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# Comparing FSA Photographs by **BEN SHAHN**: A Lesson in Media Literacy

Robert J. Stevens and Jared A. Fogel

Why do some photographs grab our attention, like the sobering *Migrant Mother* and the exuberant *Lunchtime Atop a Skyscraper* (both taken during the Great Depression), while others are forgotten?<sup>1</sup> Is a photograph simply a record of a moment in space and time, or can it also convey a political message? Can a photo tell us something about the opinions of the person holding the camera? And does it matter whether

this person was being paid for taking the picture?

This lesson helps social studies students begin to analyze photographs critically, and thus to better understand how the maker of an image can be a participant in civic discourse—an actor in the important public policy debates that each generation must engage in.

In this lesson, we have selected for study two contrasting photographs taken by Ben Shahn for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Great Depression. Between 1935 and 1943, the FSA photographers produced nearly 80,000 photographs of life in Depression-era America, “the largest documentary photography project of a people ever undertaken.”<sup>2</sup> We bring a couple of black-and-white photographs into our classroom for analysis—as well as a color poster by Shahn that might inspire some interesting discussion toward the end of the lesson.

## The Farm Security Administration

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who became president in 1933, pushed Congress to immediately create the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Farm Credit Administration (FCA), and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). These “alphabet soup agencies” of Roosevelt’s New Deal “made loans, tried to affect the market

for farm commodities, resettle farmers on better land, and offer assistance under the rubric ‘rehabilitation.’”<sup>3</sup> But grinding poverty continued. By March, 1934—four years after the great stock market crash of 1929 and one year after Roosevelt’s inauguration—“at least one out of every four American workers were jobless,” and “only about one-quarter of those were receiving any relief, most of it grossly inadequate.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1935, Congress created the Resettlement Administration (RA) “to alleviate rural poverty and assist people dislocated by such forces as farm mechanization and the Dust Bowl.”<sup>5</sup> The Farm Security Administration (FSA) began in 1937 as an outgrowth of the RA. The Photographic Section of the FSA, with Columbia University economics professor Roy Emerson Stryker as its head, was charged with documenting the work of the FSA.<sup>6</sup>

Stryker gathered around him a host of mainly youthful and unknown photographers to accomplish this enormous task. Some, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, were to become famous for the images they took while working for the FSA. Their work “represented an achievement that in some ways paralleled the accomplishments of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] art projects.” But there was a key difference between the two agencies: “the FSA photographers

were not on relief. They were hired solely for their professional talents, not because they were without a job.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the WPA hired primarily unemployed laborers, craftsmen, artisans, and writers.

For students of history, the FSA photographs became a valuable collection. Ansel Adams, who was famous at the time for his majestic black-and-white photographs of Western landscapes, complained to Roy Stryker, “What you’ve got here are not photographers, they are a bunch of sociologists with cameras.”<sup>8</sup>

## Supporting the Mission

Roosevelt’s critics at the time, and historians since, have pointed to another, unofficial “mission” of the FSA Photographic Division: the photographs could strengthen public approval for the president’s policies of federal support for Americans in distress. Supporters of Roosevelt’s New Deal hoped that unblinking representations of the conditions of impoverished farmers and their families would create public support for the various federal agencies. Photographs could also depict the success of federal programs by showing attractive neighborhoods built by federal works programs, occupied by well-dressed and well-fed families. Put side-by-side, FSA photographs of Americans “before and after” government assistance could make a compelling “visual argument.” This raises an interesting question: Were the FSA photographers also propagandists? We’ll return to this question in the discussion that follows.

Ben Shahn, who worked as an artist in the FSA Special Skills Division, was an



unofficial, part-time member of Stryker's photo team.<sup>9</sup> As a creator of posters and murals, Shahn was keenly aware of the emotional power of visual images. Shahn recalled in a 1964 interview how he had explained to Roy Stryker that a certain photograph of soil erosion would not have an impact on viewers. "Look Roy," Shahn said, "you're not going to move anybody with this eroded soil—but the effect this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people."<sup>10</sup>

### A Spectrum of Opinion

In April 1939, the "First International Photographic Exposition" at the Grand Central Palace in New York City included many FSA photographs. Some were rather shocking images of the plight of Americans in the Great Depression—images of poverty, despair, social inequality, and the daily grind of mere survival endured by thousands of "have nots" in the 1930s. These images contrasted with other FSA photographs showing families living in well-ordered communities that had been planned, financed, and built by the federal government.

There were many different reactions to this exhibition. The magazine *U.S. Camera Annual of 1939* reproduced many of the photographs. It reported cheerfully on the families living in the resettlement communities: "And it is a happy augury that an even greater number of those government photographs, made in California, Wisconsin, Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma, reveal, so impressively, the progress of our country's romantic experiment in resettlement, and are now exhibited in an itinerant fashion (much like the lives of the people their cameras captured—our note), throughout the country at large, under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art in New York."<sup>11</sup>

Others viewers, quoted in *U.S. Camera Annual*, focused on the stark images of rural poverty: "[The photos] touched me to the point where I would like to quit everything in order to help these stricken people..." [They are] "absolute proof of the great need of a continuance of the work of our administration. If this

work was not to be continued, one would be tempted to curse the economic system that produced such human wreckage. For goodness sake...continue." "Americans who think the F.S.A. is a waste of money should see these."

