

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Lesson Title—Great Depression Memories from Waterbury, Northfield, and Thomaston

Created by Sean Gilligan

Grade: 9-12

Length of Class Period: 48 minutes (the historical fiction writing part will go beyond the first period)

Inquiry (what essential questions are students answering, what problems are they solving, or what decision are they making?)

-What was it like growing up in the Waterbury region during the Great Depression?

-How was life in 1930s America similar to life in 21st century America?

-How was life in 1930s America different from life in 21st century America?

Objectives (What content and skills do you expect students to learn from this lesson?)

-Students will interpret interviews of people who grew up in the Waterbury region during the Great Depression.

-Students will create a short historical fiction writing piece depicting life in 1930s America. They will utilize information from a variety of sources including the interview documents.

Materials (What primary sources or local resources are the basis for this lesson?)-(please attach)

Great Depression Memories from Waterbury, Northfield, and Thomaston

Great Depression Historical Fiction Writing Assignment

Activities (What will you and your students do during the lesson to promote learning?)

This lesson can be used as part of a 1930s Great Depression unit. It is expected that students will have explored at least a textbook chapter and perhaps some other sources about the Depression before this lesson. First, ask students what they have learned about history by talking with elderly individuals. After this initial discussion, the teacher should note that students will explore interviews that were conducted in 1999 by the Waterbury Republican-American newspaper with three elderly people who grew up during the Great Depression. Let students know they will be exploring what it was like growing up in the Waterbury region during the Great Depression. Students can be split into pairs to do a jigsaw. Some pairs will

read the Ralph Goodson account while other pairs will read the Edith Waterhouse/George Graham accounts. Give students time to read, discuss, and write down what their assigned accounts teach them about growing up in the Waterbury region during the Great Depression. Then ask for student pairs to share out. Also, another discussion piece should include asking students to share how the accounts show similarities and differences between 1930s America and 21st century America. At this point, the Great Depression historical fiction writing assignment could be explained. Writing will have to be completed during another class period. Students can utilize what they have learned from a variety of 1930s sources including *Great Depression Memories from Waterbury, Northfield, and Thomaston* in writing the historical fiction assignment.

How will you assess what students learned during this lesson?

- Verbal responses
- Active pair interpretation
- Written interpretations
- Great Depression Historical Fiction Writing Assignment

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards—

Standard 1-Content Knowledge

1.2 Demonstrate an understanding of significant events in local and Connecticut history and their connections to United States history.

High School 15. Describe how major events in U.S. History affected Connecticut citizens (e.g. Great Depression)

2.3 Create various forms of written work (e.g. journal, essay, blog, webpage, brochure) to demonstrate an understanding of history and social studies issues.

High School 16. Write informative/explanatory texts about events and topics.

Great Depression Memories from Waterbury, Northfield, and Thomaston

This document contains reflections about growing up during the Great Depression from Ralph “Sonney” Goodson of Waterbury, Edith Waterhouse of Northfield, and George Graham of Thomaston. Their words help us understand what life was like in the Waterbury region during the Great Depression. These accounts come from a *Waterbury Republican-American* article entitled “The Great Depression” (Oct. 31, 1999).

Federal Programs

Federal relief programs like the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps had a significant impact on the Waterbury region of Connecticut. The CCC provided jobs to many young men. It gave food and shelter and relieved their families of support. The men would stay in CCC camps set up at the work sites. The CCC’s legacy includes parts of Black Rock State Forest in Watertown, Mohawk State Forest in Cornwall, and Macedonia Brook State Park in Kent. In Waterbury, the Works Progress Administration built Municipal Stadium and paved Willow Street. Murals were painted in post offices and schools and bridges were constructed.

Ralph “Sonney” Goodson of Waterbury

Ralph “Sonney” Goodson was born in 1930 in Waterbury, Connecticut. He grew up on Vine Street near the Waterbury Manufacturing Company division of Chase Brass and Copper Company. His father worked at Waterbury Manufacturing to support the family of seven children. Goodson doesn’t remember if his father was laid off during the Depression, but he does remember there was no meat.

“We used to be sent to the meat market, Jake’s,” Goodson said. “Jake’s was in the North Square between Bishop and North Main. We used to go there to get the bones for the dog. But he knew they weren’t bones for the dog. There was enough meat on them that you couldn’t call them bones.”

