

The Great Depression in Arkansas, Dyess Colony,
and “Five Feet High and Rising” by Johnny Cash

Objectives:

1. Students will evaluate the causes and effects of the Great Depression in Arkansas.
2. Students will analyze the impact of the Great Depression on the music of Johnny Cash.

Essential/ Compelling Question:

How do we handle hard times?

Guiding Questions:

1. What were causes and effects of the Great Depression in Arkansas?
2. What was the purpose of the Dyess Colony?
3. How did life in Depression-era Arkansas influence the songs of Johnny Cash?
4. What were some of the hardships faced by children during the Great Depression? How do those hardships compare to the problems faced by children today?

Standards Correlation:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose.

C.5.6.6 Analyze significant examples of music from various periods of United States history

H.6.6.8 Analyze the causes and effects of the Great Depression

E.7.7.1 Discuss economic wants and needs of people over time

Key Terms:

Great Depression, unemployment, tenant farming, New Deal, Farm Security Administration (FSA), Franklin Roosevelt, Johnny Cash

Materials:

-Lyrics to “Five Feet High and Risin’” (copies for students, or display on LCD projector)

-Prezi: Arkansas in the Depression - http://prezi.com/ola9kwrewuva/the-great-depression-in-arkansas/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy

Opening:

Pose the essential question, “How do we handle hard times,” to students. Have them brainstorm possible responses to difficult economic, political, or social situations. Then, show an introductory video on the Great Depression at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHDEeujcCzY>. Pause the video as appropriate. Have students make a list of difficulties faced by Americans during the Great Depression. Discuss possible responses to these hard times.

Activities:

1. Using the Prezi on Arkansas and the Great Depression, http://prezi.com/ola9kwrewuva/the-great-depression-in-arkansas/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy or a selection from the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=403> or a selection from the Arkansas History textbook, provide students with an overview of the causes and effects of the Great Depression in Arkansas. Use the guiding questions at the start of the lesson to structure discussion during the overview.
2. Analyze Arkansas photographs from Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information collection on the Library of Congress website. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/> The collection is searchable by state, county, and city, as well as keyword. Instruct students to look for people, objects, and activities in each photograph. Ask students to identify the difficulties/hard times faced by Arkansans during the Depression. Discuss the possible causes of the problems, the similarities and differences between problems of the 1930s and hard times/difficulties in Arkansas today, and generate a possible list of responses to these difficulties.
3. Artists, writers, and musicians often use art, literature, and music as a way of responding to hard times. Johnny Cash’s song “Five Feet High and Rising” is one example of this, as are poetry and artwork from the Depression. Have students read the lyrics to this song from a projected image or handout. Discuss the literary devices and/or context of the lyrics. To what events in Arkansas and U.S. History was this song a response? Now, show a video of Cash performing this song <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2HrBcGvGYg>.

Closing

Return to the lesson’s essential and guiding questions and discuss similarities and differences between hard times in the past and present, as well as responses to these problems. Potential homework/extension activities include having students write their own lyrics in response to an

historic or contemporary “hard time,” or having students interview a family or community member about family/community stories of the Great Depression.

Content Resources

Arkansas During The Great Depression

Arkansans faced economic woes for years before the stock market crash of 1929 and the start of the national Great Depression. Dropping cotton prices combined with a major flood in 1927 and a drought in 1930 economically crippled the state. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers, as well as small farmers, depended on a strong harvest to offset money they laid out in advance for goods and services, so any disruption in agricultural production had dire consequences. By the time the stock market crashed, many Arkansans were in financial ruin, unable to pay their taxes. By 1933, nearly 40 percent of the state’s labor force was unemployed.

Agriculture was the mainstay for Arkansas families. The Great Flood of 1927, for many, wiped out what little hope they had of making better lives for their families. At the flood’s height, thirteen percent of the state was under water. This was nightmare for the estimated 80 percent of Arkansans who made their living off of agriculture. Houses, fields, roads and railroads were destroyed in many areas, bringing the economy, and Arkansans’ lives, to a standstill with no relief in sight. In 1927, there were no extensive, coordinated government programs to help with relief, such as welfare, social security or food stamps. With the stock market crash right around the corner, the state was already poorly equipped to deal with further disasters.



Floodwaters In Dixie (Woodruff County); 1927. (www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net)

The next devastating natural disaster to hit Arkansas was the drought of 1930. Crops were devastated and much farmland became worthless. Creditors and merchants began to limit the amount of goods they provided on credit. Food riots brought national attention to the plight of Arkansas families and caused the Red Cross to offer food assistance. Over 165,000 people applied for help within three days.

Another blow to Arkansas came from the political leaders of the state, who in 1927 passed a measure that required the state to take over county road improvement districts. This required the state to take on a substantial amount of debt. Servicing the debt expended a large percentage of state revenue. When the drought hit in 1930, there was no surplus state money. Merchants and banks began to close their doors, which in turn led to a decrease in tax revenue from these businesses.

