



▲ *The Wizard of Oz's* Dorothy, Tin Man, and Scarecrow

WITNESS HISTORY

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow"

Americans eager to escape the gloom of the depression regularly sought refuge in the fantasy world presented by the movies. One of their favorites was *The Wizard of Oz*, which opened in 1939. In an early scene, the farm girl Dorothy sings of better times:

“Somewhere over the rainbow

Way up high,
There's a land that I've heard of
Once in a lullaby.

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.

Some day I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me.
Where troubles melt like lemon drops
Away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me.”

—“Over the Rainbow,” E. Y. Harburg, 1939

Culture of the 1930s

Objectives

- Trace the growth of radio and the movies in the 1930s and the changes in popular culture.
- Describe the major themes of literature in the New Deal era.

Terms and People

Frank Capra
Federal Art Project
mural

Dorothea Lange
John Steinbeck
Lillian Hellman

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas and Details Complete a table like the one below to record examples of cultural or popular media.

Cultural or Popular Media	Example
Movies	

Why It Matters Mass entertainment, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, flourished during the New Deal years as Americans sought escape from the worries of the depression. And, for the first time, the government played an active role in the arts, creating programs that put artists to work. It was a golden age for entertainment, and the movies, music, and works of literature produced during this era hold a unique place in American culture. **Section Focus Question:** How did the men and women of the depression find relief from their hardships in the popular culture?

Movies and Radio Captivate Americans

Entertainment became big business during the 1930s. Large radio networks, such as NBC and CBS, were broadcasting giants while a cluster of film companies—including MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, and Paramount—dominated the silver screen. By 1935, two in three homes owned a radio; by the end of the decade, about nine in ten did. In 1939, nearly two thirds of all Americans attended at least one movie a week. Stars in both industries made fortunes and attracted loyal followings. Glossy fan magazines tracked the stars' personal and professional lives.

Enjoying Escapism Above all, when Americans went to the movies during the Great Depression, they did so as a means of escapism. They sought relief from their concerns through a good laugh, a good cry, a lyrical song, or by seeing good triumph over evil. *The Wizard of Oz*, one of the most memorable depression-era films, delivered all four. It promised weary audiences that their dreams really would come true.

The big movie studios churned out musicals, romantic comedies, and gangster films. Children marveled at the colorful animation of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. For a good scare, teens and young adults flocked to *Frankenstein*. Adults watched dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers glide effortlessly across the ballroom floor in *Top Hat*. And millions wept as they watched the stormy love affair between Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in the Civil War epic *Gone With the Wind*.

Providing Social Commentary In the early 1930s, many films reflected the public's distrust of big business and government. Gangster movies, such as *Public Enemy* starring James Cagney, were very popular. These films showed a declining faith in government and law enforcement, with characters turning to crime to survive the depression. But as the New Deal restored confidence, the government regained its glow, and movies began portraying government officials as heroes. In 1935, Cagney portrayed an FBI agent who captured the bad guys in *G-Men*.

Other films focused on the strength of average Americans. Director **Frank Capra** was a leader of this genre. The characters in his films were everyday people struggling with the hardships of the time. In Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, actor James Stewart plays a junior senator who fights against the greed and corruption he finds in the nation's capital. Depression-era audiences cheered Capra's films, which celebrate American idealism and the triumph of the common man over the forces of adversity.

Radio's Golden Age The success of the movie industry was matched by that of radio. The national radio networks broadcast popular shows starring comedians such as Bob Hope and Jack Benny. Americans avidly followed soap operas,

Radio Captures the Nation

Americans united in their love for the radio and its stars, including mainstays George Burns and Gracie Allen (below).



Vocabulary Builder

episode—(EHP uh sohhd) *n.* television or radio program that is one of a series of programs telling one story

Funding the Arts

The Federal Art Project poster (below) promotes an exhibition of works by WPA artists. William Gropper's mural, *Construction of a Dam*, was a tribute to the strength and dignity of labor inspired by the construction of two western dams.



variety shows, and humorists, such as Will Rogers. Dramatic shows were also popular. *The Lone Ranger* started its run in 1933 and ran for more than 20 years. The detective serial *The Shadow* began each thrilling **episode** with the haunting line, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

In addition to providing entertainment, the family radio provided information. FDR used his fireside chats to explain and promote his New Deal programs. Newscasters delivered the daily news and political commentary.

On at least one occasion, radio listeners had a hard time recognizing the difference between news and entertainment. It happened on the night of October 30, 1938, when millions of Americans tuned in to a drama called *War of the Worlds*, directed by Orson Welles. The Mercury Theatre broadcast was so realistic that many people believed that Martians were actually invading. Panic gripped areas of the country until announcers insisted that it was all make-believe.

Swinging to the Sounds of the Era Like films and radio shows, music provided a diversion from hard times. Whether listening to the radio at home or dancing in nightclubs, Americans enjoyed the popular music of the day. "Swing" music played by "big bands" topped the charts. Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, and Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey were some of the top swing musicians, a term probably derived from Ellington's tune "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing." *Your Hit Parade* and *Make Believe Ballroom*—the program that introduced disc jockeys—were just two of the radio shows that brought the latest tunes to listeners. The most popular vocalist of the era was Bing Crosby.

Latin music was very popular. The rhythms of the rumba and the samba had a special appeal for dancers, and Latin bands were prominently featured in films and on the radio. Folk and ethnic music also gained a following during the 1930s. Black singers focused on the harsh conditions faced by African Americans. Huddie Ledbetter, a folk singer known as Leadbelly, described experiences of African Americans with the songs "Cotton Fields" and "The Midnight Special." Woody Guthrie wrote ballads about the Okies, farmers who fled Dust Bowl states and headed to California. Guthrie's song "Dust Bowl Refugee" helped listeners understand the Okies' plight.

✓ **Checkpoint** What were some of the most important popular cultural trends of the 1930s?

The New Deal and the Arts

During the New Deal, the federal government provided funding for the arts for the first time in American history. Recognizing that many artists and writers faced dire circumstances, WPA administrator Harry Hopkins established a special branch of the WPA to provide artists with work. Programs such as the **Federal Art Project**, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Theater Project offered a variety of job opportunities to artists.

In federally funded theaters, musicians and actors staged performances that were often free to the public. In a series of new state guidebooks, WPA writers recorded the history and folklore of the nation. Artists painted huge, dramatic **murals** on public buildings across the nation. These paintings celebrated the accomplishments of the workers who helped build the nation. Many of the murals can still be seen in public buildings today.

Photographers also benefited from federal arts programs. The Resettlement and Farm Security Administration (FSA) sought to document the plight of America's farmers. Roosevelt's top aide, Rexford Tugwell, told the head of the FSA, "Show the city people what it's like to live on the farm." Walker Evans and **Dorothea Lange** were among the FSA photographers who created powerful images of impoverished farmers and migrant workers, including Lange's famous photo "Migrant Mother."

Primary Source "When Dorothea took that picture that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it. . . . She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage."

—Roy Stryker, FSA, on Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother"

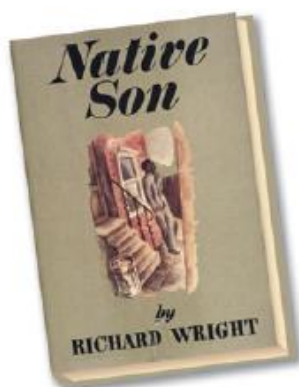
Some members of Congress attacked the Federal Art programs for promoting radical values. Congressman J. Parnell Thomas described the Federal Writers' and Theater projects as "a hotbed for Communists." Eleanor Roosevelt and others defended the Federal Art programs on the grounds that they did not "believe in censoring anything." Nonetheless, congressional support for the programs declined. Although the Federal Art programs ceased to exist in the early 1940s, they set a precedent for further federal funding of the arts and humanities in the 1960s.

✓ **Checkpoint** In what ways did the New Deal support American arts?

California

One of several WPA murals in San Francisco's Coit Tower, *California* was painted by Maxine Albro, an artist who painted many scenes of Mexican life after studying with noted Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.





Native Son

Richard Wright's novel about the psychological pressures that lead a young black man to commit murder sold more than 200,000 copies in one month. During the 1930s, the author worked as a writer and editor for the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago.

The Literature of the Depression

The literature of the 1920s, from authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, sometimes overshadowed the literature of the 1930s. Still, the depression era produced some memorable works.

During the depression, many writers drifted to the left and crafted novels featuring working-class heroes. They believed that the American economic system no longer worked and they blamed this failure on political and business leaders. Many artists of the 1930s saw "ordinary Americans" as the best hope for a better day.

The most famous novel of the 1930s was **John Steinbeck's** *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck follows the fictional Joad family from their home in Oklahoma, which has been ravaged by Dust Bowl conditions, to California, where they hope to build a better life. But instead of the Promised Land, the Joads encounter exploitation, disease, hunger, and political corruption.

African American writers captured the special plight of blacks, facing both the depression and continuing prejudice. Richard Wright's *Native Son* explored racial prejudice in a northern urban setting. Wright was an outspoken critic of racial discrimination.

In New York, some important playwrights had their first successes during the New Deal period. **Lillian Hellman**, a New Orleans native, wrote several plays featuring strong roles for women. Hellman's plays *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Watch on the Rhine* are also notable for their socially conscious subject matter. Clifford Odets was another dramatist who achieved prominence in the 1930s. His plays *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* chronicle the struggles of the working class during the Great Depression.

On a lighter note, many Americans devoured comic strips and comic books during the 1930s. Among the most popular comic strips were *Flash Gordon*, a science-fiction saga; *Dick Tracy*, a detective story; and *Superman*, the first great "superhero" comic. The success of *Superman*, which began in 1938, quickly led to a radio show and later to a popular television series and several feature films. *Superman* reassured Americans that ordinary citizens, like mild-mannered Clark Kent, could overcome evil.

 **Checkpoint** Describe the most notable works of literature of the 1930s.

SECTION 4 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
www.pearsonschool.com/ushist

Comprehension

1. Terms and People For each item below, write a sentence explaining how it affected the people of the era.

- *The Wizard of Oz*
- Frank Capra
- *War of the Worlds*
- Federal Art Project

2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:

Identify Main Ideas and Details

Use your table to answer the Section Focus Question: How did the men and women of the depression find relief from their hardships in the popular culture?

Writing About History

3. Quick Write: Make Generalizations

Compare *The Wizard of Oz* and *War of the Worlds*. Write a few sentences describing how both were escapist fare that helped people forget their troubles.

Critical Thinking

4. Make Generalizations What values did the movies and other popular entertainment of the depression reinforce for Americans?

5. Identify Effects How did federal support of the arts benefit both artists and the public?

6. Identify Point of View How did the work of New Deal era artists and writers contribute to our appreciation today of the New Deal?