

Folk in the History Classroom: Using the Music of the People to Teach Eras and Events

Michael G. Lovorn

Social studies content is more meaningful to students when they can empathize with the people they study. Such empathy can be fostered via content material that is presented in a relevant, emotional, intimate, and even entertaining manner. Folk music offers this type of creative and constructive approach.

The elementary school classroom is the opportune place to introduce the stories of ordinary folks, whose experiences are traditionally underrepresented in textbooks and state standards. Connections between history and folk music are common and quite natural. Each period in American history has had its descriptive folk songs and notable artists. From traditional colonial tunes, such as “Yankee Doodle” and “The Girl I Left behind Me”, to the memorable melodies of Stephen Foster (“Oh! Susanna” and “Camptown Races”), the story of America’s early days is well documented in song. African American spirituals, stirring Civil War battle cries, and lonely cowboy yodels describe nineteenth-century life through a variety of perspectives. In the twentieth century, folk artists chronicled events such as the world wars, the Great Depression, union activities, and the civil rights movement. This tradition is alive and well, as evidenced by the multitude of folk festivals that take place annually across the United States.

Many historic events could not be adequately presented without a variety of perspectives, particularly those of ordinary people. The accompanying lesson uses Woody Guthrie’s “Dust Storm Disaster” to study the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Guthrie’s music describes the “Dirty Thirties” from the perspective of folks most affected by this environmental and economic disaster. The working class experience is fundamental to a genuine understanding of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Guthrie’s poignant lyrics provide an intimate picture rarely afforded by the textbook.

I have identified vocabulary terms from Guthrie’s lyrics for the purpose of making language connections to the time and region. These terms are divided into two groups, lesson vocabulary and geography vocabulary, and are identified to direct students’ focus to new terms and places that are integral elements of the activity. Period photographs enrich the activity and heighten students’ visual learning experience.

MICHAEL LOVORN is an assistant professor of history/social studies education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Alabama. He may be reached at mlovorn@bamaed.ua.edu. He would like to express his sincere thanks to Dr. Mary E. Haas, editor of the elementary section of *Social Education*, for her assistance and encouragement in writing this article.



Son of Farmer in Dust Bowl Area by Arthur Rothstein. Available from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.



Farmer and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm by Arthur Rothstein. Available from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

LESSON

Woody Guthrie's "Dust Storm Disaster"

This lesson is appropriate for fourth or fifth grade students and takes about 55 minutes.

Lesson Objectives

1. After viewing and discussing photographs of the Great American Dust Bowl era, students listen to and analyze Woody Guthrie's "Dust Storm Disaster".
2. Working with a partner and independently, students define relevant vocabulary associated with the Dust Bowl.
3. Students place the Dust Bowl era on a timeline of the twentieth century and locate places affected by the Great Dust Storm.
4. Students discuss both short-term and long-term ramifications of the Dust Bowl on the environment, the economy, and the mass migration to California.

Focus Question

What can be learned from photographs and songs of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression era?

NCSS Standard: **III People, Places, and Environments** (Early Grades)

Materials

This lesson requires a combination of rural and urban images of the 1930s that include long unemployment and relief lines, soup kitchens, family life, dust covered farm equipment, and children; Woody Guthrie CD (*Dust Bowl Ballads*); CD player; partially-labeled maps of the United States; Woody Guthrie lyrics handouts; Dust Bowl vocabulary matching handouts; markers, pencils, and paper.

Oratory Introduction Procedures

Invite students to comment on the selected photographs from the Depression/Dust Bowl Era (1930s). Ask students to consider and elaborate on various elements in each photograph—particularly facial expressions or aspects of the clothing, buildings, and setting that provide information about the people's experience. Ask students to comment on or make predictions about the activities in each photograph. Ask students to summarize what they learned from the photographs by listing words that describe the feelings they have toward the scenes and people.

