

# Teacher's Guide

# Journey From The Dust

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## A Story of the Great Depression

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# Journey from the Dust

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

**Many people think of the beginning of the Great Depression as October 29, 1929, Black Tuesday**, the day of the big stock market crash. Even today, the roots of this collapse have not yet been pinpointed. Stock prices had been rising almost out of control for months. The banks were borrowing money from the Federal Reserve to give loans to investors, who used the money to buy more stocks. Then a sudden period of intense trading began. After several rollercoaster days, the stock market hit a record low on October 29: by the end of that day, over 16.4 million shares of stocks had been bought or sold. Stock prices plummeted. Investment trusts lost half or more of their values. Over the next year all of those prices continued to drop, lower than anyone would have ever thought possible. The effects of this event were cataclysmic both nationally and globally, devastating the American economy and way of life. However, put in the context of the 1920's, the stock market crash was not the beginning, but rather a turning point.



WW1 had ended in 1919. The Great War had been particularly good for American farmers: since European farms were unable to produce while the war was being fought on their territory, many American farmers increased their own production, cultivating more land for crops and buying new equipment to help them with their work. With less competition and higher prices for their goods, American farmers prospered. But after the war was over, when the demand for their produce declined and European farms returned to work, prices began to fall, leaving American farmers with over-cultivated fields, unnecessary equipment, no market for their crops and enormous loans and mortgages, with no money to pay them off. Throughout the 1920's, American farmers faced loss of income, bankruptcy, foreclosure. They were already in a depression by October 1929. The stock market crash now meant not only lost savings from stocks or the bank, it also drove produce prices even lower. With unemployment at an all time low, no one in the country was working enough to earn the money to buy what the farmers grew. It often cost more to grow, harvest and sell the crops than the prices they sold for; in some cases in California, it was cheaper to destroy the crops than to pay the workers to pick them. Meanwhile, many Americans, especially children, were living below poverty level, starving.

President Hoover, the nonpolitical humanitarian Quaker inaugurated only 7 months earlier, made numerous efforts to contain the crisis, such as tax reductions, stabilization of wages and prices (including agricultural prices through the Federal Farm Board), and maintained or increased spending on public projects. Unfortunately, these efforts were not enough to rescue America from its downward spiral, and soon the makeshift shelters erected around the country by citizens who had lost their homes were being called "Hoovervilles." The Bonus Army Riot only solidified this public opinion. In 1932, 20,000 WW1 veterans and their families marched from Portland, Oregon to Washington, DC, seeking immediate payment on wartime bonuses they were to be awarded in 1945. After two months of encampment, protests and growing violence, President Hoover ordered a peaceful evacuation of the Bonus Army. Instead, Chief of Staff MacArthur led an army attack against the men, women and children of the Bonus Army camp. When Hoover accepted public responsibility for the riot, his presidential fate was sealed. That November, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President.

In contrast with Hoover, FDR was a gregarious and popular candidate, winning a landslide election victory. Americans were desperate for change and they believed FDR could and would deliver on his promises of relief and reform. During the first few weeks of his presidency, known as the Hundred Days, the Roosevelt administration set more legislation into action than any other comparable period in history, before or since. Over the coming years, Roosevelt's New Deal established a steady stream of welfare and work relief programs, including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works and Public Works Administrations (CWA/PWA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), National Youth Administration (NYA), and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a program employing young men

ages 17-24, whose impact on national forests and state parks can still be seen today. The Grand Coulee Dam, one of the Public Works Administration projects, employed thousands of laborers from across the country, totalling 100 million work hours, to construct a dam in eastern Washington state. Harnessing the Columbia River, the greatest potential energy source among the rivers of America, the Grand Coulee Dam provided irrigation, flood control and water power to a vast area of the state—and became known as the biggest man made structure of all time, nearly four times the size of the Pyramids in Egypt!



