Note that there are too many materials here for any of you to explore fully. Part of your challenge is to decide how you, as a group, can best understand the usefulness of these sources and what questions those sources enable you to ask and begin to answer about the United States in the 1930s. You may decide that you need to do outside reading to help with this.

Within each group, two students will be responsible for presenting on the sources. Each group will have 10 minutes to present its argument about the value of its sources. Presentations should take a clear position and illuminate it with concrete evidence. For those presenting, this will count as their formal presentation.

Those students who do not deliver the presentation will write a 2-3 page short essay in which they answer one of the questions their group has prepared for the class. Since those questions may be too broad to answer fully in a short essay, you should be prepared to narrow your topic. Be sure to state a focused stand and to support it with specific evidence. This essay will count as one of your two short essays.

The groups of documentary sources are:

Photography: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

Interviews: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

Reporting: Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America*; Lorena Hickok, *One-third of a Nation*; Ernie Pyle, *Ernie's America*

Literary: Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free*; Tom Kromer, *Waiting for Nothing*; James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Film presentation:

Those students who did not present their groups documentary source project will present a brief argument based on their interpretations of the films on Nov. 21. Presentations will run five minutes and should include precise and narrowly focused stands, supported with clear evidence. Your argument may use the films to shed light upon a theme from other parts of the course, may draw upon the rest of the course to explain the films, or may explore the films on their own. Be sure, though, to take a clear stand with your thesis. That means your interpretation should be one that others might

contest; in thinking about your presentation, imagine how you would address that opposition.

Presentation note:

Both sets of presentations will form essential parts of our work on the days in question. To make your presentations as productive as possible for your peers and our discussions, you must go through a draft of your presentation in advance. Consequently, this course is affiliated with Communication Within the Curriculum and, as such, all speakers are required to meet with a speaking advisor from CWiC prior to giving their presentations.

Research essay:

The course will culminate with a 10-15-page primary-source research essay that explores a focused subject related to Depression-era America. You must define a narrow topic, make a clear argument about your topic, and back it up with your primary sources. You are free to think creatively in selecting your topic. All students must discuss their topics with me no later than Oct. 20. The research essay is due by 4:00 Dec. 12th. It counts for 30% of your grade.

Prior to handing in the essay, there are three components of your research project that you will have to complete. First and second, you must write a two-part research proposal: one part will identify your question and why it is worth studying (this requires starting your secondary source research); one part will identify your primary sources and why they are valuable for you, including the limits of those sources if appropriate (this requires starting your primary source research). Each part of the proposal will run 1-2 pages. The first part is due by Nov. 3, the second part is due by Nov. 17; either part may be handed in first. Third, in preparation for the final class of the semester, you will write a 2-3 page essay arguing for the value of including your research paper as required reading in a course on America in the Depression. We will designate research groups within the class and you will circulate your essay among members of your group. These essays must be circulated electronically to your group and me by midnight Dec. 3rd. In addition to helping you prepare your final essay, the three components together count for 10% of your grade.

Paper policies:

All written work should be double-spaced, numbered, proofread, spell-checked, stapled and handed in on time. Papers handed in up to one day late will be graded down by one-third (eg, A- to B+); papers handed in up to a week late will be graded down one full grade; papers more than one week late will not be accepted. Back up and save copies of all your work: computer errors or lost papers are your responsibility. All written work should state a clear thesis and support it with properly cited evidence from your sources.

Course Materials:

The following books are available at Penn Book Center at 34th and Walnut streets. Alternatively, you may read many of these books on reserve at Van Pelt library; note that Goodman's, Burton's and Gray's books are not on reserve.

Robert McElvaine – *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*

Alan Brinkley – *Voice of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression*

Alan Brinkley – *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*

Lizabeth Cohen – *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*

John Steinbeck – *The Grapes of Wrath*

James Goodman – *Stories of Scottsboro*

Virginia Lee Burton – *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*

Harold Gray – *Little Orphan Annie, 1934*

Michelle Hilmes – *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*

Norman Corwin – *We Hold These Truths* (CD)

Additional material is also on Blackboard (BB) for this course; you may access the site at: <http://courseweb.library.upenn.edu>. Films are on reserve at the library.