

Learning STAGE

JAN 2016
VOLUME VII, ISSUE 6



MOTHER HICKS

By Suzan Zeder

In this issue:

Page 2

The World in 1935
The Great Depression

Page 3

Children and Youth in the 1930's
Orphans and Foster Care in the 1930's
Teenage Hoboes

Page 4

The WPA: Works Progress Administration
The Ware Trilogy

THE WORLD IN 1935

Mother Hicks is set in 1935, during a time in American history known as the “Great Depression.” Here are some things you may and may not know about that year in history. Search the listed websites to learn more.

- The “Black Sunday” dust storm blew into the eastern Oklahoma panhandle with winds of 40 miles per hour, rolling across Oklahoma and Texas with a wall of dust that resembled a land-based tsunami.
www.srh.noaa.gov
- Amelia Earhart became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean, from Hawaii to California.
www.xroads.virginia.edu
- The book publisher Penguin produced the first paperback books, making reading more accessible and affordable. **www.thepeoplehistory.com**
- The national debt rose to more than 30 billion dollars. www.fsmitha.com
- Nuremberg Race Laws were established in Germany, one of the first statutes implemented by the Nazi party to deny human rights to Jewish persons. **www.hsc.edu**
- Italian dictator Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, then known as Abyssinia. Italy used mustard gas on the soldiers of Abyssinia, violating the Geneva Protocol of 1925. This resulted in 15,000 casualties. **www.sipri.org**
- *It Happened One Night* won Best Picture at the Academy Awards, and Shirley Temple was given a Special Award for the film *Bright Eyes*. **www.xroads.virginia.edu**
- George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* debuted on Broadway, featuring the revolutionary casting of an all-African American cast of classically-trained singers. **www.xroads.virginia.edu**

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

“The Great Depression” of the 1930’s was the deepest and longest lasting economic downturn in the history of the Western industrialized world. Many who invested in the stock market did so with borrowed money. When the market crashed in 1929, these investors and businesses were completely ruined.

People began to spend less money, and without consumer spending, there was no need to produce goods. As industries failed due to lack of sales, workers were laid off. In 1933, 24.75% of the American workforce was unemployed. (See **www.history.com**)

As the dust storms destroyed farms throughout the Great Plains, many families migrated west. Destitute families lived in junk-built shanty towns that they called “Hoovervilles” to shame Herbert Hoover, who was president of the United States from 1929 to 1933 at the beginning of the Great Depression. Hoover believed the government should not help people directly by creating jobs or providing economic relief. His critics considered him indifferent to human suffering. In the 1932 presidential election, Hoover was soundly defeated by Franklin D. Roosevelt with 472 electoral votes to Hoover’s 59.

When “FDR” took office in 1933, he immediately established plans to address the economic turmoil. In FDR’s first hundred days in office, legislation was passed to stabilize agricultural and industrial production, create jobs, and stimulate recovery. The economy would not fully recover until 1939, when World War II increased the need for industries to produce supplies for the war effort. (See **www.dol.gov**)



CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE 1930's

Thousands of schools had to close due to lack of funds. Close to three million youth had to leave school. In some coal mining regions, many children went without proper shoes or warm clothing for winter, and as many as 90% were malnourished (See <http://newdeal.feri.org>)

With little to no money for entertainment, some children were still able to do “kid things,” even without proper clothing, food, or education. Kids enjoyed such schoolyard games as marbles, hopscotch, and “crack the whip.” They would also go fishing, have snowball fights, catch lightning bugs, and play new board games like Scrabble and Monopoly.



ORPHANS AND FOSTER CARE IN THE 1930's

In 1933, 120,000 children needed foster care. (See <http://ic.galegroup.com>) Ailing families would use foster homes and orphanages to care for their children, hoping to be reunited one day. The need for homes for orphans and foster kids was far greater than what was available.