Other visitors to the exhibition were not pleased with the effort: "They're exceedingly lousy," "Lousy bunch of prints," "Subjects very sordid and dull for exhibition...Make them more sensational," and "Photography good but a hell of a subject for a salon."

Some viewers accused the people depicted in the photos of laziness. "What these people need more than anything else is birth control," "There are plenty of farmers in the U.S.A. who don't look like that," and "They create a false impression."

Finally, for some viewers, these images were quite dangerous and even seditious. "Purely propaganda for Communism," "Magnificent propaganda," and "subversive propaganda."

These comments sample the range of public reactions to lower-income fellow citizens, to efforts of the FSA photographers, and to the economic interventions of the Roosevelt administration.

### A Lesson Using Images by Shahn

This lesson takes one class period of 50 minutes, and could be taught toward the middle of a unit of study on the Great Depression. Our main purpose is to teach students about the Great Depression using photographs as a primary historical source. But we are also aiming for media literacy: it is important for students to critically analyze a photograph, asking to what extent it might (or might not) accurately depict reality, what it means in the context of a specific society and a specific time and place, and what it might tell us about the photographer and his or her motives in creating the image.

Students work in groups of three. The teacher begins by presenting a FSA photograph by Ben Shahn, giving a paper copy to each group or projecting the image on a screen. This first photo (HANDOUT A1,) shows a mother and her daughter bend-

ing over, picking out scraps of coal from a slagheap in Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania.

The teacher gives each student a photograph analysis worksheet (HANDOUT, B). At first, students examine the photograph as it is, with no other information provided by the teacher. Students discuss the image in the small groups, and each student answers questions 1-3 in writing on his or her worksheet.

Then the teacher provides basic information from the catalog record at the U.S. Library of Congress (SIDEBAR: About the Images, page 6). Students now learn, among other things that Ben Shahn took this photo in 1937. Students can now address questions 4-6 on the worksheet, which ask about the known facts of the photographs, their subjects, and their creator.

Repeat this process with a second photograph and a bank analysis worksheet. The new photo (HANDOUT A2, page 3) shows well-dressed children standing together on a stone wall in a resettlement community.<sup>12</sup> They look healthy and fed. The wall is of the type built by WPA crews during the 1930s that can be seen today in state parks all across America. This photo, attributed to Shahn, was taken in the Shenandoah Homesteads federal project in Virginia in 1941.

Next, the teacher describes the work of the FSA and its Photography Division (as described above) and reads and/or hands out a short biography of Ben Shahn (HANDOUT C, page 7). Students discuss this new information, as well as questions 7-10, within their small groups. Then each student answers questions 7-10 in writing, which challenges students to summarize and integrate what they have learned.

Finally, the teacher presents a 1937 poster by Shahn, "Years of Dust," which shows a worried farmer with clouds gathering in the background (HANDOUT D page 8). Invite some freewheeling discussion about the poster. Shahn was best known for his work as an artist. He had formal training in art and printing, and yet his posters have a childlike quality. Suggested questions for discussion:

# Photograph Analysis Worksheet

1. *Observation.* What do you see in this photograph? Study the photograph and discuss it in your group. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities that you can clearly observe in the photograph.

People	Objects	Activities

2. *Inference.* Make some reasonable guesses about this photograph. When, would you guess, was the photograph taken?

\_\_\_\_\_

Where was the photograph taken?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why are these people here, doing what they are doing?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why was the photograph taken, would you guess?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. *Inquiry.* Write a question that is left unanswered by the photo.

\_\_\_\_\_

4. After the teacher gives you more information about the photographs, you can answer these questions more precisely: When was the photo taken, in fact?

\_\_\_\_\_

Where was the photograph taken?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why are these people here, doing what they are doing?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. You can also answer some questions about the creator of this image. Who was the photographer?

\_\_\_\_\_

For whom was the photographer working?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think that the photographer had a message beyond simply documenting the moment? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what might that message have been?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Write a question that is still left unanswered about this photo.

\_\_\_\_\_

7. After you have learned more about Ben Shahn and the FSA Photography Division, you can answer these questions. Do you think that taxpayer money was well spent in hiring the FSA photographers and showing their work to the public?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. What would be a good title for this photo?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Write a question that you would like to ask the people shown in this photo, if they were still alive today.

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Write a question that you would like to ask photographer and artist Ben Shahn, if he were still alive today.

\_\_\_\_\_

*Why might Shahn have drawn and painted in this style? (See below.)*

*Did his work as a photographer affect his work as an artist? How?*

**Ben Shahn immigrated with his family to the United States from Lithuania in 1904 when he was 6 years old. Did his experiences as an immigrant influenced his political beliefs? His art?**

*Are these two FSA photographs by Ben Shahn accurate records of a historical event? Or are they “art”? Or propaganda? Or a combination? Explain your reasoning.*

*Is the Ben Shahn’s FSA poster shown here an accurate historical record? Is it art? Is it propaganda?*

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, what can be said of the enduring historical legacy of the FSA photographs? FSA photographer Walker Evans argued that what was valuable in the photos he took was “in the record itself, which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done.” So are the photos a valuable part of the historical record? Or are they “subversive propaganda” and “purely propaganda for Communism,” as its detractors asserted? The answer to this question is not an easy one.