In November of 1930, 70 banks in the state of Arkansas closed due to insufficient funds. By 1933, nearly half of the banks in the state had been closed. There was no federal deposit insurance at the start of the Depression, so when a bank closed, deposits were lost.

All of these factors, together, led to a vicious circle:

No money = consumers not buying = manufacturers produce less goods = layoffs and rise in unemployment = no money to spend



Library of Congress

Arkansas family during the depression (courtesy Library of Congress)



Franklin D. Roosevelt New Deal pin, 1932. From *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/72254/Franklin-D-Roosevelt-New-Deal-pin-1932>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt began the process of bringing back the confidence of the United States people through New Deal programs. One of these programs was the Dyess Colony.

Tenant farmers such as Johnny Cash's father, had to give 25 to 50 percent of their crops and earnings to the landowner. However, during the Depression, when cotton fell to just pennies on the pound, this was not enough to sustain many families.

New Deal programs such as the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) were implemented to pump life into the sinking economy.

The first administrator of the WPA in Arkansas, William R. Dyess, proposed that tenant farmers, such as Ray Cash, be given a chance to own and develop their own land. FERA purchased 16,000 acres of land in Mississippi County in Northeast Arkansas to build a “resettlement” colony in which tenant families would be given 20-40 acre tracts of land to clear and farm. They had a chance to own the property by paying back the federal government over a period of time.



Resettlement house in Dyess Colony, Arkansas (courtesy Library of Congress)

In May 1934, “Colonization Project No.1” was established in Mississippi County, Arkansas. Named after Dyess. 500 small farmhouses were built, and a barn and a chicken coop were provided. Aside from those improvements, the land that was to be cleared was often swampy and difficult to cultivate. Like other New Deal housing projects, Dyess was a whites-only experiment. Families with a farming background from all across the state applied to be one of the lucky few to get a new start in Dyess. An advance was given to the families to buy supplies and to pay for the houses and land. At the end of the first year, payments towards the property came due.

In early 1935 Ray and Carrie Cash, they made the two day trip from Kingsland, Cleveland County, to Dyess and began a new life. Johnny Cash wrote about this event as a blessing, which

gave his family an opportunity to make something of their own and to built a future that did not involve living off of others.



Johnny Cash boyhood home in Dyess, Arkansas (www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net, Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism)

From its peak of about 2500 residents in 1936, World War II saw many of the residents leave for war duties, and many never returned. Today, the city boasts a population of around 500 residents, but enjoys a moderate tourism industry due to its famous son, Johnny Cash.

Five Feet High and Rising

In January of 1937, the rain just simply would not stop. This was bad news for the colonists of Dyess, as the Tyronza River flowed directly through town. Unable to effectively drain, the Tyronza was just one of several tributaries of the Mississippi River that went over its banks at that time. Much farmland was now underwater and it was beginning to creep into farmhouses and barns, leaving the residents stranded. Many of the residents of Dyess did not have vehicles and needed assistance to evacuate the town. Buses were brought in and took residents who had no family in the state to cities such as Memphis to wait for the waters to recede. Ray Cash sent his family back to Kingsland to stay with family while he stayed to look over the farm.



Flood refugee camp in Forrest City, AR, 1937. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Johnny Cash recalled this event in his 1959 song “Five Feet High And Rising.” Johnny wrote about finding the good in any situation. It didn’t take long to find the “good” in the flood of 1937. The rising waters had brought in a fresh, rich layer of topsoil that provided such a good cotton crop that Ray Cash was able to pay off the advance for his house and land in February of 1938, only three years after making the move. The song recalls listening to his parents discuss their situation as the waters rose, and how with every foot it rose, things got worse, until they had to leave. This song is a direct connection to the Dyess colony and Arkansas for Cash. It is storytelling songwriting at its best, written by arguably the best storytelling songwriter of all time.

“Five Feet High And Rising” by Johnny Cash

How high’s the water mama?

Two feet high and risin’

How high’s the water papa?

Two feet high and risin’

We can make it to the road in a homemade boat

That’s the only thing we got left that’ll float

It’s already over all the wheat and the oats,

Two feet high and risin’

How high’s the water mama?

Three feet high and risin’

How high’s the water papa?

Three feet high and risin’

Well the hives are gone, I’ve lost my bees

The chickens are sleepin’ in the willow trees

Cow’s in water up past her knees,

Three feet high and risin’

How high’s the water mama?

Four feet high and risin’

How high’s the water papa?

Four feet high and risin’

Hey, come look through the window pane

The bus is comin gonna take us to the train

Looks like we’ll be blessed with a little more rain,

Four feet high and risin’

How high's the water mama?

Five feet high and risin'

How high's the water papa?

Five feet high and risin'

Well the rails are washed out north of town

We gotta head for higher ground

We can't come back till the water comes down,

Five feet high and risin'

Well it's five feet high and risin'