

Teenage Hobos

Grade Level: 4 – 8

Time to Complete: 1 – 2 days

Standard(s) Covered:

SS-04-3.1.1

Students will describe scarcity and explain how scarcity requires people in Kentucky to make economic choices (e.g., use of productive resources-natural, human, capital) and incur opportunity costs.

SS-05-3.1.1

Students will describe scarcity and explain how scarcity required people in different periods in the U.S. (Colonization, Expansion, Twentieth Century to Present) to make economic choices (e.g., use of productive resources-natural, human, capital) and incur opportunity costs.

SS-04-2.2.1

Students will describe social institutions (government, economy, education, religion, family) in Kentucky and how they respond to the needs of the people.

SS-05-2.2.1

Students will describe social institutions (government, economy, education, religion, family) in the U.S. and explain their role in the growth and development of our nation.

Major Objective(s): Students will

- understand that, at the height of the Great Depression, 250,000 teenage Hobos were roaming America
- realize that teenage Hobos clung to the belief that today's pauper could be tomorrow's millionaire
- learn that hobo life held a powerful attraction for boys
- discover Jack London, author, rode the rails at age 15, which led to his writing the book The Road
- understand that riding the rails could be dangerous.
- learn that Hobos suffered diseases due to exposure, lack of cleanliness, vermin, contagion, and infection
- realize that many young riders reported being put in jail to do forced labor
- understand most teenage Hobos had to leave home and ride the rails

Major Point to Teach:

The realization that a child's family was flat broke, or just hard pressed to put food on the table, was the reason many boys decided to "hit the road". One less mouth to feed would lessen the burden on their parents, they believed, and in many homes it was true.

Prior to the 30s, there were five types of “boy tramps”: adventure-seekers; rebels, broken home runaways, work seekers, and mentally handicapped. In the 30s, they rode the rails for reasons beyond their control.

Between 1929 and 1939, 24,647 Hobos were killed, while riding the rails, and 27,171 were injured.

It was common for youths caught trespassing, on railroad property, to be brutally handled or marched off to jail. Able-bodied youths would be arrested by the local sheriff and sentenced to 20 – 60 days on the “cotton farm”, which may also have been peanuts, sugarcane, or whatever crop was needed to be worked.

Pride and shame led many teenage Hobos to go without eating for days, raiding garbage cans, picking up crusts of bread in the streets and pilfering food. Stealing became a part of survival.

Destitute youths drifted from one shelter to another, paying for a bed at the Y, when they had money, staying at the Salvation Army, or other missions, when they were broke.

Teen Hobos went from childhood to being adults. All they thought about was surviving.

In summer, some boys followed the harvests in the West and were called “bindle stiffs”. All this was for starvation wages or no wages at all.

There were occasional girl Hobos, but they were clothed as males for protection.

A majority of people were sympathetic to the boys and girls who came to ask for food. The youths were buoyed by the acts of kindness.