If one sees the photographs, many of them masterpieces of photographic art,

as being an accurate documentation of life as it was experienced by millions of American who suffered during the Depression, then one will tend to agree with Walker Evans.

If one sees these photographs as being “subversive propaganda,” then we must ask what precisely was “subversive” about them? If we define “subversive” as an attempt to weaken or overthrow the government, then we are at a bit of a stalemate. As a product of Roosevelt’s New Deal, the photographs were obviously not an attempt to weaken the federal government. Quite the opposite—they were propaganda: “ideas, facts, and allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause” (Webster’s).

But if one sees the “subversion” not as a weakening of the government, but as a direct challenge to the capitalist economic system, then the term “subversion” may have some merit. The Great Depression demonstrated the frailty of capitalism. When the stock market crashed in 1929, social peace and stability were at risk. Roosevelt’s New Deal projects clearly fit a socialist model of government, with the government redistributing wealth from richer to poorer citizens by providing jobs through work projects.<sup>13</sup>

There may be no single answer to such questions, but that does not mean that they are unimportant. The FSA photographs can help students examine history beyond dates and facts. Studying these photographs can also develop students’

media literacy skills, contributing to an education that might be useful during turbulent economic times. 📷

## Notes

1. Charles C. Ebbets, *Lunchtime Atop a Skyscraper* (photo, Bettmann Archive, 1932); *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange (photo, FSA, 1936) is described in “Other Photographers of the FSA,” American Studies at the University of Virginia, at [xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/Lange.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/Lange.html).
2. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, *Documenting America, 1935-1942* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).
3. Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Harry Abrahams Press, 1993) 14.
4. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression in America: 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 69.
5. Fleischhauer and Brannan
6. McElvaine, 18-19.
7. McElvaine, 302.
8. McElvaine, 25.
9. *Cotton Pickers, 1935*: Ben Shahn, Photographer,” American Memory, Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap01.html.
10. F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 50.
11. *U.S. Camera Annual of 1939* (Washington, DC: U.S. Farm Security Administration, 1939): 11-12.
12. A list of New Deal Homestead and Resettlement Communities (from Virginia to California and many states in between) is at [www.newdeallegacy.org/new\\_deal\\_towns.html](http://www.newdeallegacy.org/new_deal_towns.html).
13. James Curtis, *Minds Eye, Minds Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992); A good general source for students: Jerry Stanley, *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp* (New York: Crown, 1993).

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## ABOUT THE IMAGES

The Library of Congress provides these notations for the images on pages 3 and 8. Your students can search on the catalog number (shown below, “LC...”) to see the same images onscreen. The Prints and Photographs online catalog is at [www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html).

**Woman and child picking coal** from a slag heap. They are paid ten cents for each 100-pound sack.  
Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania, 1937 (created)  
Ben Shahn (photographer)  
LC-DIG-fsa-8a17117

**Scenes of the northern Shenandoah Valley**, including the Resettlement Administration’s Shenandoah Homesteads, Virginia, 1941 (created)  
Ben Shahn (likely photographer) LC-USF33-007004-M5

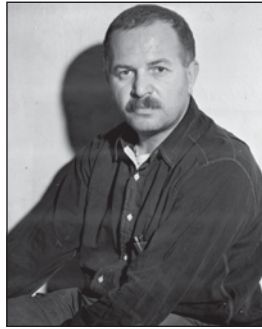
### Years of Dust (Poster)

Resettlement Administration rescues victims, restores land to proper use. Farmer sits on porch while behind him child stares through window and dust storm envelopes farm. 1936 (created)  
Ben Shahn (artist)  
LC-USZC4-430

## Handout C

# BEN SHAHN

Ben Shahn was born in Lithuania in 1898 into a family of Jewish craftsmen. As a young boy, Shahn delighted in reading Hebrew Scriptures. He would spend hours drawing biblical scenes and Hebrew typefaces in his own distinct style. His uncle, a bookbinder, brought him books from his shop. His mother was a potter, and his father a woodcarver. Watching them, he learned to love creating with his hands. His father's anti-tsarist political activities (against the Russian emperor) forced the family to immigrate to the United States in 1906.<sup>1</sup>



Shahn then grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn. He became an apprentice in a Manhattan printing firm. He finished high school at night and later took art and design classes at colleges. In 1925 he traveled with his newlywed to Paris, Italy, and North Africa where he saw many famous works of art for himself.

Shahn saw his art as a means to combat injustice and raise social awareness. In the 1920s he became part of the social realism movement. "Social Realism" is a term used to describe the works of American artists who were devoted to honestly depicting the social troubles of the suffering urban lower class: urban decay, poverty, and poor working conditions. Shahn's early work was concerned with political issues of the time, while his later work portrayed the loneliness of the city dweller.

His series of paintings of the trial and execution of the radical labor activists Sacco and Vanzetti established his reputation as an artist and social critic. Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist who was famous at the time, admired Shahn's work and invited him to assist with murals Rivera was painting for Rockefeller Center's RCA Building. When a portrait of Lenin, the Russian communist revolutionary, was discovered among the figures Rivera had depicted, the murals were removed.