There was enough meat to boil into the soup the family regularly ate for dinner. The Goodson family didn’t even have enough money for a full quart of milk.

“We used to go to the grocery and take an empty bottle,” Goodson said. “You could buy a pint of milk because you didn’t have enough money for a quart of milk.”

Ralph Goodson also remembers many years with few changes of clothes and shoes patched with cardboard. He said in his family, the children’s clothes usually came from the former Brown Brothers Store in Waterbury.

“The reason we bought at Brown Brothers is they extended credit, and the suits came with two pants, one long pant, and one knicker,” Goodson said. “When your sneakers got a hole in them, you put a piece of cardboard in them. The soles of the shoes used to flap.”

“There was a train that used to go up Vine Street into Chase’s,” Goodson said. “The way we got fuel to heat our house was to pick up the coal that fell off the train as it went by. The train came up Vine and into the factory. That was my best memory, picking up coal, my brother and I. My brother was 16 years older than I. We would get enough for ourselves and the neighbors—no, I think he was selling it to the neighbors.”

The Goodsons had a kerosene heater in the dining room and a coal and wood stove in the kitchen. The dining room and living room were closed off during the week—to save on heating them. Sliding doors separated the living room from the kitchen.

“During the week, those rooms were not in use,” Goodson said. “You did your living in the kitchen.”

For fun, Goodson said there were dances at the Goodwill Elks Lodge on East Hawkins Street in Waterbury, and there was a movie house in every neighborhood. Big band dances were held at the Hamilton Park Pavilion, where people like Benny Goodman played. There was a stable at North Main Street and Lakewood Road, where Goodson and his friends would rent horses. There were rodeos on upper North Main Street, near Bucks Hill Road. Big band concerts were also held at the Palace Theater.

“I loved the Palace Theater,” Goodson said. “I’ve seen them all right there at the Palace Theater. But the biggest attraction of the whole town was the State Theater. I’ve seen Gene Autry and Champion, Roy Rogers. Every Christmas, those movie stars would come to town. We’d go the theater, and every child would get a bag of candy, nuts, and apples. The Carroll Theater in the North Square had an admission price of 12 cents. Everybody used to go. There was dish night, and that’s how most people got their dishes.”

An amateur hour was held every week at the Plaza Theater, at the corner of North Elm and East Main Streets.

“The kids could perform,” Goodson said. “They’d win prizes by applause. It used to be a beautiful town.”

The Pearl Street Neighborhood House had two bowling alleys, arts and crafts, girls cooking classes, ping-pong, a gymnasium, a boxing ring and basketball teams. A Salvation Army headquarters, where the Pride building now stands on Cherry Street, had a toy library where children could sign out toys. Goodson said that was the only way he and many other children could get to ride a bike or rollerskate.

“It’s a town that had everything,” Goodson said. “There was enough to keep busy. The most mischief we used to get into was raiding gardens just about dark. We used to carry our salt and pepper. Raw green peppers, cucumbers, the grapes—oh, the old Italian widows in black, sitting on the porch, under the drying peppers. In Waterbury in those days, we didn’t lock the houses. Crime, per se, it was unheard of.”

Goodson said the Depression taught patience and endurance. It also taught him to always have a dream. He never had a bedroom to call his own. He slept on a bed in the family’s dining room. He never had a bicycle. And it hurt.

Goodson a community activist, said he turned some of that pain and patience into a community garden at the corner of Orange and Ashley Streets in Waterbury. And he turned some of his endurance and dreams into a People’s Park on Walnut Street.

“You always have to have a goal,” Goodson said. “Your goal has to be something that’s almost unattainable; otherwise, you’ll stop having goals. The hurt was there. But I’m better off for it.”

Edith Waterhouse of Northfield

Edith Waterhouse grew up in the countryside of Northfield, Connecticut, during the Great Depression. Her late father, Thomas Hockey, milked the cows on his farm and delivered

it in his truck to the customers who could still afford it. Edith's father also sold chickens, eggs, and produce.

"A quart of milk was 9 cents in 1929 and rose to 14 cents over the next few years. It was a great uproar," Waterhouse said.

Waterhouse remembers the desperation. She also remembers how even though her family faced tough times, they were also able to help others.

