

Learning about the Great Depression and Dust Bowl through Primary Sources

Cortney Stone
Curator of Education



The best way to understand history is to examine primary sources – the materials created by those who experienced historical events. Examples of primary sources include journals, photographs, and newspaper articles from the time period. Even household objects and textiles, such as samplers and quilts, can serve as primary sources. Teaching with primary sources encourages critical thinking and analysis among students. It also lets them examine history in the open rather than through the lens of a secondary source, such as a textbook or classroom lecture.

Oklahoma's C3 Standards for Social Studies require educators to teach history using primary sources. This guide has information for teaching with primary sources along with examples and discussion questions related to the Great Depression and Dust Bowl in Oklahoma.

Using Sources Wisely

First, you must select good primary sources that are age-appropriate for your students and relevant to your social studies lessons. You may want to choose sources that are good for compare and contrast exercises. Next, you will need to create questions that invite students to examine the sources

closely and think critically about the subject matter. Finally, you should present the materials and the questions to the students in an engaging manner and help them understand the lessons. Ask them to back up any comments or assumptions they make with evidence from the primary sources or other sources, and help them find ways to answer any additional questions they have by doing research.

Where to Find Primary Sources

Primary sources are everywhere. The Library of Congress and the Smithsonian have millions of photographs, first-hand accounts, and other materials related to United States history for use in the classroom. The Oklahoma Historical Society's research division is an excellent source of material related to Oklahoma history. You may also find valuable resources at your local library or historical society. Even one of your family heirlooms, such as a journal, a photograph, or a quilt, can serve as a primary source. Your students will appreciate your personal link to history.



Primary Source: Photograph of a Dust Storm

G. L. Risen took this photograph in Hooker, Oklahoma, on June 4, 1937. It shows a large dust storm approaching the town. This photo is from the Risen Brothers Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.



1. Name three things you notice in this photograph.

2. Look at the size of the buildings and the size of the black clouds. Estimate how tall the dust clouds are.

3. What do you think the residents of Hooker thought when they saw this dust storm rolling into town?

4. Do you see any people or cars in the streets? Where do you think the people are?

5. How would you feel if you were in Hooker and you saw this storm coming into town? What would you do?

Primary Source: Photograph of a Dust Storm – Teacher Guide

1. Students will notice the primary focus of the photo: a large, rolling dust storm. They may also notice how small the buildings are, the empty streets and sidewalks, the normal clouds in the sky above the dust storm, and how the dust clouds touch the ground.
2. The building in the background on the right is three stories tall. The dust cloud appears to be at least five or six times the height of this building.
3. Students may suggest that people were very frightened or worried. They might also suggest that people felt the world was ending. Dust storms brought darkness, misery, and death, so some people did believe that the world was ending during the dust bowl days.
4. There are three cars in the street in the middle of town. Students may only notice two because you can barely see the top of the third car at the bottom edge of the photo. You cannot see any people out walking around, so students may suggest that the town's residents have taken shelter indoors. During dust storms, many people took shelter in homes, churches, businesses, schools, and storm cellars. Being out in a dust storm was very dangerous because you could not see and the dust would fill your lungs.
5. Answers will vary.

Primary Source: Photograph of Classroom during a Dust Storm

Someone from the Associated Press took this photograph in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on March 25, 1935. These children are attending school during a dust storm. This photo is from the Minneapolis Public Library Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.



1. Name three things you notice in this photograph.

2. How are these people reacting to the dust storm? Why are they reacting that way?

3. How is this classroom different from yours? How is it the same?

4. Imagine what it would be like if you were in school during a dust storm in 1935. How would you feel? What would you do?

Primary Source: Photograph of Classroom during a Dust Storm – Teacher Guide

1. Students may notice the way the children are covering their faces, their desks, their clothing, and their books.
2. The children in the photograph are covering their noses and mouths to keep the dust out of their lungs. Breathing in dust made people very ill, and some of them died from "dust pneumonia." Also, the classroom windows are closed to minimize the amount of dust coming into the room. Dust particles were so fine that they could get in through tiny gaps around the edges of windows, so the children still needed to cover their noses and mouths. Some students may point out that they are still studying their lessons in spite of the dust storm. People often tried to continue their routines as much as possible during dust storms.
3. Students will notice a number of differences, such as the style of desks, the different type of windows and shades, and the students' clothing. They may notice that the similarities include the fact that the students use desks and books.
4. Answers will vary. Have students suggest ways to keep dust out of their classroom. Ask them to try to do their work with one hand over their nose and mouth. Do the same for yourself as you teach. This will make normal activities such as holding a book, writing on a piece of paper, and speaking into new challenges.

Primary Source: The Lyrics of "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie, a famous folk singer from Oklahoma, wrote this song in 1940.

This Land Is Your Land

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway:
I saw below me that golden valley:
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

1. Who is the intended audience of this song?

2. What is "this land?" To whom does it belong?

3. How does Woody Guthrie describe this land?

4. What is good about this land? What is bad?

5. Read the fifth verse. How does Woody Guthrie seem to feel about the "No trespassing" sign?

6. The sixth verse describes conditions during the Great Depression. What does Woody mean when he says "the shadow of the steeple?"