Shahn painted murals for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), notably those in a Bronx Post Office and a federal building in Washington, D.C. He also designed posters and murals for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) between 1935 and 1938. He explained that his work at the FSA aimed "to explain in posters to the people who need it what is being done for them, and to the others what they are paying for."<sup>2</sup> Shahn

wanted people receiving aid to understand that the federal government was working to help them. He wanted taxpayers to understand how the federal government was using their money.

Shahn's work at the FSA provided him the opportunity to travel though Depression-era America. He took photographs to use later when composing his paintings and drawings. Art critics at that time thought that using photographs diminished the value of a painting, but today

artists routinely work from photographs as they plan a piece. Shahn's creations became very popular and were exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art in a 1947 retrospective.

After the war, Shahn worked for the broadcasting giant CBS. He designed a promotional brochure publicizing an early television documentary on juvenile delinquency entitled *The Eagle's Brood*. "One cannot help noticing the wrinkles in [the boys'] clothing and their morose, almost bitter facial expressions. Ironically, one boy's pose is reminiscent of Rodin's *Thinker*."<sup>3</sup>

Shahn was active in local government, serving as a city councilman in Roosevelt, New Jersey, between 1945 and 1948. In 1959, during the anti-communist hysteria known as McCarthyism, Shahn was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee to answer questions about his alleged communist affiliations. In 1962, Shahn was a founding member of Graphic Artists for SANE (Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy), which was concerned about nuclear weapons testing and nuclear war. His portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1965.

In his senior years, Shahn was awarded many honors, including an honorary professorship of poetry at Harvard University. His "poetry" was his artwork and writings about art. He was a father to four children. He died in New York in 1969. 🇺🇸

### Notes

1. Sources for this biography: The Phillips Collection, [www.phillipscollection.org/american\\_art/bios/shahn-bio.htm](http://www.phillipscollection.org/american_art/bios/shahn-bio.htm); American Studies at the University of Virginia; New Jersey Public Television and Radio; American Memory at the Library of Congress.
2. Selden Rodman, *Portrait of the Artist as an American* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 89.
3. The Art Directors Club, "Ben Shahn," [www.adcglobal.org/archive/hof/1988/?id=231](http://www.adcglobal.org/archive/hof/1988/?id=231).

# YEARS OF DUST



**RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION**  
**Rescues Victims**  
**Restores Land to Proper Use**



# Online Resources about New Deal Photography

## America from the Great Depression to World War II

[memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html)

The American Memory Collection at the Library of Congress has a very engaging set of essays and images, “Black-and-White Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945.” OWI, the Office of War Information, was the successor to the FHA. See especially “Cotton Pickers, 1935: Ben Shahn, Photographer” at [memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap01.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fachap01.html). Many photos are printable at high resolution.

## A New Deal for the Arts

[www.archives.gov/exhibits/new\\_deal\\_for\\_the\\_arts](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts)

The National Archives hosts this exhibit of paintings and photos created between 1933 and 1943, when federal tax dollars employed artists, musicians, actors, writers, photographers, and dancers to an unprecedented extent. Chapters include “Work Pays America,” “Activist Arts,” and “Useful Arts.”

## New Deal Network

[Newdeal.feri.org](http://Newdeal.feri.org)

Primary documents, photos, art, poems, and literature are preserved at this extensive site. The New Deal Classroom Network ([newdeal.feri.org/classrm/index.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/classrm/index.htm)) contains lesson plans, web projects, and bibliographical materials on the Great Depression, including the arts of that era. The New Deal Network, an educational guide to the Great Depression of the 1930s, is sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

## Ben Shahn Interview

[www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/oralhistory/shahn64.htm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/oralhistory/shahn64.htm)

Read the 1964 transcript at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Shahn speaks of his travels and work for the FSA; the American image as portrayed by FSA photographs; techniques and materials; exhibitions and publications of his work; and the effectiveness of the FSA project overall. He recalls Roy Stryker, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Edwin Rosskam, and Dorothea Lange.

## America in The 1930s

[xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/front.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/front.html)

American Studies at the University of Virginia hosts a large, well-organized online library of print, audio, and video resources on this decade. See links to a comparison of the FSA photographers and their occasionally conflicting purposes as well as a biography of Ben Shahn.

## Ben Shahn: Passion for Justice

[www.njn.net/arts/sculture/shahn/photography.html](http://www.njn.net/arts/sculture/shahn/photography.html)

New Jersey Public Television and Radio (with PBS) provides a website about Ben Shahn, with a time line of his life, a discussion of the interplay between Shahn’s photography and paintings, and two lesson plans for grades 8-12: “Painting the News” and “Visual Politics,” at [www.njn.net/arts/sculture/shahn/classroom.html](http://www.njn.net/arts/sculture/shahn/classroom.html).