"I was seven years old. I remember my father telling us that one his customers had committed suicide. They had lost everything. His wife sold everything in their lovely home and moved away. She asked my father if he would be interested in buying her diamond ring. As mother never did have a decent diamond, he bought it. I believe he paid \$40 for a three-quarter carat blue diamond."

Waterhouse and her sister, the late Olive (Hockey) Sagendorf, attended Northfield Grammar School (presently the Northfield Volunteer Fire Department on Main Street).

"I would bring girls home from school because they had such poor lunches," Waterhouse said. "They'd stop at the store and get a five cent cupcake or something like that and that was their lunch. My mother would give them something good, soup and sandwich and chocolate pudding. We didn't give too much of the garden stuff away because that was his living."

For fun, Edith Waterhouse used to go ice skating on Knife Shop Pond in Northfield in the evenings, after she finished her chores. And the Beacon Grange on Route 254 and the Northfield Congregational Church were the centers of community life.

George Graham of Thomaston

George Graham grew up in the small factory town of Thomaston, Connecticut. His father, Wilbur, really struggled during the Great Depression. Wilbur's wife, Rose Marie, had died in 1920. His daughter, Laura, went to live with an aunt in Waterbury. Wilbur raised his son, George, by working at the Thomaston Grain and Coal Company on Chapel Street in Thomaston. He couldn't afford more than one pair of sneakers a year for his son, who played on the Thomaston High School basketball and baseball teams. George graduated in 1933.

"When I was a freshman, I had a cheap pair of sneakers to play in, and I wore them through before the season was over, and I had a big blister on my foot," Graham said. "I put more cardboard in them. I didn't have too much clothes. We used to wear long johns in the winter. Even in high school, I used to wear them. The guys would ride the hell out of me, but they kept me warm."

Graham's father charged groceries at the store on Chapel Street in Thomaston and paid for them at the end of the week. The two mostly ate hot dogs and beans. George would have a piece of toast in the morning.

"I remember I used to take peanut butter and jelly to school with me, and John Danaher, who was in school with me, his mother used to make homemade bread, and I used to swap a couple of slices of bread for my peanut butter and jelly," Graham said. "In school, I got on the basketball team, and the coach told the players that I couldn't get by on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and he took me for dinner every day before he was married. Then, Mr. Green got married, and I went to his house, which was on Grove Street, right across from the old school."

For fun, Graham and his friends would go swimming and to local ball games.

“The movies were 5 cents for kids,” Graham said. “We used to go up the Valley Shelter to round and square dances on Friday and Saturday nights.”

Great Depression Historical Fiction Writing Assignment

We have recently studied a unit on 1930s America...the Great Depression, a period where most Americans faced tough economic times. In order to test your knowledge on the Great Depression, we are asking you to create a three paragraph piece of historical fiction.

You may use information from the textbook, the 1930s video, and other sources including the "Great Depression Memories from Waterbury, Northfield, and Thomaston" article (which included oral history excerpts).

Here is the scenario. You were a teenager during the 1930s. A local history professor is interviewing you for a book she is writing about the Great Depression. Here are the questions you must answer in each of the paragraphs:

Identify your name (create a new name for your character).

Paragraph 1

What was life like for your family during the Great Depression? How did you help your family during the Great Depression?

Paragraph 2

What did you eat during the Great Depression? What were your clothes like? How did you get food and clothes?

Paragraph 3

What did you do for entertainment during the Great Depression? What valuable lesson did the Great Depression teach you?

Here is the assessment list that shows how this assignment will be graded. Remember to use complete sentences when you write.

Assessment List

- ___ of 10 points A new name was created for your character.
- ___ of 20 points You accurately described life for your family during the Great Depression. You explained how you helped your family. Details were historically accurate.
- ___ of 30 points You explained your diet during the 1930s. You also described what your clothes were like. Also, you explained how you obtained food and clothes. Details were historically accurate.
- ___ of 20 points You explained what you did for entertainment during the Great Depression. Also, you explained a valuable lesson that the Great Depression taught you. Details were historically accurate.
- ___ of 20 points Historical details were used throughout the story. Plus, this assignment was set up in paragraph form and proper editing (no grammar, spelling errors).
- ___ of 100 points