

# The Great Depression: Character, Citizenship, and History

Gail McEachron

WELL-WRITTEN and exciting literature for youth about the Great Depression of the 1930s offers a way to present a significant period in history to children with sensitivity to their emotional and cognitive development. Children's literature and nonfiction about the Great Depression also provide a historical context for teaching economic concepts such as supply and scarcity, goods and services, needs and wants. Primary students are too young to analyze the full range of economic, social, and environmental factors that brought about the Great Depression, but they are capable of understanding the human side of struggling during difficult economic times. Equity, which could be defined as the fair distribution of resources and rewards for work completed, is a concept that emerges early in children's developmental understanding of social interactions.<sup>1</sup>

Many children in today's classrooms come from families that are themselves struggling to make ends meet. Some are homeless; others have unemployed or marginally employed parents. Teachers need to talk about poverty in light of the fact that, in the U.S., one out of six people under the age of 18 is poor.<sup>2</sup> If any member of a family suffers serious health problems, the economic burden may be impossible to meet, because one child out of eight in the U.S. is not covered by health insurance (see sidebar).

In any case, all of the children in the classroom can benefit from stories that describe the strength of individuals and community support. The books featured in this article provide opportunities for teachers to illuminate the strength of character demonstrated by acts of human kind-

ness, self-sacrifice, sharing, and community effort. They also show how people came together at one point in U.S. history and, through their government, provided life's necessities when private industry was failing to do so.

## The Social Studies/Language Arts Connection

This examination of children's literature provides teachers with an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about the Great Depression, using literature selections that complement one another. That is, one selection may be strong in historical content, while another selection may tell a memorable story or provide beautiful illustrations, but leave the narrative without a clear historical context. Taken as a set of texts, the literature selections provide a way to show children how families pulled together during a time of great financial loss and, in doing so, demonstrated triumph of the human spirit over natural and economic disasters. In addition to emphasizing economic concepts and good citizenship, the selections provide opportunities to integrate language arts concepts such as narrative, characters, and dramatic conflict.<sup>3</sup>

The books listed below describe the impact of the Great Depression on children and reveal the ways in which youth, their neighbors, and their family members made sacrifices. These young people were motivated not only by the will to survive, but often by the desire to help others. These books provide an opportunity to reflect on the inner strength that people sometimes display when faced with hardship. The stories of children who lived during the Great Depression also provide inspiration

to those who may face similar obstacles in their own lives.

## Dust Bowl Days

*Children of the Dust Bowl*, by Jerry Stanley, provides a history of a school at Weedpatch Camp in Bakersfield, California. (The camp, formally known as Arvin Federal Government Camp, is used by migrant workers even today.) The book begins by describing how farmers were losing their lands in the midwestern states during the Dust Bowl years of drought. Advertisements about the need for workers in California gave many of them great hope and expectations. These families would pack up everything they had and head for California, only to face unemployment, discrimination, and humiliation when they arrived. They suddenly found themselves with a new name, "Okies," short for Oklahoma folk (whether they were actually from Oklahoma or not). They were not wanted.

After witnessing migrant children being taunted by peers, a man named Leo Hart started a separate school called Weedpatch Camp so that people from Oklahoma and other parts of the Dust Bowl could receive an education and families could rebuild their dignity and self-respect. In addition to learning the traditional curriculum, students at Weedpatch learned how to grow their own food, sew their own clothing, and build their school from the ground up. After several years, the school developed such a positive reputation that the community members who had originally tried to banish the newcomers soon requested that their sons and daughters be allowed to attend Weedpatch. With pride and a strong sense of self-respect, the children and teachers at

## End of the Roaring Twenties, 1929

The average American was busy buying automobiles and household appliances, and speculating in the stock market, where big money could be made. Those appliances were bought on credit, however. Although businesses had made huge gains from the mechanization of manufacturing, the average worker's wages had only increased 8 percent.

The imbalance between the rich and the poor, with 0.1 percent of society earning the same total income as 42 percent, combined with production of more and more goods and rising personal debt, could not be sustained. On Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, triggering the Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the history of the modern industrial world. It spread from the United States to the rest of the world, lasting from the end of 1929 until the early 1940s. With banks failing and businesses closing, more than 15 million Americans (one-quarter of the workforce) became unemployed.

President Herbert Hoover, underestimating the seriousness of the crisis, called it "a passing incident in our national lives," and assured Americans that it would be over in 60 days.

— PBS, "Surviving the Dust Bowl", [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX05.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX05.html)

the Weedpatch School opened its doors to those who had considered them backward and ignorant.

### A Right to Public Education

There are a variety of ways that *Children of the Dust Bowl* can be used in a primary classroom.<sup>4</sup> The photographs are primary resource materials that give students an idea of what conditions prevailed for children during the Depression. Photos show loaded down "jalopies," tent shelters, and children without shoes. Songs entitled "Tain't no use to sit an' whine" and descriptions of day-to-day living provide windows into what life was like in these impoverished conditions. The photos also document the transformation of the children from vagrants to confident, self-sufficient students with a range of vocational skills.

Several economic concepts can be underscored through these success stories. Natural resources can be depleted if they are abused or overused: the dust of the Dust Bowl storms was actually topsoil, set loose by drought and destructive farming methods. Goods by themselves do not create wealth: an oversupply of consumer goods and industrial capacity contributed to the stock market collapse of 1929. Fair wages are good not only for the workers, but for a stable, sustainable economy; wages that are too

low can lead to an oversupply of goods in the warehouses and eventual economic collapse. Dislocated farmers need not live in poverty: human resources can be created through education and training. Government intervention may be needed to provide basic human needs if the market economy proves unable to do so.

Another way to present *Children of the Dust Bowl* is to emphasize the involvement of Leo Hart, who was superintendent of Kern County schools. It became his personal mission "to find out what to do for these children to get them adjusted into society and to take their rightful place."<sup>5</sup> With the financial help of Dewey Russell, a close friend of John Steinbeck, Hart started the Weedpatch School with fifty undernourished, skeptical young people meeting in two condemned buildings. Leo visited several colleges

and universities in California to identify "the best teachers... whose attitude indicated that they were really interested in this type of student and wanted to help in the program."<sup>6</sup>

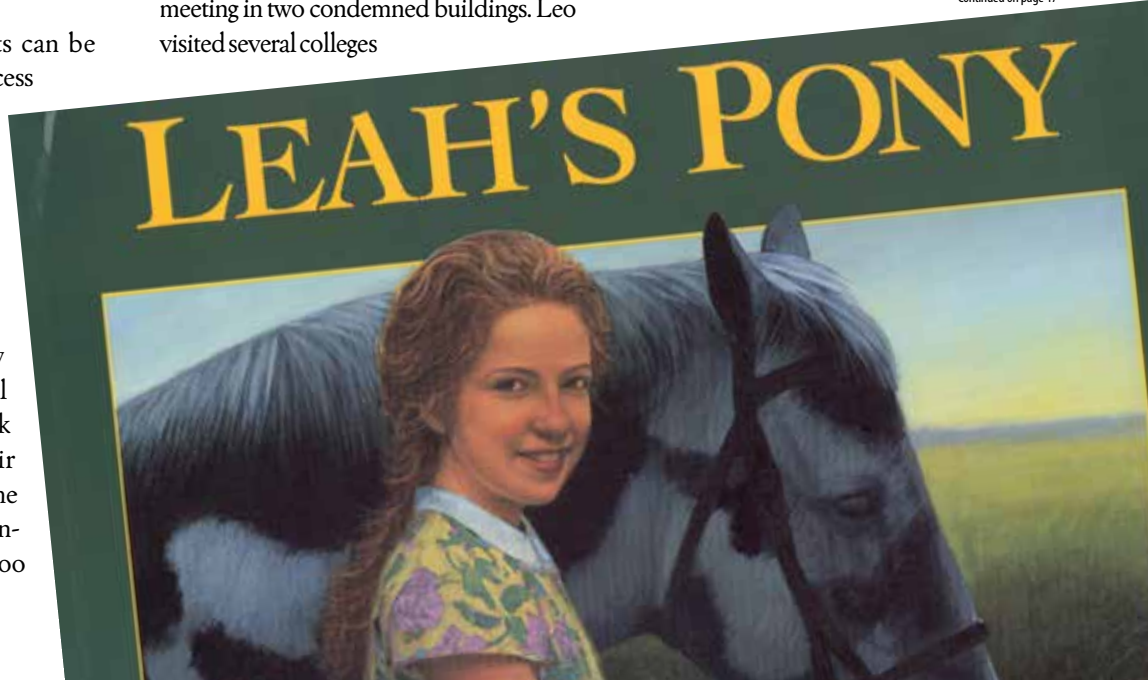
Talking with children about how one person can make a difference is another valuable lesson from the story of the Weedpatch School. One reviewer remarked that "The book is a fascinating account of the cruelty society heaps on its underdogs as well as an inspiring lesson for adults; it demonstrates very eloquently the profound difference one person can make in the lives of children."<sup>7</sup>

### Obstructing a Farm Auction

*Leah's Pony* is a beautifully written and illustrated book. The book tells a fictional story of how one family's hardship is overcome through the compassion demonstrated by Leah and other members of the community. Elements of the plot are based on historical events, recorded in newspapers and told in oral histories.

Author Elizabeth Friedrich and illustrator Michael Garland blend their expertise in a way that shows great sensitivity to family relations and to the experiences of Americans at one point in history. As the book opens, Leah is happy because her father has just bought her a pony during a year when his corn crop was tall and straight. Garland illustrates father and daughter close together with Leah's pony. As the story unfolds, adverse conditions such as drought and dust result in poorer and poorer corn crops.

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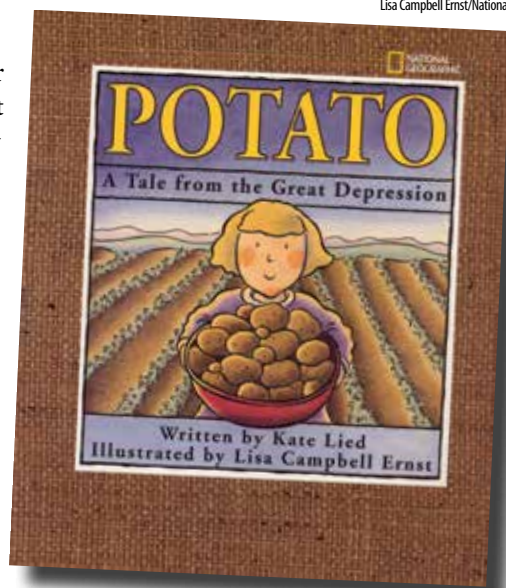
Father and daughter are illustrated further apart, as if to symbolize the estrangement that can result when stresses on the family mount unbearably.

The financial losses are so great that Leah's family can no longer afford the mortgage, and the family's farm is auctioned. This demoralizing event was experienced by thousands of families during the Depression. However, in an interesting twist reminiscent of O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*, Leah sells her pony in hopes of using the cash to buy back her father's tractor during the auction so that he will be able to work—and maybe hold onto the family farm. On the day of the auction, the most valuable item “put on the auction block” is the tractor, and Leah opens by bidding one dollar for it. To her surprise—and to the dismay of the auctioneer and bankers—no one in the community will overbid her. As the auction progresses, all the family's capital resources (farm animals, equipment, and furniture, etc.) are purchased by friends and neighbors, who soon return these items to Leah's family. In the end, Leah's selfless act of giving up her pony is rewarded when the grocer who bought the pony surprises her by returning it to her barn.

It may be a bit of fancy on the part of author Friedrich to imagine that Leah's neighbors are wealthy enough, in the midst of the Depression, to provide financial help to such a degree. Nevertheless, such obstruction of farm auctions did occur. Known as “penny auctions,” these efforts to sabotage an auction occurred when farmers quietly but firmly (often with a threat of violence) told interested buyers from outside the region to hold off bidding. Such a boycott, which employs the use of coercion, is illegal, a point that is not mentioned in the story or in the material at the back of the book, but it is part of the historical record (see sidebar).<sup>8</sup>

### Bartering Potatoes

*Potato* by Kate Lied is based on the real experiences of her grandparents who lived in Iowa during the Great Depression. Like *Leah's Pony*, this historical fiction illustrates the plight of Depression families by telling a story of temporary hardship overcome



through the support of others. It would be appropriate to read the book *Potato* aloud to first and second graders. It is told through the eyes of eight-year-old Kate. It is a great way to introduce the concept of barter. As the story unfolds, Clarence, Agnes, and their baby named Dorothy (a character based on Kate Lied's aunt), fall on hard times in Iowa and decide to go to Idaho to pick potatoes. The farmer who owned the land said that they could return to the fields in the evening and gather the leftover potatoes. Gradually, the family earned enough money to return to their home in Iowa, taking with them the extra potatoes they had picked by moonlight. They bartered potatoes for groceries, clothes, and a pig in order to have a new start in their home state.

*Potato* is written in a way that demonstrates a consideration of the developmental stages of first and second graders. Lisa Campbell Ernst's line drawings of cheerful people help to make the story accessible to primary children. “Ernst's warm pictures on brown, grainy background have a child-like simplicity. They are framed like photos in a family album, and they may encourage kids to listen to their own family stories and pass them on.”<sup>9</sup> The simple plot of having to leave home, working and saving, then returning home with potatoes to barter provides opportunities to teach students the economic concepts of barter, goods, labor, and jobs. The plot is also conducive to reinforcing language arts concepts such as beginning, middle, and conclusion, as well as cause and effect.

### Holding On to Songs

Once the teacher has provided students with background reading and discussed some of these literature selections, some students will be able to read on their own a book like Ann Turner's *Dust for Dinner*. Turner creates suspense and adventure through the chapters such as: Dust Storm, Sold!, Moving, and Trouble! Students who are learning or struggling to read are supported by the author's use of “short sentences, generous leading, and a direct, easy-to-grasp plot line.”<sup>10</sup>

*Dust for Dinner* is the story of a family (Mama, Papa, Jake, Maggy, and their Black

### From Independent Farmer to Migrant Laborer

The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history. By 1940, 2.5 million people had moved out of the Plains states; of those, 200,000 moved to California. When they reached the border, they did not receive a warm welcome ... The Los Angeles police chief went so far as to send 125 policemen to act as bouncers at the state border, turning away “undesirables”. Called “the bum brigade” by the press and the object of a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union, the LAPD posse was recalled only when the use of city funds for this work was questioned.

Arriving in California, the migrants were faced with a life almost as difficult as the one they had left. Many California farms were corporate-owned. They were larger, and more modernized than those of the southern plains, and the crops were unfamiliar. The rolling fields of wheat were replaced by crops of fruits, nuts, and vegetables ... Life for migrant workers was hard. They were paid according to the quantity of fruit and cotton that they picked, with earnings ranging from seventy-five cents to \$1.25 a day. Out of that, they had to pay twenty-five cents a day to rent a tar-paper shack with no floor or plumbing. In larger ranches, they often had to buy their groceries from a high-priced company store. ...

— PBS, “Surviving the Dust Bowl”, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX08.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX08.html)

# The Great Depression: History and Economics

**Gail McEachron and Jennifer Ramsey**

## Time/Grade

This one-hour lesson was implemented in a third grade, heterogeneous general education social studies classroom, where students held basic reading skills and monetary concepts.

## Standards

Virginia Standards of Learning (3.8). The student will explain in simple terms how opportunity cost, scarcity, and price influence economic decision making.

## Materials

*Leah's Pony*, by Elizabeth Friedrich

## Background

Vocabulary/Key Concepts:

- *Needs* — things people use to stay alive and healthy (e.g., food, shelter, water, love)
- *Wants* — things that make our lives easier or bring enjoyment
- *Producer* — someone who makes or sells something
- *Consumer* — person who buys something
- *Goods* — products or objects useful to people in satisfying wants and needs that are usually scarce enough people are willing to pay for them
- *Services* — performed tasks that satisfy a consumer's wants and needs
- *Values* — Sacrifice, importance of family needs over personal wants; community support, good citizenship.

## Objectives

1. Present two columns on the blackboard: "needs" versus "wants." The class will engage in a three minute brainstorm of ideas until at least ten items are mentioned under each category.
2. Given a discussion of elementary economics, students will differentiate goods from services and needs from wants.

3. Given the teacher's background on the Great Depression and reading of *Leah's Pony*, students will identify economic dilemmas that the characters faced and how they compensated during difficult times.
4. Given the teacher's reading of the book *Leah's Pony*, students will reflect on the message of the author by journaling for 5 minutes on "what it would be like to give up a favorite possession for a greater cause."

## Method

### Introduction

Begin by drawing two large columns labeled "needs" versus "wants" on the chalkboard. Introduce that today's economic lesson begins with a class brainstorm of present day ideas. List at least ten ideas the students generate under each category. Clarify that saving money allows you to spend it at a later date when it may be needed more. Ask children to share what they might like to buy with money they might save.

Set the stage for Great Depression, by stating that there have been times when people have found it difficult to find jobs. In the 1930s a major economic downfall began called the Great Depression. During this time in our nation's history families and banks lost a lot of money and people lost jobs. This is hard for us to understand today, but imagine wiping out all your "wants" and even some of your "needs" from the board. Pretend you can't afford to live in your house (you move into a tent), your dad and mom lost their jobs which means no money is coming in, so no eating in restaurants or shopping for new clothes or toys. Explain that during the Great Depression a drought came to the mid-west creating what people called a Dust Bowl. Many families suffered and were forced to change their lifestyles as they faced the economic hardships of the 1930s.

## Content Focus

Read *Leah's Pony* aloud to the class. Raise questions to spark curiosity and encourage active participation such as, "What will happen if Papa can't pay the bank back after borrowing money from it? What's an auction? Why would a family need to have one? By the end of the story ask: "What valuable lesson do we learn from Leah? Stress the importance of sacrificing wants and even needs (e.g., horse and tractor to run the farm) to help save a family. "How does this relate to the topic of needs and wants we discussed earlier in today's lesson?"

Continue discussion by pointing out the sacrifice that Leah made and how members of the community planned what was called a "penny auction" to ensure that Leah and her family could keep their possessions and stay on their farm. Ask students to think about their own situations by having them respond to the following question in their journals: "Would you be willing to give up your favorite possession to save a loved one's job?"

Encourage the children to identify something valuable to them and in their possession. "Would you be willing to sacrifice that valuable possession of yours so your family could continue living where they live?" "What else could you do to help?" Ask students to write about how their needs and wants would change.

Ask if any of the students would like to share their journal entries. Close by emphasizing that sometimes people fall on hard times and it is important to think about what can be done on an individual basis or as a community. Two of the strongest lessons learned from the Great Depression were that individuals were willing to make sacrifices for others and that community solutions often helped neighbors so that they could live better lives.

## Evaluation

### Formative

Are the students actively engaged and participating in the series of activities (e.g., brainstorming, discussing economics concepts, providing examples when asked, attentive to reading aloud, responding to the author's message, making applications of the characters to present day)? Are they able to apply economic concepts from the story of Leah (needs/wants, supply/demand) to their own lives?

### Summative

Assign and assess a written paragraph to Leah's Pony assessed based on the identification of sacrifice and the changing role of needs versus wants during hard times.

### Extension

Leah's mother made clothing out of flour sacks. She poured dishwater on her drooping petunias to keep them growing. Encourage students to examine the following internet site, which illustrates the many ways in which flour sacks were used as well as other examples of resourcefulness: [www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthet30s/life\\_06.html](http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthet30s/life_06.html).

## Penny Auctions

As the pace of foreclosure auctions increased between 1930 and 1932, more and more farmers became desperate. Activists demanded that state legislators halt foreclosure sales. Angry farmers marched on the capitol buildings in several states, including Nebraska.

Some farmers in Madison County, Nebraska, took matters into their own hands. In 1931, about 150 farmers showed up at a foreclosure auction at the Von Bonn family farm. The bank was selling the land and equipment because the family couldn't repay a loan. The bank expected to make hundreds, if not thousands of dollars.

As those who were there remember it, the auctioneer began with a piece of equipment. The first bid was five cents. When someone else tried to raise that bid, he was requested not to do so – forcibly. Item after item got only one or two bids. All were ridiculously low. The proceeds for that first “Penny Auction” were \$5.35, which the bank was supposed to accept to pay off the loan. ... Farm groups and activists turned their attention to the political arena demanding a stop to foreclosure sales. Eventually, several Midwestern states, including Nebraska, enacted moratoriums on farm foreclosures. Generally the moratoriums lasted a year. The theory was that the Depression couldn't last that much longer, and then farmers would have the income to make their payments. But the Depression continued, the moratoriums ran out and farmers continued to lose their farms.

— Wessels Living History Farm, York, Nebraska, [www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthet30s/](http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthet30s/).

Lab, Sam) who must leave their home in the Midwest in search of work elsewhere. Jake tells the story in first person, which adds greater interest to the events for elementary students. When the auctioneers come to haul off all their belongings to pay off a bank loan, Mama asks Jake and Maggy to hide the radio in the hayloft. “They can't take our music!” she proclaims. The teacher can refer to this expression and the continuing presence of the radio as a metaphor for the perseverance of the human spirit.