## Images of the Great Depression

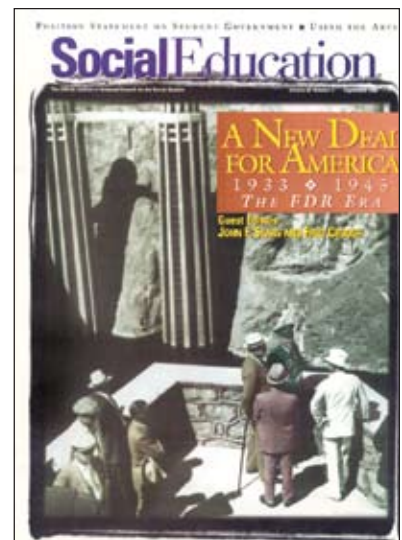
[www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/greatdepression/stevens\\_fogel.html](http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/greatdepression/stevens_fogel.html)

A longer article by Robert L. Stevens and Jared A. Fogel (*OAH Magazine of History* 16, Fall 2001) is accompanied by images at the website of the Organization of American Historians.

## New Deal issue of *Social Education*

[www.socialstudies.org/publications](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications)

The theme of the September 1996 issue of *Social Education* was “A New Deal for America,” with guest editors John F. Sears and Fred Crouch. The pdf is online free to NCSS members at the Publications Archive.



# Drummer Boys: Creating Historical Fiction and Studying Historical Documents

Daniel C. King

As my seventh grade social studies students took their seats, they looked quizzically at the photograph with no caption that I'd placed on each desk (HANDOUT A), then looked up at the board and read the questions:

1. *How old is this person?*
2. *What is he wearing, and why?*
3. *When and where was this photograph taken?*
4. *What is this person thinking and feeling?*

“Write down your best guesses in answer to these four questions,” I say.

We'd spent about a week discussing the Civil War at this point in the school year, so I had reason to believe my students had enough background information to understand my questions, and then make some coherent, educated guesses.

Five minutes later, when I saw pencils being put down and heard a murmur, “We're done,” I called the class back to order, pulled out my chart paper easel, and asked students to share some of their answers. Sure enough, their responses were right along the lines I'd hoped for. The person in the picture was a child, too young to be a soldier, but dressed in a soldier's uniform. Most students placed the photo during the time of the Civil War, but it was hard to tell (from this black-and-white image) whether this was a Union or Confederate uniform. Most students thought the boy might be feeling either scared or sad in this photo.

## Educated Guesses

“What we're going to do today,” I told the class, “is write a creative piece about the boy in the photograph. Of course we don't know much about him, but you've already told me some important details. We know he's about your age. We know he's serving in the army, and I'll inform you now

that it's a Confederate uniform. You've also guessed that he might be unhappy. Why might he be unhappy?” As we discussed this question, my 12-year-old students speculated about reasons for the boy's mood: maybe he was bored, or sad because he missed his family and friends, or perhaps he was afraid of death.

I then invited my students to create a story about the boy in the photograph. (A variation of this assignment is to write a letter in the voice of the boy in the photo.) “Give him a name,” I suggested. “Tell about his background. Explain why he joined the army, where he was, and what was about to happen. Speculate about his life after the war. It is essential,” I reminded students, “that your story be as accurate historically as possible. No stealth bombers in battle and no Nintendo DS to pass the time in camp. No radios, or cars, or antibiotics if you get sick.”

I asked for two written pages, eliciting a few groans, but also the question “Can it be longer?” from a few students. I encouraged all the students to write as much as they could during the remainder of the period. I circulated around the room as they wrote, listening to students who wanted to bounce an idea off me, answering questions about historical details, and offering encouragement when the eternal question arose, “How do I get started?”

## Quiet Enthusiasm

If there was one thing that stood out about this assignment, it was the enthusiasm with which the class worked. Here was an opportunity for them to express their knowledge in creative ways. It helped that several modalities of learning were used in this activity. There was a photograph (visual), discussion (auditory), and textbook reading that had been assigned earlier. Students who read at a low level did not have to struggle with a novel text and difficult, antiquated language, but they did engage with a primary document: the 140-year-old photograph. For strong writers, the sky was the limit. The activity was designed from the start to facilitate success, and I could sense the excitement build as students focused on their work and the room grew quiet.

## Variations on a Theme

The first time I assigned this writing activity, the results were much better than I expected. Almost everyone produced the required two handwritten pages. Many students did more, the longest story being six pages. Most impressive was the substance of the stories my students had written about this sad-faced youngster in the photo. There were very few anachronisms or errors in these student creations. (Some students, having read about draft riots during the Civil War, wrote that the boy had been drafted into the army, although he was clearly too young.)

As for his battle experience, some authors had the boy serving as a flag bearer or drummer who saw violence but didn't participate directly in the fighting, while others placed him in the heat of battle, rifle in hand. In a few cases, the boy saw friends or family members fall in battle, and one



### ABOUT THE IMAGES

Page 11: Private Edwin Francis Jemison, 2nd Louisiana Regiment. He served in the Peninsula campaign under General J.B. Magruder and was killed in the battle of Malvern Hill, July 1862. (Library of Congress) LC-B8184-10037.

Page 14: "Taylor—Drummer Boy, 78th Regt, U.S.C.I." is written under the photograph. Taylor was in the 78th Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry. Photo taken ca.1861 (National Archives and Records Administration) ARC Identifier 533233.

student wrote about family members fighting on opposite sides of the conflict. In most stories, the young boy survives the war, although in many versions he lost a limb. (My seventh graders are fascinated by Civil War field hospitals.) There were even a few poetic descriptions of his dying moments. These stories revealed a fairly good understanding of the conditions under which soldiers served in the Civil War, as well as students' ability to apply their knowledge and creativity to hypothetical situations.

### A Final Document

Peer editing of drafts is a discipline that my classes practice all year long. I pair each student with a neighbor. Students peer edit one another's work using a form with a key showing basic editing marks and a space for positive comments and/or constructive criticism and suggestions. After a draft has been corrected, it is submitted to me along with the peer editing form. (In most cases, writing an entire second draft is not needed.) I look at the quality of the draft and at comments made by peer editors. I add my thoughts, give the work back to its author to be typed, and grade the final work.

Finally, I share the caption provided by the Library of Congress. This is the image of "Private Edwin Francis Jemison, 2nd Louisiana Regiment. He served in the Peninsula campaign under General J.B. Magruder and was killed in the battle of Malvern Hill, July 1862." I tell the class that although I do not know of any letters in the historical record by Pvt. Jemison, many letters have survived from this era that they may enjoy reading.

### Extensions and Variations

This classroom activity leads naturally into other lessons that examine in more detail what life was like for young soldiers in the Civil War.

- Play instrumental music from the Civil War era while students write.
- Students can read an actual letter written by a Civil War drummer boy, transcribed in **HANDOUT B** (with

"historian's annotations" on page 12 that the teacher can use in classroom discussion) or a series of letters by a Confederate soldier published in *Social Education*.<sup>1</sup>

- Give half of your class a photograph of the Confederate boy soldier **HANDOUT C**, (page 11) while the other half gets a photo of a Union boy soldier (page 14), who is an African American. Then contrast, in a class discussion, what students imagine in their stories about these two boys.
- Students can visit Internet sites **HANDOUT D**, (page 15) where they can "dress a Union soldier" in four layers of winter clothing, examine up close all sorts of artifacts (shaving equipment, game pieces, writing implements) from Gettysburg National Park, or read collections of Civil War letters.
- You could read aloud from one of several excellent books that have been written about the experiences of boy soldiers during the Civil War.<sup>2</sup>

This writing activity allows students to analyze a historical document, draw thoughtful conclusions, practice writing, participate in peer review, and use creativity and imagination. Extension activities could involve music, websites, and additional primary sources. What more can a social studies teacher ask for in a lesson plan? 📄

### Notes

1. Stephanie Wasta and Carolyn Lott, "Eli Landers: Letters of a Confederate Soldier," *Social Education* 66, no. 2 (March 2002): 122-129; See also Joseph Hutchinson, "Learning about the Civil War through Soldiers' Letters," *Social Education* 69, no. 6 (October 2005): 318-322. Both are available in the archives, on the NCSS members-only website. Scroll down, and click on the Archives link
2. A 1992 American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults: Jim Murphy, *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk About the Civil War* (New York: Sandpiper/Clarion, 1992); Written for adults: Dennis Keese, *Too Young To Die: Boy Soldiers of the Union Army 1861 - 1865* (Huntington, WV: Blue Acorn Press, 2001), [www.ohiocivilwar.com/books.html](http://www.ohiocivilwar.com/books.html).

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## Historian's Annotations to a letter by a boy soldier

A charity provided stationery.

Felix' spelling is left unchanged in this transcription.

"Dr Brth" = Dear Brothers

"Thank God" and other religious expressions and prayers are often found in letters of this period.

"Home in A few days" = The war had ended in April 1865 and weary soldiers were hoping to be discharged soon.

Union forces marched into Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, in early April 1865.

Felix offers to pay his brothers for his drum, which the Army apparently did not supply.

Felix expects to be paid by the Army. Meanwhile, he asks for "Post. St." = postage stamps.

"Ugly and Headstrong" = Parents usually did not want their sons to join the army. Boys would argue with them and then run away from home, seeking military adventure and glory and escape from school work or farm chores.

"in Hospital" = Even absent the injuries of combat, many men were ill, and many died, due to unclean food or water. Exposure to the sun and weather, and accidents also landed soldiers in the infirmary.

A list of friends and loved ones and questions about their health were common in letters of this era.

# A Letter by Felix Voltz

Handout B

*Felix Voltz, was a drummer boy in the 187th New York Volunteer Regiment during the Civil War. Letters he wrote to his family describe the rigors of Union Army life from February through June 1865. By the time Felix sent this letter, the war had ended. Troops were to be discharged—or redeployed south for Reconstruction. Here he writes from Arlington, Virginia to his family in Buffalo, New York. Several of his letters conclude with this sentiment: “write as soon as possible for I am most sick to hear from home.”*

U.S. Christian Commission [letterhead]

May 20th / 65 Camp at Arlington Hydes

Dr Brth

I take the pen in Hand to write you once more that I am **thank God** all well yet Hoping these few lines will reach you the same. The reason I say ounce more is because We are all thinking of **being Home in A few Days**. Dr Brths I beg you to excuse me for not writing sooner. The reason was because we was on such hard Campaing and I was most all the way sick.

The Day we **marched through Richmond** it so dreadfull hot that nobody hardly could stand it and I was sunstruck and was taken to the hospitall in Richmond but I got over that in two days and was send to my Regt again.

Dr Brth another thing that my Drum arived here yesterday allright in good Order and Joe Roach says that you could not send A better one for here in the Army I thank you Brth A W for doing that favor and as soon I get **my Pay or my Bounty** I will make it all right with you.

Dr Brth I wish you would Answer soon and send me some **Post. St.** and some paper and Envelops I know no more news at Present.

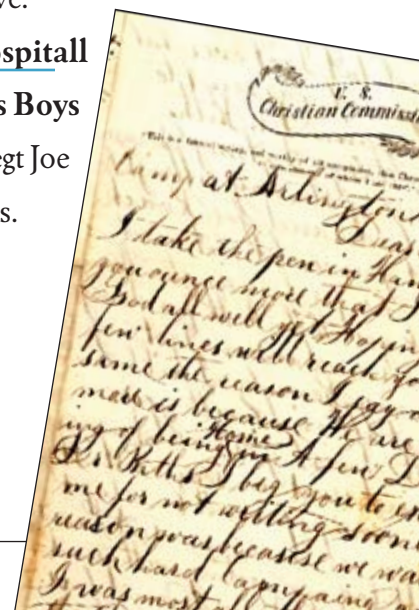
I will close my writing with sending my best Regards and love to you all in the Family tell Mother not weary herself about me because I am as healthy as ever I was and tell Father that I beg him to forgive me for being so **Ugly and Headstrong** tell him that I have found out what A home is and that there is nobody on this world thank Father & Mother and A Home and tell him if God safe my Health and lets me get Home Safe again that I will try and behafe and mind my Parents better than I have.

Tell Lechlerters Boys that Tony Beilman has come to the Regt again he was **in Hospitall** since last Fall. I will close my writing by **sending my best Respects to Lechlerters Boys and Family to all Duchenes Family** and I wish you would let me know in what Regt Joe Duchenes is Enlisted—give my best Respects to both Uncle and Bonmans Foalks.

So no mor news at Present

I remain yours truly Brother Felix Voltz

A collection of letters written by young Felix Voltz—both transcripts and images of the hand-written letters—can be seen at Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives (Blacksburg, Virginia), [spec.lib.vt.edu/voltz/](http://spec.lib.vt.edu/voltz/)



**Handout C**



# Civil War Drummer Boys: Online Resources

Please read descriptions and review any website before recommending it for student viewing.

## Camp Life

### Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service

[www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/gettex/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/gettex/index.htm)

Soldiers battled boredom by playing games, writing, drinking and smoking, whittling, making music, praying, and taking or posing for photographs. At this website, students can examine images and read descriptions and explanations. Click on a small image to call up a large color photograph of an artifact from the museum along with a detailed caption. These wonderful images—of writing implements, dice, shaving tools, etc.—appear quickly on your screen.

## Child Soldiers in the Civil War Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/children\\_civilwar/child\\_soldiers.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/children_civilwar/child_soldiers.cfm)

This website contains a short introduction to the topic and excerpts from letters that boys wrote home to their families during the Civil War. The excerpts are organized by topic: drilling, marching, fighting, life as a soldier, and prison camp confinement. Digital History is a project of Houston University, National Park Service, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and others.

## Civil War: Drummer Boys eMINTS National Center

[www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00000789.stml](http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00000789.stml)

This webpage provides ten links to online visual, music, and text resources (provided by various organizations) on topics related to young Civil War soldiers. The activities are at the middle school level. eMINTS is a University of Missouri center for using educational technology.

## The Union Army Uniform

[www.memorialhall.mass.edu/activities/dressup/civil\\_war\\_soldier.html](http://www.memorialhall.mass.edu/activities/dressup/civil_war_soldier.html)

Click the arrow to see four stages of dress, from underwear to full armor, at this nifty website of the Memorial Hall Museum in Deerfield, Massachusetts. There's a lesson about Civil War letters at the "In the Classroom" link.

## The Civil War Through a Child's Eye American Memory, Library of Congress

[lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/civilwar/overview.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/civilwar/overview.html)

This middle level lesson plan requires 5-6 class periods, but a teacher

could also use just part of the material, such as the nine-image slide show "Children in the Civil War." Students work from a webpage to analyze a photograph, write a "literary portrait" of a child, and rehearse a part for a reader's theater. (A large collection, Civil War Photographs, is nearby, but not recommended for student browsing, as it includes images of corpses, military executions, and the like. See [memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphhtml/cwphome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphhtml/cwphome.html).)

## Johnny Clem Ohio History Central

[www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=85](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=85)

This brief biography of Clem (or Klem), with a photo of the lad, mentions the "controversy raging" between historians over aspects of Clem's activities. When the war began, he was only ten years old. Although he clearly served as a drummer boy early on, "some scholars now contend that Northern reporters enhanced Clem's exploits to help promote the war effort." At OHC, one can also read about the fifteen (or so) members of the McCook family who fought for the Union, earning them the

nickname, "The Fighting McCooks." Four died in service.

## Teaching with Documents: Civil War and Reconstruction

### National Archives and Records Administration


[www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-reconstruction.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-reconstruction.html)

Although the readings are at a high school level, this website has activities that middle school teachers might use. There are lessons on black soldiers, Mathew Brady's photographs, and the Fugitive Slave Law. There's an audio recording of the last surviving Confederate veteran singing "Hang Jeff Davis from the Sour Apple Tree" among materials at the end of the lesson, "Letters, Telegrams, and Photographs."

## Civil War Related Weblinks

### U.S. Civil War Center, Louisiana State University

[www.cwc.lsu.edu/links/links6.htm](http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/links/links6.htm)

This portal contains long lists of links to Civil War diaries, letters, and recollections. Teachers looking for additional primary source material could begin at this website, but it would be daunting for students, and the material is not screened or edited for young readers. The Center also hosts the Civil War Book Review website, [www.cwbr.com](http://www.cwbr.com), which includes reviews of juvenile books at the "For Kids" link. 





# Financial Scams, Kid Style

*Housing Market Collapses!  
Big Banks Fail!  
Ponzi Scheme Exposed!*

Although the details of today's disaster-in-the-headlines are complex, the principles underlying various types of fraud are not. In fact, children may be familiar with youthful versions of money-making schemes from children's literature, spoken or Internet conversations, or their own experience.

With your class, briefly review the scams described below. Then invite students to describe any scams they have read, heard about, or witnessed that involve kids behaving dishonestly for financial gain. (Remind students to do so without naming classmates or siblings who might have been involved!) Dispassionately discuss any example that students may offer. Ask questions such as

- What part of the scam was fanciful and imaginary?
- What realistic evidence or props made the scam seem credible?
- What made the victims vulnerable to the scam?
- What led to the scam finally being exposed?
- Was there any unpleasant consequence for the scam artist?
- Was there any reconciliation between him and the victims of the scam?

## Whitewashing the Fence

In the classic tale, Tom Sawyer avoids the onerous task of painting "thirty yards of board fence nine feet high."<sup>1</sup> He pretends that the job is delightful and then barter a turn with the brush in exchange for things like "a kite in good repair" and "a couple of tadpoles."

Certainly, there is an element of dishonesty in Tom Sawyer's behavior, but whether his "clients" have been cheated is an interesting question. Ben actually enjoyed painting the fence, so maybe this pleasure was worth the crispy apple he gave to Tom.

Was Tom Sawyer a scam artist? Or was he the archetypal American salesman, convincing his customers that they have an unfulfilled need—and then handily offering to fill it?<sup>2</sup>

## Lunch-Money Bullies

A stock character in many books and movies is the schoolyard bully who grabs your lunch money. A less violent way to acquire cash is to lend other children money "for a price"—"I'll loan you \$10 if you pay me back \$13 next week. That's an interest rate of 3/10, or 30 percent per week.

Many credit card and "payday loan" companies in the United States charge interest rates of 30 percent per year and higher. This "legal usury" has contributed to the financial distress of millions of families that get caught in a vicious cycle of expanding interest payments.<sup>3</sup>

## Cake Futures

In an interview broadcast by NPR, an adult named Josh recalls how, as a third grader in a new school, he came up with a scheme to get candy bars and chips from his classmates. His mother put only healthy items like sandwiches and apples in his lunch, so Josh was excluded from the usual lunchroom bartering of snack foods.

Josh made up a story. He "told his classmates that every year, on the last day of class, his mother would bake a cake. A huge cake. The most delicious cake you've ever tasted."

As students handed over their snacks to Josh, he would make entries in a notebook indicating who would receive a slice of cake (or two, or three) on that glorious last day of school.

One curious aspect of this scam was the mutually reinforcing psychology between the scam artist and his victims. "I just imagined the hero's welcome I was going to receive when they wheeled this Technicolor, baked colossus into the schoolyard," said Josh. "We all just bought into the idea of this cake."


Eventually, adults became aware that something fishy was going on in the lunchroom. Josh's scheme was exposed, and he was punished.

Listen with your class to Josh telling his story at the NPR website.<sup>4</sup> Do you hear any echoes of today's financial news headlines?

## Stone Soup

Can deception ever be used for a good purpose? In the children's folk tale "Stone Soup," a stranger invites starving villagers to add whatever scraps of food they have—a carrot top, a bit of cabbage or potato, a chunk of bone—to a large pot of water in which he has placed a "magic stone." The stranger boils the mix and, after a while, serves a nutritious and tasty soup to all the villagers.

There is, of course, no magic in the stone. The story is a parable about the benefits of sharing: each poor villager "invests" something in a common enterprise, which generates greater wealth and happiness for all.

Why did the stranger think it necessary to appeal to the villagers with "magic"? Did the stranger "scam" the villagers, or did he just create a "useful myth"? 

## Notes

1. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).
2. *The Great Brain* by John D. Fitzgerald (New York: Puffin, 2004) is the first in a series about "Tom," a clever boy with "a penchant for swindling his pals." Written in the voice of his younger brother, the stories have "an interesting historical setting; believable characters that develop as the series progresses; plenty of humor, of both the laugh-out-loud and subtler varieties; tenderness and pathos; and even a few good scares."—reviewer Christopher S. Danielsen at Amazon.com.
3. Americans for Fairness in Lending, [www.affil.org](http://www.affil.org).
4. Alex Blumberg, "Sweet Memories of a Snack Food Financial Scheme," (National Public Radio on Morning Edition's Planet Money, March 13, 2009). Transcript and audio file online at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101838294](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101838294).