Labor organizers would round up orphans and move them to rural farms, where they did the work of grown men in exchange for room and board, essentially laboring as indentured servants. Orphaned children who endured these situations often found themselves desperate as they grew to adulthood. Some went on to lead productive lives, but many ran away from the farms as they became teenagers, only to be faced with few options. Some turned to armed robbery and prostitution. Others chased work across the country as “hoboes,” a term used at the time to describe homeless people.

TEENAGE HOBOES

It is estimated that during the Great Depression, 250,000 young people were homeless, with many traveling by train or hitchhiking across the country to find work (See <http://newdeal.feri.org>)

Though illegal and dangerous, traveling by freight train was the most efficient way to crisscross the country in order to follow the harvests and find work on farms. The railroads hired “bulls,” brutal guards whose job was to assure only paying customers rode the trains. The teens would hide along the railroad tracks, run beside the train as it gained speed, grab hold to a railing, and hope to make it into an open box car. Sometimes they missed, losing a leg or meeting a gruesome end. (See <http://erroluys.com>)

By 1932, the “roving boy” was a common sight. Girls often traveled with male friends and disguised themselves in boy’s clothing. The danger was especially high for young African Americans, who never knew if the train would lead them to a town where the color of their skin would make them outcasts. These teens were chronically undernourished, and struggled to fight off illness. A perceived element of adventure existed, but most of these teenagers led perilous lives.



THE WPA: WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

The WPA was one of many relief programs created by FDR to put unemployed Americans to work. Able-bodied blue-collar workers embarked on a variety of projects, such as the construction of highways, bridges, schools, hospitals, playgrounds, and airports. While the WPA provided jobs for thousands of Americans, some people, like Jake Hammond in *Mother Hicks*, decried the “handouts” that WPA workers received from the government while they themselves struggled to earn a living independently.

One branch of the WPA was the Federal Writers Project (FWP), created to employ white-collar workers such as writers, historians, editors, journalists, and artists. *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Projects* was compiled and transcribed by the staff of the Folklore Project. Much of the original material on which playwright Suzan Zeder based *Mother Hicks* came from the WPA archives and publications. The name of the character Faye Cooper-Cole (or Wilson Walker if played as a man) is listed in the records as a WPA writer.

These interviewers collected oral histories throughout the United States in regions previously ignored. Participants would tell stories of meeting Billy the Kid, surviving the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, journeying out west, encountering gangs in New York and Chicago, laboring in factories, and experiencing America as recent immigrants.

Without the benefit of tape recorders, the writers learned to listen for speech patterns, accents, language and expression to help recall the stories from their notes. They recorded both rural and urban accounts, traditions of ethnic groups, customs for planting, cooking and recipes, marriage and death records, and celebrations. Among the topics the WPA researched were folk traditions surrounding witchcraft. See <http://www.loc.gov> and <http://historymatters.gmu.edu> for more information about the WPA.

THE WARE TRILOGY

Mother Hicks is one of three plays by Suzan Zeder that are known collectively as *The Ware Trilogy*. BYU will present the prequel, *The Taste of Sunrise*, March 10-26. UVU will be presenting a student-directed production of the sequel, *The Edge of Peace*, this spring. For more information about *The Ware Trilogy*, go to <http://noordatheatrecenter.com>.



Works Consulted, for Additional Reading:

Clement, Priscilla Ferguson and Jacqueline S. Reinier *Boyhood in America: An Encyclopedia*, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006
Askeland, Lori ed. *Children and Youth in Adoption, Orphanages, and Foster Care: a Historical Handbook and Guide*. Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Minehan, Thomas. *Boy and Girl Tramps of America*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.

Uys, Errol Lincoln. *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move during the Great Depression*. New York: TV Books, 1999.

CREDITS

Learning Stage is published by the Noorda Theatre Center for Children and Youth at UVU. This issue was guest edited by Noorda Center Outreach Coordinator Kynsie Kiggins under the direction of Dr. John Newman. Graphic design by Kenwood Huh.