Affirm students' ideas and discuss impacts of the Great Dust Storm of 1935, particularly its effects on the land and the people of the region. Post on the board a list of related vocabulary, people, and locations:

Lesson vocabulary: *alarm, comrade, doom, dreadful, drought, dust storm, foreclosure, Great Depression, huddle, jalopy, knell, migrant farmer, mysterious, nation, oil boom shacks, relief, rippling, sundown, tractor, wheat-fields.*

Geography vocabulary: *Albuquerque, Arizona line, Boot Hill, Clovis, Colorado, Dakota, Denver, Dodge City, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma City, Rio Grande.*

Lesson Development

Tell students they will be listening to a folk song that was recorded before they were born and that music sounded differently then. Explain that folk tunes, in particular, were seldom as polished or refined as the more familiar commercial recordings. Play the first few seconds of the song and then stop. If students show signs of suppressing laughter, allow them to enjoy a good laugh. After a few seconds, they will be able to refocus on the general theme of the lesson.

Number students off (1, 2, 1, 2) to place them in pairs. Explain that each student is to complete the two-sided Dust Bowl handout during the lesson, and one culminating Dust Bowl handout at the end. The two-sided handout is to be done in pairs, and the culminating handout will be done individually.

English language learners may be selectively paired with proficient English speakers, and the teacher may scaffold material by modeling the activity, and gradually leading students to independent work. Vision-challenged students may be provided large-print copies of all lesson materials. Deaf or hearing-impaired students may be provided clearly outlined, labeled handout and image packets. Additionally, the teacher should spend substantial one-on-one time with students to ensure comprehension.

Explain to students that they will be hearing the folk song twice in its entirety. Pass out the two-sided worksheet to each student (pp 175–176). During the first playing, all 1s will work on the map side of the handout. All 2s will work on the lyrics sheet. During the second playing, these assignments will be reversed. After both assignments have been completed, students compare notes and collaborate on both sides of the handout.

Once students complete the collaboration activity and work together to verify answers on the two-sided handout, pass out the vocabulary matching handout (page 178). Students will work on this activity independently, without help from partners or the teacher. Each student demonstrates her/his comprehension of the Dust Bowl by defining new vocabulary and drawing a scene from the 1930s based on her/his perceptions of the time.

Informal assessment is done as the teacher moves around the classroom checking for understanding and randomly asking affirming questions throughout the lesson. Handouts will be collected. The teacher will examine them for accuracy and they will serve as a formal summative assessment.

continued on page 177

Name: _____

The Great American Dust Bowl

We will listen to this song twice. Listen carefully and mark each of the cities and states mentioned in the song. We will stop several times so you can ask questions and complete your answers. When you are finished marking the cities and states, connect the outer marks and shade in the space in the middle. You will have a map of the Great American Dust Bowl of 1935!

Places affected by The Great Dust Storm of 1935

Cities:

- Oklahoma City, OK
- Albuquerque, NM
- Clovis, NM
- Dodge City, KS
- Denver, CO

States:

- Arizona
- Colorado
- Dakota (South Dakota)
- Kansas
- Nebraska
- New Mexico
- Texas

Other Places:

- Rio Grande (River)
- Boot Hill (Cemetery)



Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/united_states.html
 Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Handout 1b

Dust Storm Disaster

We will listen to this song twice. Listen carefully and fill in the blanks using terms from the word bank at the bottom of the page. When we get to the word (STOP!), we will pause for you to ask questions and complete your answers. Have fun! I hope you like the song!

On the fourteenth day of April of 1935, there struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky. You could see that dust storm coming, the cloud looked death-like black. And through our mighty _____, it left a dreadful track. (STOP!)

From Oklahoma City, to the Arizona line, Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio Grande. It fell across our cities, like a curtain of black rolled down. We thought it was our judgment, we thought it was our _____! The radio reported, we listened with alarm to the wild and windy actions of this great, _____ storm. (STOP!)

From Albuquerque and Clovis and all New Mexico, they said it was the blackest, that ever they had saw. From ol' Dodge City, Kansas, the dust had rung their _____, and a few more _____ sleeping, on top of ol' Boot Hill. (STOP!)

From Denver, Colorado, they said it blew so strong, they thought that they could hold out, but they didn't know how long! Our relatives were huddled into their _____ shacks. And the children, they were crying as it whistled through the cracks! And the family, it was crowded, into their little rooms. They thought the world had ended, and they thought it was their doom. (STOP!)

The storm took place at _____, it lasted through the night.

When we looked out next morning, we saw a terrible sight! We saw outside our window, where _____ they had grown, was now a _____ ocean of dust the wind had blown. It covered up our fences, it covered up our barns. It covered up our _____ in this wild and dusty storm! (STOP!)

We loaded our _____ and piled our families in. We rattled down that highway to never come back again. (STOP!)