However, there was one arena over which FDR had no control: the weather. In the 1930's, it stopped raining in the midwestern US. Drought set in around the Oklahoma Panhandle: Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Nebraska. In the summer of 1934 in Oklahoma, the temperature was over 100 degrees for 36 days in a row. Then the heavy winds began, reaching up to 50 MPH. Combined with dry soil and little grass to hold the dirt down in still over-cultivated fields from the WW1 expansion, the wind created dust storms, blowing huge clouds of dust and dirt for miles all across the region, which became known as the dust bowl. Now the few crops farmers could manage to grow without rain were destroyed by the dust. Livestock and people died in dust storms or from dust pneumonia. Life in the dust bowl seemed hopeless. Many people gave up on the land which had been their home for generations and struck out for California, lured by rumors of jobs and good living there, advertised in leaflets from the Growers' Association, much like the propaganda that had brought European immigrants to the US in earlier decades. Generally families drove, piling all of the belongings and relatives they could fit into a beat up car or truck and following the Mother Road, Route 66, across the country, a long and difficult journey with treacherous road conditions. For the young, single and largely male population, riding the rails was the preferred method of travel—jumping on the trains and traveling for free—faster but definitely more dangerous, from the threat of physical injury to the weapons of the railroad bulls, the train company detectives hired to keep illegal passengers off the trains at any cost. Those who managed to survive the dangers often became part of the hobo culture, an unofficial brotherhood of job seekers (unlike the bums, who sought only handouts) whose homes were the railroad “jungle” hangouts they established along the way. For some, the rails became not just a means of transportation but a way of life.

Unfortunately, once the travelers arrived, California turned out not to be the paradise the promoters made it out to be. Jobs were few and poorly paid, and the “Okies,” as people who'd left Oklahoma were called, were treated with as much prejudice as foreign immigrants, refugees in their own land. Here, “Hoovervilles” were renamed “Little Oklahomas,” and those who'd journeyed halfway across the country in search of a better life found themselves doing backbreaking labor for pennies a day, then going home to a cardboard shack with the taunts of native Californians ringing in their ears. Union activists helped them to organize strikes and demands for better wages and living conditions, which usually resulted in limited improvements and often violent consequences. Unable to return home, despite the hardship, some stayed on in California, while others joined the migrant labor pool already in existence, moving from crop to crop with each new harvest.



The country continued to struggle on through much of the 1930's, until once again a climate of war emerged overseas, altering the global economy and political front yet again. One era of crisis in America had ended, but a new one had just begun.

Journey from the Dust tells the story of one young man and his experiences in the face of those challenges of the Great Depression. It addresses the issues of survival on every level: physical, spiritual, personal, economic, racial, national, idealistic. At the same time, it is a piece about hopes and dreams, and about the incredible efforts those who lived through the Great Depression made to hold on to their visions of a brighter future. It is the story of a journey both physical and symbolic, a story of one of the most powerful times in American history.

# JOURNEY FROM THE DUST

## SYNOPSIS

**Journey from the Dust tells the story of Mark Dobson and his family** during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl in the 1920's and 1930's. Mark is the eldest of two children living on the family farm in the Oklahoma panhandle. Mark's father is a farmer and World War One veteran. His mother is a "city girl", a talented woman who taught and played piano in Oklahoma City before meeting and falling in love with Roy Dobson. Mark has one younger sister, Samantha, ten years his junior. He inherits his mother's gift for music and at an early age shows great talent as a piano player.

In 1929, when Mark is 14, the life he and his family have experienced comes to a sudden end. On October 29, 1929 the Stock Market crashes, ruining fortunes and bankrupting thousands of people overnight. Without enough money in the banks to satisfy widespread panic, many banks fail, closing their doors and leaving customers like the Dobsons penniless.

Two years later, in the midst of already crippling poverty, the midwestern states fall into a severe and unrelenting drought. Mark and his family watch their crops shrivel in the sun as the soil is turned to dust. When the windstorms begin, the dust becomes deadly. People and animals are buried in the dust, or—as happens with Mark's own grandmother—contract dust pneumonia and slowly suffocate.

In the face of such hardship many people leave the area, heading for California where work is rumored to be plentiful and crops abundant. Mark's father, however, joins the growing number of World War One soldiers who petition President Hoover for early payment of their veteran's bonus money. Mark goes with his father on the Bonus Army March to Washington D.C. In the nation's capital things become violent however, when General MacArthur disperses the Bonus Army with tear gas and guns, killing and injuring the protesters. Mark and his father return to Oklahoma, now beaten and dispirited.



As the Great Depression deepens, families all across the country sink further into poverty. In 1932 President Roosevelt is elected. This new presidency energizes the country as scores of programs are implemented to create work and revitalize the economy. This doesn't help the Dobson family in time, however, as dust storms and foreclosure have sealed the family's fate: evicted from the family home, they must now separate in order to survive. Mark's father leaves to find work; his mother and sister are taken in by a relative, and Mark follows in his father's footsteps as he heads out alone to California and the promise of opportunity.

Mark heads for California, the land of plenty. He travels along the now-famous Route 66, the "Mother Road" of migrants fleeing the midwest for the Golden State. After an unpleasant encounter in Albuquerque, Mark is befriended by a hobo named Pete, who teaches him the "rules of the road". Pete's primary mode of transport, like so many young men of his day, is riding the rails. He introduces Mark to the hobo community and teaches him how to hop the trains.

On his first trip riding the rails, Mark meets a fellow hobo named Fred –an African American man who is surprised that Mark accepts him as his travelling companion. Fred plays the guitar and teaches Mark the harmonica. They become friends making music together in the boxcars and hobo jungles until one night when they become the victims of a racial attack. Mark and Fred try to run to safety by hopping on a speeding train, but Fred miscalculates and is thrown off the car to his death.

Mark arrives in California alone and quickly learns that he was wrong to expect great opportunities. With the surplus of labor, wages have fallen. Economic prejudice is everywhere, as Californians protest “Okies, go home”. Working conditions are brutal and pay is horribly low. Even the union organizers can’t help; demands for better conditions are met with violence. Mark leaves California for Washington State.

In Seattle he encounters more poverty, with a huge “Hooverville” established on the shores of Elliott Bay. One day in a soup kitchen in Seattle, Mark’s luck changes. He learns about the Civilian Conservation Corps, a work project of President Roosevelt’s New Deal. Traveling as a paid passenger he heads out to Eastern Washington to begin work on the Grand Coulee Dam. Life in the CCC is as structured as the military, and workers are paid both for themselves and their families. Finally Mark is able to keep his promise to his mother and sister! His days are filled with difficult and exciting work, and his nights are spent playing music with his new friend Will, or practicing the piano in a nearby church.

Mark’s fortunes continue to rise when he learns that his father is also working on the dam! Reunited, father and son work side by side again, as they did on the family farm. Mark makes plans to send for his mother and Samantha, and also applies to music school in Seattle.

These happy times end suddenly when an accident at the dam kills Mark’s father. Mark is left with a badly injured hand. Laid off work, he and the family survive on the widow’s wages paid to his mother. Time goes by and Mark learns to play again, overcoming the pain and fear. His audition for music school is a success and he enters school on a scholarship. As his musical career continues to grow, Mark realizes that he and his family are only a few of the hardy survivors who overcame great misfortune to rebuild the dreams “that got blown away in the dust of the Great Depression.”

# ***Journey from the Dust***

## **DEFINITIONS**

**Great War:** the first World War, fought in Europe 1914-1918

**Black Tuesday:** October 29, 1929, the day of the big stock market collapse

**Great Depression:** period of US history from 1929-1941, marked by extreme national poverty, unemployment and economic devastation

**bank failure:** when widespread panic as a result of the stock market crash caused many Americans to rush to the banks to withdraw all their savings, many banks did not have the cash to provide them and were forced to close their doors

**Bonus Army:** a group of approximately 20,000 WW1 veterans who joined a march that started in Portland, Oregon and ended in Washington, DC in 1932. They marched to pressure the congress into making immediate payment on bonuses for wartime services that were scheduled to be awarded in 1945; the bill was ultimately rejected by the Senate and the Bonus Army forcibly driven out of the capital by federal troops

**Herbert Hoover:** US President from 1928-1932, a Quaker, a humanitarian, responsible for the organization of numerous relief programs in Europe during WW1; his public image declined as a result of the perception of his efforts to rescue the US from the effects of the stock market crash and his introverted personality

**Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR):** US President from 1932-1945, widely popular, elected for a record four terms, whose **New Deal** administration was responsible for the many work and relief programs which sustained the US throughout the Great Depression

**dust bowl:** an area of the United States centered around the Oklahoma Panhandle, including parts of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, Colorado and Nebraska, plagued by drought, heat and heavy winds throughout the 1930's which created catastrophic **dust storms**

**dust pneumonia:** fatal illness resulting from severe damage to the lungs caused by the dust storms

**foreclosure:** the bank act of repossessing a property when the loan or mortgage on it cannot be paid

**Mother Road: Route 66,** the treacherous US interstate road on which many dust bowl migrants traveled to reach California

**vagrancy:** the offense of wandering from place to place with no established residence or means of support

**hobo:** during the Depression, men who had lost or were unable to find jobs traveled the nation looking for work, often exchanging household chores for a meal; transient