On two occasions, it looks as if the family's prized possessions may need to be sacrificed. First, Mama says that it's time to sell the radio when the family is living on just bread and butter. On a second occasion, Sam the dog eats a chicken belonging to the owner of the farmland. In both instances, the family finds ways to keep its members' spirits high while working through the problem. The examples of thoughtfulness to others and consideration for family members is a great way to begin a discussion about the students' family members and how they help one another.

### Images of the Times

*Children of the Dust Days*, by Karen Coombs, is part of the Picture the American Past Series, which features photographs and prints of children in various historical contexts and settings (e.g., *Civil War*, *Emancipation*, *Frontier*, *Settlement Houses*, etc.).

Each book in the series includes a variety of primary resource material that provides teachers with opportunities to share first-hand accounts. Music, diary entries, photos, maps, and newspaper articles make the lives of children from the past accessible and personal.

Coombs selected photos with an eye toward what primary children would find interesting and what teachers need to illustrate concepts appropriate for students in kindergarten through third grade. For example, a close-up photo of a corn plant eaten by grasshoppers allows children to compare devastated plants with healthy crops. A picture of a child sitting at a table with a saucer over her glass of milk shows how environmental degradation affected the day-to-day activities of children. Pictures of cars being pulled by horses—because families couldn't afford gasoline—demonstrate how accommodations were made when faced with scarce resources. In the book, the family used old maps as tablecloths for a shared meal. In these descriptions, one often ends up comparing the meager resources, on the one hand, and the continuity of fellowship, on the other.

### Making Do

To demonstrate how children and their families were resourceful during the Great Depression, a teacher could point



## Poverty in the USA, 2004

One in six children in the United States continues to live in poverty. One in eight—9.3 million—children has no health insurance. Three out of five children under six are cared for by someone other than their parents on a regular basis. Only 31 percent of fourth graders read at or above grade level. An estimated three million children were reported as suspected victims of child abuse and neglect. Almost one in ten teens ages 16 to 19 is a school dropout. Eight children and teens die from gunfire in the U.S. each day—one child every three hours.

— Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children 2004* (Washington, DC: CDF: 2004), [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org); See also National Center for Children in Poverty, *Low Income Children in the United States, 2004* (New York: Mailman School of Health, Columbia University, 2004), [www.nccp.org/pub\\_cpfo4.html](http://www.nccp.org/pub_cpfo4.html).

out activities that uplifted people's spirits while they passed the time. Games such as jacks and mumblety-peg were inexpensive and could be played in today's classrooms. To add a touch of reality, children could follow the directions in Coombs' *Children of the Dust Days* for making a burlap shirt, which they could wear while playing related games.

Throughout history, people have composed and sung songs to help them unite in an attempt to overcome obstacles. Coombs provides excerpts of Woody Guthrie's song, "Talking Dust Bowl". In the back of Stanley's *Children of the Dust Bowl*, there are sources listed for locating Okie Ballads such as, "Sunny Cal," "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad," "Tain't no Use to Sit an' Whine," and "Tow-Sack Tattler." Perseverance and self-control must have been highly valued by the songwriter of the lyrics to "Tow-Sack Tattler."<sup>11</sup> One line about "taking and giving blows" can artfully be directed to the blows of economic loss, such as adults "taking a blow" from losing

a job, and then having to watch their families suffer from lack of basic necessities or common pleasures, like ice cream.

### Tow-Sack Tattler<sup>12</sup>

It takes a little courage  
And a little self-control  
And a grim determination  
If you want to reach the goal

It takes a deal of striving  
And a firm and stern-set chin  
No matter what the battle  
If you really want to win

You must take a blow and give one  
You must risk and you must lose  
And expect with the battle  
You must suffer from a bruise

But you mustn't wince or falter  
Lest a fight you might begin  
Be a man and face the battle  
That's the only way to win

## Conclusion

Through these selected texts about the Great Depression, teachers can provide primary children with images, stories, and examples of how real people faced hardships created by both natural disasters and the collapse of markets and economic institutions. All five books emphasize the strength and will of individuals who made a difference. Americans want to continue being productive workers, concerned about their families, and actively engaged in civic responsibilities. If we look back at these tracks in the farm soil of our mid-western states, we see that we have big shoes to fill. 🌱

## Notes

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2. Chafel.
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9. Hazel Rochman, "POTATO" (review), *Booklist* 93, no. 15 (1997): 1338.
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