Word Bank: *alarm • comrades • doom • dreadful • dust storm • huddle • jalopies • knell • mysterious • nation • rippling • oil boom • shacks • sundown • tractors • wheat fields*

Expansion Procedures

Affirm students' vocabulary comprehension by asking review questions. Ask several volunteers to share their drawings and explain the message of the song. Assign students to do further research on significant personalities of the Great Depression era (such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Dorothea Lange, John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and others); older students might investigate the impact of the Dust Bowl on Native Americans in the region (such as the Cherokee in Oklahoma and the Sioux in South Dakota). Students who perform these research activities may present their findings to classmates. Younger students can share a photograph and a two-sentence summary, for instance, while older students can prepare and deliver a brief dramatic presentation.

Conclusion

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "When I hear music . . . I am related to the earliest times, and to the latest." Folk music can serve as a springboard to the study of virtually any period in history. Songs of everyday folks are a colorful way to introduce lifestyles and experiences of these eyewitnesses of history. They enable teachers to effectively teach cultural concepts such as civic ideals, activism, economics, strife, struggle, nationalism and regionalism, and empathy. What's more, folk songs can make the classroom a more inviting and intellectually stimulating learning environment.

RESOURCES

Dust Bowl Resource Websites

The following websites include first-hand accounts, photographs, government documents, and lesson ideas.

- American Memory** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afct.html/tshome.html>
- Digital Classroom** www.archives.gov/education/lessons/depression-wwii.html
- History Matters** historymatters.gmu.edu/
- The New Deal Network** newdeal.feri.org/

Folk Music Websites

The following websites include resources and links for using folk music in the social studies classroom.

- Educational Cyber Playground** www.edu-cyberpg.com/Music/folkmusic.html
- Lesson Planet** www.lessonplanet.com/search/Art_and_Music/Music/Folk_Music
- The Folk File: Links and a Folkie's Dictionary** www.folklib.net
- Native Ground Music** www.nativeground.com/articles.asp
- The Folk Music Index** www.ibiblio.org/keefer/index.htm

Lyrics Sheet

Dust Storm Disaster

by Woody Guthrie (1912–1967)

On the fourteenth day of April of nineteen thirty-five,
there struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky.
You could see that dust storm coming,
The cloud looked death-like black.
And through our mighty nation, it left a dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City, to the Arizona line,
Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio Grande.
It fell across our city, like a curtain of black rolled down.
We thought it was our judgment, we thought it was our
doom.
The radio reported, we listened with alarm,
The wild and windy actions of this great mysterious storm.

From Albuquerque and Clovis and old New Mexico,
They said it was the blackest, that ever they had saw.
In old Dodge City, Kansas, the dust had rung their knell,
And a few more comrades sleeping, on top of old Boot Hill.

From Denver, Colorado, they said it blew so strong,
They thought that they could hold out, but they did not know
how long.
Our relatives were huddled into their oil boom shacks,
And the children they was crying as it whistled through the
cracks.
And the family was crowded, into their little room,
They thought the world had ended, and they thought it was
their doom.

The storm took place at sundown, it lasted through the
night.
When we looked out next morning, we saw a terrible sight.
We saw outside our window, where wheat fields they had
grown,
Was now a rippling ocean of dust the wind had blown.
It covered up our fences, it covered up our barns.
It covered up our tractors in this wild and dusty storm.

We loaded our jalopies and piled our families in.
We rattled down that highway to never come back again.

*Lyrics used with permission from Larry Richmond and
Songways Service Inc.*

The Dust Bowl

Match the terms you have just learned with their correct definitions or descriptions. When you finish with the matching section, draw your own Dust Bowl scene in the box below.

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| _____ 1. Comrade | A. River between Texas & Mexico |
| _____ 2. Jalopy | B. Unknown, confusing |
| _____ 3. Boot Hill | C. Small, wooden house |
| _____ 4. Tractors | D. Grain crop used to make bread |
| _____ 5. Oil Boom Shack | E. Close friend |
| _____ 6. Knell | F. Old, clunky car |
| _____ 7. Rio Grande | G. Country (The United States) |
| _____ 8. Nation | H. Funeral bell |
| _____ 9. Mysterious | I. Old cemetery |
| _____ 10. Wheat | J. Farm machine |

Now draw your own Dust Bowl picture here: