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## **American Culture of the 1930s**

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The Great Depression of the 1930s brought difficult economic times for tens of millions of Americans. Even for people who were fortunate enough to keep their jobs, have homes to live in, and be able to put food on the table, the times were still challenging. Many of those who lived through the Depression relied on the popular culture of the era to provide a distraction from the misery of daily life.

### **KEEPING AMERICA'S VALUES**

One concern among many Americans was that the nation's values might experience dramatic, negative change as a result of the Depression. For some it did. There was a handful of lawless individuals—from bank robbers and cop killers, such as Bonnie and Clyde and Babyface Nelson, to gangsters like John Dillinger—who responded to the challenge of the Depression by turning to crime and murder. But the vast majority of Americans remained true to the nation's

overall moral values of honesty, hard work, and individual responsibility.

One might have expected many Americans to have become cynical during the Depression, seeing themselves as little more than the helpless victims of such big money fat cats as Wall Street moguls, remote heads of corporations, and greedy bankers. Yet the vast majority of the country's citizens chose to commit themselves to the future, when the economy might turn around and prosperity and personal potential might gain another shot at the brass ring. Many were too proud to accept direct relief, preferring work instead of charity.

### **THE SMALL SET**

Another value that many Americans clung to was their optimism and hope for the future. One means of coping through the bad times was to listen to the relatively new medium of radio. Radio had been becoming more popular in the mid-1920s, but the numbers of radio listeners mushroomed dramatically during the Great Depression. Just like television sets today, in the 1930s nearly every family in America had at least one radio at home. From farmhouse parlors to the living rooms of brownstones in major cities across the country, Americans tuned in to their radios and listened to an increasingly wide variety of programs. For many, the radio was a shared social experience. People might gather on a neighbor's front porch and listen to a national broadcast or a local program. They could also tune in to national sporting events and local ball play.

America's airwaves were filled with a host of entertaining shows, music, dramas, comedies, news programs, and cultural events. The Thirties marked the beginning of the great era of the radio serials, programs that broadcast each week at a scheduled time slot across the nation. Daytime

programming catered to women working in their homes, and included drama and romance serials. During the evenings, radio schedules featured news broadcasts, comic shows, and variety hours. The supper hours were given over to children's programming mostly, with a typical line up that might include the following:

5:15 WTIC 1040 *Tom Mix*

WEAF 660 *Story Man*

5:30 WTIC 1040 *Jack Armstrong*

WJZ 760 *Singing Lady*

5:45 WJZ 760 *Little Orphan Annie*

WOR 710 *Uncle Don*

Popular radio programs of the period included the crime fighting "Green Hornet," "Ripley's Believe it or Not!," the vine-swinging "Tarzan," the square-jawed "Dick Tracy," and super-duper spaceman, "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century." When Macy's department store in New York announced Buck Rogers Disintegrator Guns for sale, 20,000 people lined up outside the store.

## **THE BIG SCREEN**

For many Americans who sought entertainment outside the home, the national medium was motion pictures. By the end of the 1930s, nearly two out of every three Americans—80 million people—attended the movies at least once a week, with adults usually paying 25 cents a ticket and children, 10 cents. Film became the common entertainment outlet for people seeking a respite from the difficulties and challenges of daily life during the Depression.

While motion pictures had existed for 30 years by the time FDR became president, films with synchronized sound had only been around for a few years. The 1930s became an

