

20th
Century
Series

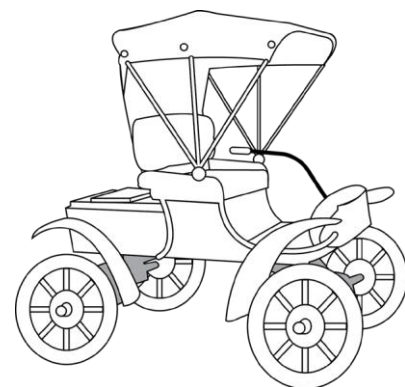
GREAT DEPRESSION READER'S THEATER



A 5-ACT PLAY
FOR MIDDLE GRADE
STUDENTS

Act I: “Buy Now, Pay Later”

Narrator #1: Production of supplies during World War I helped boost the economy, or money system, in the United States. The decade that followed the war, often called “The Roaring 20’s”, was a period of prosperity in America, where life got better for many people.



Customer: (*Excitedly*) This is it! This is the car I’ve been looking for.

Salesman: That’s Ford’s Model T- an excellent choice, sir! It’s very popular right now.

Customer: (*Amazed*) You can say that again! Three families living on my street have bought one just in the last couple of months!

Salesman: (*Nodding*) Henry Ford has turned a luxury item into one that many Americans can afford, thanks to the assembly line. And we have a great deal going on for families looking to buy using an installment plan.

Customer: (*Confused*) What do you mean, “installment plan?”

Salesman: You don’t have to pay the entire cost of the vehicle up front. We call it the “Buy Now, Pay Later” plan!

Customer: (*Thinking*) That sounds like what we did for our band-new electric refrigerator. Instead of paying for the whole thing at once, we make a payment each month. We do owe a little more that way, but it’s worth it. They called it “buying on credit.”

Salesman: Same concept! So, what else do I have to do to put you in this car today?

Customer: Nothing. (*Reaching out for a handshake*) I’ll take it!

Narrator #1: In the 1920’s, the economy was driven by consumer spending for several reasons. First, people had jobs and, as a result, money to spend. Second, financing was more readily available for middle-class Americans. Lastly, there were improved products such as automobiles, refrigerators, and washing machines, which made life easier for consumers.

Fan #1: I can’t wait to go to this baseball game! The Philadelphia Phillies vs. The New York Yankees... Should be a good one!

Act I: “Buy Now, Pay Later”

Fan #2: It really is great that we get to go. We don't even have to sneak in this time! (*Holding up tickets*) My dad really came through with these tickets for a birthday gift!

Fan #1: (*Teasing*) Yeah, it's too bad you have to watch my Phillies destroy your Yankees.

Fan #2: Yeah right! I bet Babe Ruth hits two homeruns today. (*Practicing swing*) Just watch!

Fan #1: (*Nodding*) It's definitely possible. “The Great Bambino” is the best player in baseball. He might even set the homerun record one day.

Fan #2: But the Yankees aren't a one-man show! Lou Gehrig has been crushing it, too. Their lineup is unstoppable!

Fan #1: (*Tiredly*) Alright, calm down... They haven't even played the game yet, and you're already counting it as a win. Let's head out for Yankee Stadium!

Narrator #1: Products of the 1920's helped save time for many families. As a result, they had more time to enjoy leisurely activities. This included going to baseball games, which became “The National Pastime.” Babe Ruth was the best player during this decade, and was one of the first athletes to gain celebrity status for his accomplishments. For most middle-class Americans, life was good in the Roaring 20's.

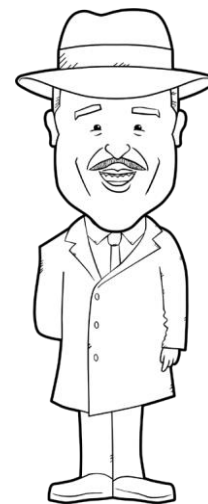


Discussion Questions

1. What were the Roaring 20's?
2. How were families able to afford products during this decade?
3. What do you like to do with your free time?

Act II: The Harlem Renaissance

Narrator #2: In the 1920's, there was a major African-American cultural movement within a neighborhood in New York City, which was called the Harlem Renaissance. There was an explosion of impressive work done during this time period, including in literature.



Father: I'm glad you came down to Mexico to visit me, Langston. It's been so long since we've seen each other.

Langston Hughes: (*Bitterly*) You can say that again.

Father: (*Confused*) What's on your mind?

Langston Hughes: It hasn't been easy, you know. Growing up without a father in my life. (*Pauses*) I'm lucky to have mother, though.

Father: She's done an excellent job raising you, I have no doubt. (*Changing subject*) But what are your plans moving forward?

Langston Hughes: What do you mean?

Father: What I mean is that it isn't easy for an African-American man to make it in this world, so you need to go into a reliable profession to support a family.

Langston Hughes: (*Lacking confidence*) Well, you know that I've always enjoyed writing...

Father: (*Seriously*) Yes, but that's a hobby, Langston, not a profession.

Langston Hughes: (*Becoming defensive*) And how do you know that? Times are changing. For example, in Harlem, blacks are doing incredible things. And I want to be a part of it!

Narrator #2: Hughes moved to New York City and added to the Harlem Renaissance, writing about his personal experiences as an African-American. He also proved his father wrong by becoming one of the first full-time, professional writers in America. Music was a large part of the Harlem Renaissance, too.

Band Member: (*Walking off stage*) What a performance! The crowd was going crazy!

Louis Armstrong: (*Confidently*) We were smooth up there, that's for sure.

Act II: The Harlem Renaissance

Band Member: (*Shaking head, laughing*) I've got to admit, you caught me a little off-guard there in the middle when you went and did your own thing. But I knew we just had to get out of the way and let you go to work!

Louis Armstrong: (*Excitedly*) I was just feeling it! Music doesn't always have to follow a script. It should be from the heart.

Band Member: Well, whatever you did, the people loved it. We're going to be booked throughout New York City for months!

Louis Armstrong: I sure hope so... There's nothing I love more than playing that trumpet up on stage.

Band Member: (*Humbly*) Say, do you think you could teach me some of that stuff you were playing?

Louis Armstrong: (*Nodding*) I can try, but it's difficult to explain. It's more of a feeling.

Band Member: I appreciate it. We're lucky to have you in the band!

Narrator #2: Louis Armstrong exploded onto the scene in the 1920's as part of the growing craze of jazz music sweeping the country. He was part of the Harlem Renaissance, playing in New York but eventually traveling all around the world as a solo artist. The Harlem Renaissance was an important part of the Roaring 20's.



Discussion Questions

1. What was the Harlem Renaissance and how was it connected to the Roaring 20's?
2. Compare and contrast Langston Hughes and Louis Armstrong.
3. What is your favorite type of music and why?

Act III: The Stock Market Crashes

Narrator #3: The stock market is a way for people to invest their money in companies in the hopes of gaining more money. During the Roaring 20's, the stock market was booming, and people were making tons of money. But that all changed on Tuesday, October 29, 1929.



Stock Broker: *(Talking over a phone call)* Excuse me, sir. This is your stock broker calling from New York City.

Investor: *(Happily)* It's great to hear from you! How much money am I making today?

Stock Broker: *(Nervously)* Have you not been watching the news?

Investor: *(Confused)* No, I've been at work. Why?

Stock Broker: *(Upset)* The market has crashed! It's down over 10 percent already. *(Pauses)* As a result, we're calling because we need all of our clients to pay back the loans they used to buy their stocks.

Investor: *(Awkwardly)* Well, I don't have all of the money right now.

Stock Broker: *(Shocked)* What do you mean?

Investor: I bought those stocks with the loans you gave me, and I was just going to pay it back with the profits I made. But based on what you're telling me, I've lost most of my money! *(Panicking)* What am I going to do?!

Stock Broker: *(Seriously)* In that case, we're going to have to sell your stocks to try to recover a small amount of the money you owe us. Goodbye.

Narrator #3: In the 1920's, many people "bought on margin" with stocks, using loans to make their purchases in the hopes of getting rich quick. When the market crashed, many people panicked, and life savings were gone in a matter of minutes. This would start a chain of events that destroyed the economy.

Banker: *(Looking exhausted)* How can I help you today, sir?

Customer: *(Impatiently)* About time! I've been waiting in this line for hours!

Act III: The Stock Market Crashes

Banker: *(Trying to be polite)* I apologize for your wait. We've been quite busy this morning.

Customer: It would seem so. *(Pauses)* Anyway, I'm here to make a withdraw.

Banker: *(Under his breathe)* You and everybody else. *(To customer)* How much will you be taking out of your account today, sir?



Customer: *(Crossing arms)* All of it.

Banker: I'm sorry. I'm not sure I heard you correctly. I thought that you said "all of it."

Customer: *(Nodding)* That's right. I want every penny I have in my savings account right now. I have a payment on my car coming up and owe money to my stock broker.

Banker: *(Checking paper)* Well, the thing is sir, you have a rather large account, and... we don't have all the cash right at this very moment.

Customer: *(Angrily)* What do you mean that you don't have my money?! The stock market crashed, and I lost a ton of money. And I have bills to pay!

Banker: *(Wiping forehead)* You see, we don't have a huge safe in the back with everyone's money. We invest it and loan it out to people, which is how we make money...

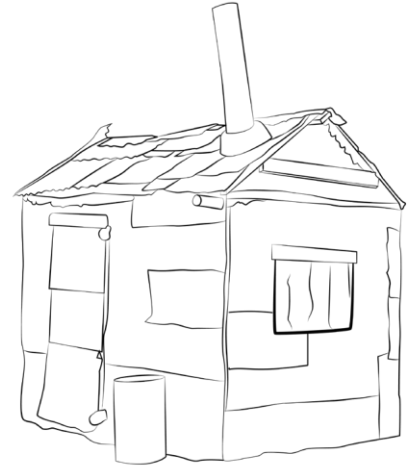
Narrator #3: After the stock market crash, there were "runs" on banks. This is when a bunch of people panicked and demanded all their money back from the bank at the same time. But the banks didn't always have their money! In 1929, over 600 banks closed, and thousands of people lost their entire life savings. The Great Depression had officially begun.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain how people lost money in the stock market in 1929.
2. What is a "run" on a bank, and how did they create issues?
3. How did people panic in 1929?

Act IV: Life During the Depression

Narrator #4: The stock market crash in 1929 is usually considered the start of the Great Depression. This was the worst economic slump in U.S. history, where most Americans struggled. Many people lost their jobs, and as a result, homelessness rose to new levels.



Hobo #1: (*With curiosity*) Where are you headed, if you don't mind me asking?

Hobo #2: Out West. I heard a rumor that there was work out there picking fruit or something.

Hobo #1: (*Surprised*) Our West? You mean like, California?

Hobo #2: (*Nodding*) That's right.

Hobo #1: But that's over a thousand miles away! How are you going to get there?

Hobo #2: I'll ride the rails. It won't be easy... I've heard that companies have been hiring men to make sure people can't just hop on the trains anymore. But I'm going to take my chances. I have to find work so that I can feed my family.

Hobo #1: (*Nodding*) I know how you feel. My wife and son are in a Hooverville right now. But they're with some good people that I know. Once I find a job, I'll send for them to join me.

Hobo #2: (*Confused*) Hooverville? Is that like a shantytown?

Hobo #1: That's right. It's a small little village with houses made of cardboard and other scraps that the homeless have made to survive. And they named them after President Herbert Hoover, the guy who let this all happen!

Narrator #4: Hoovervilles sprang up around the country as the homeless population grew. People traveled around on trains in the hopes of finding work. But life wasn't always better out West, especially in states like Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

Farmer #1: (*Looking up at the sky*) I think today might be the day! (*Pointing*) That cloud right there looks like it has some rain in it.

Act IV: Life During the Depression

Farmer #2: (*Shaking head*) I've been trying to tell you not to get your hopes up. Hasn't rained for weeks, and it won't today, either.

Farmer #1: (*Shrugging shoulders*) You never know. Our crops need it bad, though.

Farmer #2: (*Grimacing*) You can say that again. I think they're almost done for.

Farmer #1: I sure hope not. Without our crops, we'll starve!

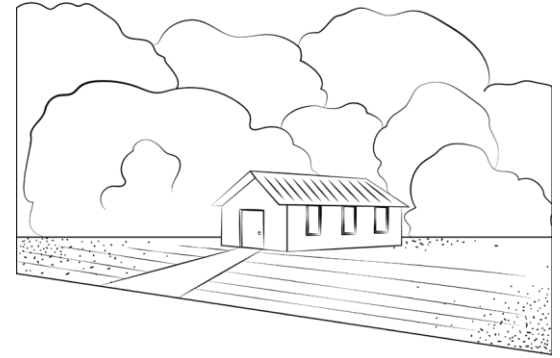
Farmer #2: Better start eating less now, then, so there's enough food for the winter.

Farmer #1: (*Looking out to horizon*) What's that look like, way out there?

Farmer #2: (*Worriedly*) Looks like another dust storm brewing. Better go back to our homes and get ready! Don't forget to put those wet rags underneath your door to keep the dirt out.

Farmer #1: (*Sadly*) Let's face it, there's no keeping the dirt out. Last week I found some in my underwear drawer!

Narrator #4: In the 1930's, the Southern plains in America experienced a serious drought. Since the land was overused to begin with, huge dust storms took place, devastating crops. The area became known as the Dust Bowl, and added to the problems of the Great Depression.

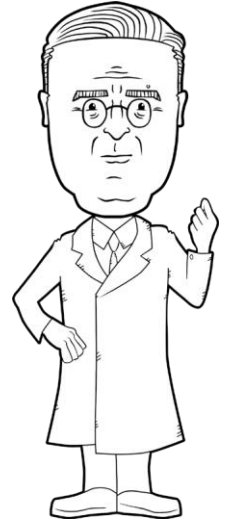


Discussion Questions

1. What was a Hooverville? Why were they common in the 1930's?
2. What was life like in the Dust Bowl area of America?
3. What personality traits would help someone make it through during the Great Depression?

Act V: The New Deal

Narrator #4: President Herbert Hoover was an extremely unpopular president, so it was no surprise that his opponent, Franklin D. Roosevelt (“FDR”), won the Election of 1932 in a landslide. FDR created an aggressive plan to help Americans struggling during the Great Depression.



Franklin D. Roosevelt: (*Seriously*) Now that the campaign is over and I am officially president, the real work begins. We must develop a complete plan to assist people in need.

Adviser #1: The banks are in dire need of help. And they are an important part of making our country run smoothly.

Adviser #2: (*Nodding*) I agree with that. We need to make sure Americans regain their confidence in our banking system. But how?

Franklin D. Roosevelt: One of my ideas is to shut down the banks so that people can no longer get their money out... All of this panic is just creating more issues. We'll call it a “Banking Holiday.”

Adviser #3: (*Optimistically*) Genius! I bet when it's over, people return the cash they've stuffed under their mattresses.

Adviser #1: (*Quietly*) Or freezer. That's where I keep mine.

Adviser #2: (*Rolling eyes*) We need to make sure that banks are regulated more, too.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: (*Calmly*) Without a doubt. Which is why I want to decide which banks are healthy enough to open. I also think we should create a law that guarantees the money people put in banks, up to a certain amount.

Adviser #2: That should definitely improve confidence in the banks.

Adviser #3: What about getting people back to work? Most people are willing to do whatever it takes to make a living, but there just aren't any jobs!

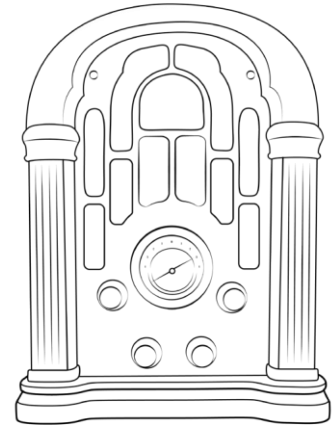
Franklin D. Roosevelt: I have a few ideas for programs that will put people back to work.

Adviser #1: Excellent! We need to make sure that we support farmers. Prices have been so low that they've really been struggling.

Act V: The New Deal

Franklin D. Roosevelt: Don't worry, the programs will target many different industries, from farming, to manufacturing, to energy. (*Pauses*) But I'm going to need help from Congress. I can introduce laws, but Congress must pass them.

Adviser #2: (*Shrugging shoulders*) They know that if things don't improve, they'll be voted out of office the next time they're up for re-election. They'll pass these laws out of desperation.



Franklin D. Roosevelt: (*Thinking*) Maybe so, but I don't want to take any chances.

Adviser #3: What if you spoke directly to the American people? If you get them on board, then their representatives will have to listen!

Adviser #1: That's a good idea! You could communicate through the radio...

Franklin D. Roosevelt: I like it. We could call them something casual... like "fireside chats." The American people need to know that their government is on their side, and I want them to understand how we're going to get things back on track.

Narrator #5: The laws that FDR introduced were quickly passed in Congress in what became known as the "First Hundred Days." His programs were called the "New Deal" and were largely successful, while his fireside chats helped reassure the American people. However, it would take World War II to get America fully out of the Great Depression.

Discussion Questions

1. How did FDR help improve the banking situation in America?
2. What was the goal of "fireside chats"?
3. How do leaders communicate with citizens in modern times?