**riding the rails:** hopping trains and traveling in boxcars, a common mode of travel for hobos and other transients who didn't have the money to buy a ticket

**manifest:** in the 1930s, a high speed train which did not make local stops

**railroad bulls:** detectives hired by the train companies to keep hobos and other non-paying travelers off the trains; bulls would often use violence to discourage train hopping, and transients who were caught were usually put into forced labor to repay their debt

**hobo jungle:** hobo camps near railroad stations where hobos and other transients could rest, make a fire, and meet other travelers for news

**mulligan stew:** a common hobo meal, in which any small amount of meat or vegetable was thrown into one pot to make a dish that could stretch to feed as many as had contributed to it

**bum:** a transient looking for handouts but not for work

**migrant worker:** farm laborers, often immigrants from Mexico, Japan, China and the Philippines, who traveled the US following the changing harvest seasons to pick fruit and other crops

**Hooverville/Little Oklahoma:** names given to shantytowns and squatters' camps built out of cardboard, newspaper and other found materials by people who had lost their homes as a result of the Great Depression; Hoovervilles were named for the President; native Californians called the shacks built by dust bowl migrants Little Oklahomas

**Okie:** derogatory name given to dust bowl migrants from Oklahoma by native Californians

**union organizer:** migrant laborers and their advocates made efforts to organize and govern themselves as a work force to protect themselves against unfair working conditions and to demand fair pay and treatment from their employers

**soup kitchen:** an establishment usually run by a religious or welfare organization that provided free, hot meals to the homeless and jobless during the Great Depression

**Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC):** one of the first and most popular New Deal programs, which employed young, single men in forestry, flood control and beautification projects in national parks and forests around the country

**Grand Coulee Dam:** a Public Works Administration (a New Deal program) project in eastern Washington state, building a dam to provide irrigation, water power and flood control to an approximately 50 mile area; at the time of its construction, it was the biggest man made structure of all time



# Journey from the Dust

## TIMELINE

**1919** World One (The Great War) Ends

**1920** Prohibition is adopted in the United States making alcohol illegal.

Women win the right to vote in the United States.

**1921** Harding is sworn into office.

**1922** Harding Vetoes the World War One veteran's bonus bill.

**1923** Harding Dies in office. Coolidge is sworn in as president.

Linbergh makes the first flight across the Atlantic.

**1928** Hoover is Elected

**1929** Year starts with the market concerns about "Margin" buying.

**Oct. 24** Black Tuesday, 21 point drop starts a panic on wall street.

**Oct. 29** Black Thursday, the "crash" begins. 16.4 million shares change hands in one day.

**Nov. 13** Decline continues. Market has fallen to 50% from levels on Sept. 3.

**1930** 66 Banks in Nebraska fail. Bank of the United States fails, wiping out 400,000 depositors.

**1931** Drought hits the midwestern and southern plains. Dust from over-plowed land begins to blow, crops die, "Black Blizzards" begin.

The House and Senate approve the Veteran's Bonus Bill. Hoover vetoes the bill.

**1932** Huge dust storms increase to 14 in one year.

The "Bonus March" begins. Twenty thousand veterans and their families protest and camp out in Washington DC. The protest ends in a riot when Hoover sends the Army to evict the protesters.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected president.

**1933** America's largest agricultural strike in history happens in California's San Joaquin Valley. During the strike two men and one woman are killed, hundreds are injured. The union is finally recognized by the growers.

38 Dust storms are reported.

11 states declare bank holidays.

Roosevelt's first one hundred days: the first "New Deal" begins.

**1934** The Dust Bowl spreads. 27 states (75 percent of the country) are affected. The Drought is now the worst in U.S. history.

Upton Sinclair, the author of "The Jungle" and a Socialist, wins the California primary for governor.

**1935** Social Security starts.

**April 14**, "Black Sunday". The worst black blizzard of the dust bowl occurs.

Experts estimate 850,000,000 tons of topsoil has blown off the plains in during the year.

**1936** Roosevelt is reelected.

**1937** The stock market falls again. The "Roosevelt Recession" starts.

**1938** "War of the Worlds" is broadcast causing widespread panic.

Extensive conservation efforts result in 65 percent reduction in the amount of soil blowing.

**1939** Rain finally falls again, ending the drought.

The New York Worlds fair opens.

# Journey from the Dust

## INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES:

1. **Role-on-the-wall:** a character from the piece is represented as an outline of a person, on which the group writes or draws information about that character: on the inside of the figure is written what that character feels or thinks about herself, on the outside, how she appears or how others perceive her. This activity can be done for multiple characters and/or used as a jumping point for further discussion.
2. **Create tableaux (physical still images)** of Mark's experiences. Image work may be literal or symbolic, may depict actual events from the piece or imaginary ones, and may also focus on different points of view. Students may then select characters from the images to interview (characters may be played by students or teacher). Soundtracks can be added, or images can be brought to life and acted out.
3. **Group forms two lines to create a path for Mark** (played by teacher or student) as he leaves for California. As he passes through, individuals offer a piece of advice. Alternately, or in addition, individuals can provide voices in the head, speaking as his family, friends, acquaintances or Mark's personal thoughts at that time.
4. **Create tableaux** or draw a specific scene in the script.
5. **Write captions** for specific images from the video.
6. **Partners or small groups discuss personal experiences** of racism/prejudice or significant decision-making:
  - a. Situations are selected and played as forum theatre improvisations, in which other members of the group can take on the role of the main character and experiment with different ways the scene could have been handled or occurred.
  - b. For each story, two or more students separately create (using other students as actors, if necessary) a tableau that represents the way they picture or imagine the situation. The images are then shown and compared.
7. **In pairs, students take turns interviewing each other** as characters from the piece.
8. **A Day in the Life:** small groups prepare active scenes or tableaux to show all of the events of a significant day, building a chronological sequence toward the important moment (i.e. Black Tuesday, the day a dust storm hits, etc.).
9. **Students draw or make a collage** showing the themes and issues of the piece and/or how the piece made them feel.
10. **Read and discuss selections** from other first person perspectives or fictional accounts of the Depression/Dust Bowl experience (see reading list).
11. Students physically **create a Hooverville**.

12. **Write a monologue or dialogue** and/or act out a scene from the piece focusing on the perspective of character other than Mark.
13. **List items you use** on a daily basis. What would use in their place if you could no longer afford them; what could you do without; what items are necessities; how does this make you feel?
14. **Role play a labor scenario:** divide the participants into groups representing Bankers, Growers, Workers and Union Activists. How do different numbers of people affect the power; who is in control at what point; what nonviolent actions are possible; why do labor struggles become violent?
15. **Trace Route 66:** Do an adventure story on the road. Depict the story in cartoons or tableaux, or stage scenes of adventure along Route 66. How long did it take? Find photos or images of sights between Oklahoma and California on Route 66.
16. **Find folk songs from the era.** Write your own. Write a song for Mark or Fred or Will, or one of the other characters. How do stories become important in folk songs?
17. **Research WPA works in your area.** Who does this work now?
18. **Discuss difference between “hobo” and “bum”.** How does community become significant during hard times?

# Journey From The Dust

## SUGGESTED READING

### HISTORY:

The invisible scar

Caroline Bird

*anecdotal history of the (primarily urban) Depression experience*

Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the Children at Weedpatch Camp

Jerry Stanley

*young people's experience in the government workers' camps in California*

The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road

John Steinbeck

*journalistic/real life inspiration for The Grapes of Wrath*

Grand Coulee Dam: the biggest man-made structure of all time

*fact-filled publicity from the 1940's*

The Great Depression: an eyewitness history

David Burg

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?: The Great Depression 1929-1933

Milton Meltzer

An Album of the Great Depression

William Katz

The Dust Bowl: Disaster on the Plains

Tricia Andryszewski

### ORAL HISTORIES:

A Land So Fair and Bright: the true story of a young man's adventures across Depression America

Russ Hofvendahl

*very colorful autobiographical account of riding the rails*

Dust Bowl Diary

Ann Marie Lowe

*real life diary of young farm woman*

"We had everything but money:" love and sharing saw America's families through the Great Depression

ed. Deb Mulvey

**FICTION:**

Out of the Dust

Karen Hesse

*beautiful poetic story of a young piano-playing Oklahoma farm girl*

Hard times: a story of the great Depression

Nancy Antle

*simple historical fiction about a young harmonica-playing boy in Oklahoma*

Tracks

Clayton Bess

*two brothers riding the rails and becoming a part of the hobo culture*

The Coming Home Cafe

Gayle Peerson

*young people riding the rails and looking for work*

Treasures in the Dust

Tracey Porter

*story of two best friends separated when one girl's family leaves Oklahoma for California*

A Time of Troubles

Pieter von Raven

*migration to California, union action*

The Bittersweet Time

Jean Sparks Ducey