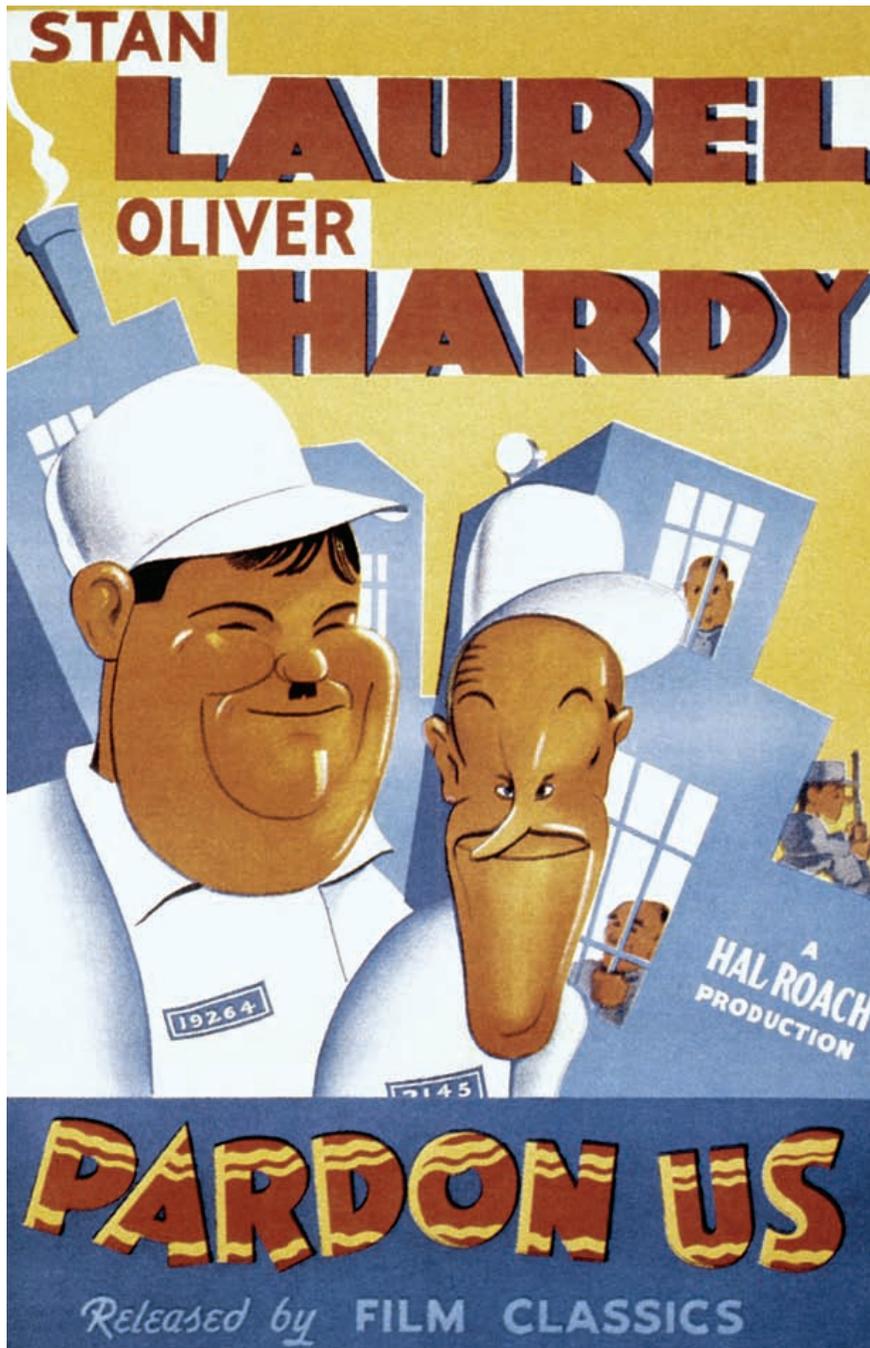
innovative and ground-breaking decade for the film industry, and the variety of motion pictures was wide, even if the content was typically censored.

Some films made social commentary, while others were nothing more than distracting comedies, or period-set dramatic productions on a grand scale. John Steinbeck's popular Depression-era novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, reached the big screen in 1940, with Henry Fonda in the lead role as Tom Joad. Director Frank Capra produced such populist-themed films as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), featuring actor Jimmy Stewart as a newly elected, naïve senator fighting corruption in the nation's capitol.

Historical epics were popular, with their elaborate period stage sets. They included *Mutiny on the Bounty*, starring the decade's heart-throb, Clark Gable; Errol Flynn and Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*; and the grande dame film of the decade, set during the Civil War, *Gone With the Wind*, starring Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable.

### **Laughter and Screams**

Comedies were commonplace, because Americans badly needed something to laugh at. The Marx Brothers appeared in screwball films such as *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Horse Feathers* (1932) and *A Night at the Opera* (1935), some of which were little more than film versions of their vaudeville stage shows. Other favorite screen comedians included W. C. Fields, the comic team of Laurel and Hardy, and wide-mouthed Joe E. Brown. For kids, there were the *Bowery Boys* and *Our Gang* series, which included the likes of Spanky, Weezer, Alfalfa, and Buckwheat, a black character. Child actors of the era included sausage-curling Shirley Temple and everyone's favorite, all-American teen, Andy Hardy, played by Mickey Rooney.



A poster for the 1931 movie *Pardon Us*, starring Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. The movie was produced by Hal Roach Sr., who went on to be one of the most successful film and television producers to date.

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There were horror films, including *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, both released in 1931, followed by *King Kong* (1933), which featured a variety of crude special effects. Another popular subject matter for 1930s films were the gangsters of the era, including *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Little Caesar* (1930), which featured such stars as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson, both of whom would still be making films into the 1970s and 1980s. These films were usually made under the stark limitations of black and white. They were juxtaposed against the heavily choreographed musicals of the 1930s, including elaborate stage productions by Busby Berkeley, such as *Gold Diggers of 1933*, which featured hosts of leggy chorus girls.

### Walt Disney

Perhaps more significant as a trend in film during the 1930s was the animation produced by Midwestern artist Walt Disney. Disney began his career making crude animations in Kansas City for local advertisers, but moved to Hollywood to produce animated shorts for movie houses. His first was *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (1927), followed by the original Mickey Mouse cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* (1928). More Disney animated shorts followed through the 1930s, in color, rather than the early black and white, but Disney changed the animation industry forever when, in 1937, he released his first feature length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It soon became a classic.

### MAGAZINES OF THE 1930s

Despite the popularity of radio during the 1930s, print media became even more popular than ever. Even in the midst of the Depression, new magazines and journals were launched. The first issues of the photographic journal, *Life*, reached the newsstands in 1936, for example. The cover of its first issue

## “RED-BLOODED” AMERICANS

The Roosevelt administration met with constant criticism for its extensive use of the power of the U.S. federal government. FDR and his administrators did not ultimately abandon capitalism, but rather tweaked it a little. Yet radicalism was a part of the U.S. landscape during the Thirties. One of the signs of this was a rising membership in the American Communist Party.

Leading the way in this trend was the Popular Front, a combination of political groups across the country that were anti-fascist, as well as anti-capitalist. With support from Stalin and the Soviet Union, the Popular Front began praising FDR and his handling of the Depression. They tried to sway the minds of many Americans by adopting the slogan, “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism.” Under the organization’s influence, membership in the American Communist Party increased to 100,000 by the mid-1930s.

Many intellectuals began taking the Communist Party seriously. When civil war erupted in Spain, with Fascists fighting to take over the government,

3,000 young Americans, many of them Communists, went to Spain to fight. The Communist Party organized rallies for the unemployed and a hunger march in Washington, D.C. in 1931. Union organizers were sometimes members of the American Communist Party. They even tried to organize a union of black sharecroppers in Alabama.

Yet the American Communist Party was not a truly “American” institution. It had strong ties with Moscow, and American members were closely supervised by the Russians. This became clear in 1939, when the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, signed an agreement with Germany’s fascist leader, Adolf Hitler, under which both nations agreed not to attack one another. Following this, Communist leaders in Moscow ordered the American Communist Party to shut down the Popular Front and begin campaigning against the liberalism of the New Deal. This move puzzled and angered American Communist Party regulars, many of whom left the party, disillusioned. U.S. radicalism was struck a hard blow.

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featured a photo by Margaret Bourke-White of a New Deal-era hydroelectric dam. For decades, *Life* would be one of the nation's most popular magazines. Popular weekly, biweekly, or monthly magazines of the decade included *Collier's*, *Look*, *McCall's Photoplay*, *The Catholic Digest*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Redbook*, and the most widely read of them all, *Reader's Digest*. There were magazines for every taste and interest: *Screenland* and *Silver Screen* for moviegoers; *Time*, a no-nonsense news magazine; and those for the simplest of tastes, including *Cowboy Short Stories*, *Sweetheart Stories*, *Detective Story*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Ace Sports*, *Crackerjack Funnies*, and *College Humor*.

### A NEW LITERATURE

Just as the 1920s had produced a new era of serious writers, so the decade of the Depression did as well. Many of those who had written before the stock market crashed had focused on the materialism of the Twenties. The new literature of the Thirties did not fall prey to the economic despair of the era, but took on the voice of social conscience. John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–36) continued the earlier literary focus on America's obsession with material wealth. Some authors wrote of a coming revolution in the United States, with writer F. Scott Fitzgerald even suggesting that Communism might hold the answers for the country's future. But much of that movement lost its steam and drive as reports emerged from the Soviet Union of the harsh control exerted by Josef Stalin and the brutal murders of tens of thousands of his opponents.

### Steinbeck and Wright

Two writers whose works spoke on behalf of social justice and change were John Steinbeck and Richard Wright. Perhaps no writer of the era captured the grip of the Depres-

sion on the American heart and soul better than Steinbeck, who published four novels during the 1930s—*Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). This story follows the difficulties of the Joad family as they abandon their dusted out farm in Oklahoma and head west along Route 66,



A still image from *The Wizard of Oz*, a musical-fantasy movie made in 1939. The movie was based on a children's novel written by L. Frank Baum in 1900.

lured by visions of a California paradise where jobs and fruit abound. Throughout the novel, the Joad family is battered to the point of collapse, illustrating Steinbeck's belief that the working class was downtrodden and would only survive through organization and radicalism.

Black writer Richard Wright was born on a plantation outside Natchez, Mississippi, and grew up with an insatiable appetite for books. A white friend checked out books for him from a segregated public library in Memphis. As a young man in his twenties, Wright moved to Chicago and soon found work with the Federal Writers' Project. Between 1934 and 1944, he was a member of the Communist Party, but he eventually renounced the party. His greatest published work was *Native Son* (1940), a novel that presented a black protagonist, Bigger Thomas, born in a ghetto. Bigger flirts with Communism, but is never fully accepted by his comrades in the organization. He descends into psychological confusion until he accidentally murders his employer's daughter. Hounded by a mob, Bigger kills his girlfriend, is captured, and condemned to die. Wright's novel is written with rage and bitterness, noted in the words of Bigger: "They wouldn't let me live and so I killed."

### **Wolfe and Faulkner**

The Thirties produced several additional Southern writers of significance, including Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. Wolfe's most important work was his novel *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), which was a semi-autobiographical telling of his North Carolina youth, including his college experiences at Chapel Hill (called "Pulpit Hill" in the book). His character, Eugene Grant, searches for his own identity and emerges from his experiences having broken away from his family's drab life and found his own path. Grant has discovered, in Wolfe's words, "You can't go home again."

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Mississippi writer William Faulkner penned several novels during the era, beginning with *Sartoris* (1929), which set the stage for much of Faulkner's later works, largely set in his fictional Mississippi county, Yoknapatawpha. He followed up with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936). Faulkner's work presented the foibles and sins of Southern history, creating a style that destined him to be one of the great modern writers of the twentieth century.

### **A NEW BATTLE APPROACHES**

By the end of the 1930s the United States had experienced at least ten years of hard times, unemployment, radical change in the role of the federal government in the lives of many of its citizens, and great shifts in its popular culture. FDR had overseen the New Deal, which had battled the Depression at every turn, with mixed results. But there was a new challenge on the horizon.

The world stage was becoming crowded with extremist leaders: the Spanish Fascist Francisco Franco; Italy's socialist blowhard Benito Mussolini; warlords in Japan; and the German Führer, National Socialist Adolf Hitler. Their armies were on the march, and the threats they represented to the democratic nations of the world now appeared as real as the Great Depression had seemed to so many throughout the decade. A new battle was approaching, and the U.S. war on poverty, unemployment, and corporate greed was about to give way to the greatest conflagration of war in the history of the world.