7. Why are people gathering at the church and the relief office? Why does this make Woody wonder if "this land is made for you and me?"

Primary Source: The Lyrics of "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie – Teacher Guide

Note: Though we have included all the lyrics to this song, you may use your own judgment to determine what is suitable for your class. Generally, younger students study the first few verses, while older students study most or all of the verses.

1. The intended audience of this song is everyone who lives in the United States.
2. "This land" refers to the United States. When Woody wrote this song, there were 48 states and the US stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. For Woody, the land in the United States belonged to every American, and every American has freedom across this land.
3. Woody uses poetic language to describe many interesting natural features of the land, such as "golden" valleys, "endless" skies, deserts, and giant redwood forests. He also describes things that people have added to the land, such as wheat fields and highways. To him, everything in this land is beautiful.
4. Woody feels that many of the natural and human-made features of the land are good and beautiful, but he seems to feel that "no trespassing," signs, poverty, and hunger are bad things found in this land. He mentions "dust clouds," but he does not say whether they are good or bad.
5. Woody points out that the other side of the "no trespassing" sign is blank, so everything that isn't private property belongs to us all.
6. The "shadow of the steeple" refers to the shadow cast on the ground by a church steeple. People are standing near the church.
7. People are at the church and the relief office because they are poor and hungry and they need help. The Great Depression made life very difficult for

people, so they went to churches and the government for help. Many did not want to ask for help, but they were very desperate and they had no other choice. The fact that people are so needy in such a beautiful and free land makes Woody wonder if "this land was made for you and me."

Primary Source: Life in the Dust Bowl (Oral History)

Read or listen to the oral history interview with Lillian Eells and Luella Hardison from the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University.

<http://dc.library.okstate.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Dustbowl/id/3079/rec/3>

1. What are some hardships Lillian and Luella faced during the Dust Bowl era?

2. The storm they describe is the one that occurred on April 14, 1935 (also known as Black Sunday). What was it like?

3. What did they do during dust storms?

4. What did they do after the storms had covered everything in dust?

5. What kind of food did they have during the Dust Bowl?

6. Why did they refuse to enroll in the government relief program even though it offered better food?

Primary Source: Life in the Dust Bowl (Oral History) – Teacher Guide

Note: The full audio (which is 1 hour 4 minutes) and transcript of this interview is available at

<http://dc.library.okstate.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Dustbowl/id/3079/rec/3>. You may play it in class or print out the transcript. It includes information about their family history prior to the Dust Bowl. They begin talking about the Dust Bowl on page 12 of the transcript and at 21 minutes into the interview.

1. Lillian's son Ray got dust pneumonia. Dust covered everything, even the fences, and they could only see the tops of the fence posts. They had trouble finding fresh fruit and had to buy wormy apples. They had to eat many jackrabbits because the cows were not healthy enough to eat. They had trouble washing and hanging their laundry out to dry because the dust would stick to it and make it dirty again.
2. They knew the storm was coming because "birds and jackrabbits and tumbleweeds all went ahead of the storm." It was very dark and the wind was blowing so hard that it blew their screen door back against the side of their house.
3. They couldn't do much to protect themselves. They hid inside the house or the school. They put dampened sheets over the beds to protect them from the dust. The dust would stick to the wet sheets. Sometimes they tried to drive the livestock into a building for safety, but the animals often refused to move. People who were driving along the roads had to pull over and stop. They couldn't see because of the black clouds of dust.
4. They would tip their chairs and desks to the side and let the dust fall off. They could not keep their homes clean. When they set the table, they put the plates face down and turned them over right before eating so that they

wouldn't be covered in dust. Some people stayed and "toughed it out," but others packed up their belongings and traveled to other parts of the country to find work and a place to live away from the dust storms. If their laundry was hanging outside during a dust storm, they had to shake off as much dust as possible and wear the dirty clothes.

5. The family had a milk cow. They had trouble finding fresh fruit and often bought tiny shriveled apples that had worms in them. They had to kill off their cows because they weren't healthy enough to eat. The meat was very tough and difficult to chew. They had to hunt and eat jackrabbits instead.

6. They were too proud to accept charity. Some people were very proud of the fact that they could take care of themselves and provide for their families. Even though life was very difficult during the Great Depression, their pride made them uncomfortable with taking free things from the government instead of earning a living by working. They only accepted government help when they were desperate.

Bibliography

Eells, Lillian and Luella Hardison, interview by Jennifer Paustenbaugh, digital audio recording and online transcript, November 8, 2001. Dust, Drought and Dreams Gone Dry: Oklahoma Women and the Dust Bowl. Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, Oklahoma State University.

<http://dc.library.okstate.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/Dustbowl/id/3079/rec/3>

Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov>.

Minneapolis Public Library Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.

Risen Brothers Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.