

The Mudcat

The Mississippi History Newsletter for Students

Vol 1. No 3.

Fall 2013

The Great Depression and the Movies

Movies are a great way to learn about history. They allow us to see and hear what life might have been like for people in the past. Many excellent films have been set during the **Great Depression** in the United States, including *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Souder* (1972, 2003), and *Annie* (1982, 1999). Each of these films provides a unique view of the Great Depression, but the movies don't always accurately portray the people and events of that time. It was not until recently that a popular movie focused on the experience of Mississippians during this difficult period. *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) is the story of three escaped prisoners in Mississippi fleeing the law and meeting a variety of characters in their trek across the state. The movie covers many aspects of life during the Great Depression from blues and folk music to bank robbers to racism. One of the positive effects of this movie was that it made people wonder, "What was the Great Depression? And what was life really like in Mississippi at that time?"

Hard Times in Mississippi



Sharecroppers. Images courtesy of Library of Congress (top left) and Mississippi Department of Archives and History (bottom left and top right).



During the Great Depression as one quarter of all Americans were **unemployed**. Historians often mark the beginning of the Great Depression with the famous Stock Market Crash of October 1929. The crash hurt many

people because it caused factories to close or **lay off** employees in order to save money. Furthermore, a huge **drought** hit the central United States in the early 1930s. This forced many farmers to **migrate** west in search of new jobs.

In Mississippi times were especially tough. Many Mississippians were either small independent farmers or **sharecroppers** who worked hard and depended on good harvests (usually cotton) to survive. Even before the Crash of 1929, cotton prices were falling so low that it was almost impossible for small farmers to

survive. A large number of African Americans living in Mississippi worked as sharecroppers and were treated very poorly by the whites who owned the land they farmed. The combination of low crop prices and racial violence caused many African Americans to leave the south to find jobs in northern cities; this is referred to as the **Great Migration**. Despite these challenges, *O Brother* revealed Mississippi as a complex place and makes us want to take a deeper look at Depression-era Mississippi.

The Radio

Radio played a big part in Depression-era Mississippi, just as it did in *O Brother*. As a new technology in the 1930s, radios provided news, entertainment, and new music across the country. Because of the high price

of this new technology, oftentimes friends and neighbors would gather and listen to a single radio together, drawing communities closer and helping to distract people from the difficulties of daily life.



Crosley Radio, 1924, one of the first radios used in Ackerman, Mississippi (top), and RCA Victor Table Top Radio, ca. 1930-1940 (bottom). Images courtesy of Museum Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Outlaws and Prisons

Outlaws, bank robbers, and other criminals during the Great Depression were often looked upon with understanding. They were seen as ordinary men driven to crime by **poverty** and injustice. Stories of the bank robbers' exploits were very popular and made newspaper and radio headlines all over the country.

Even minor crimes

could often lead to prison and work on a **chain gang**. During the first half of the 1900s, it was common for many male prisoners to be put to work doing hard physical labor.

Just like the prisoners in *O Brother*, these convicts wore shackles on their ankles and were connected



Image courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

to one another by a large chain, thus being nicknamed "chain gangs."

Do you notice anything unusual about the men on this chain gang? It's something they all have in common...

The Blues in Mississippi



Blues music was born in the Mississippi Delta, and its origins are closely tied to the experience of African Americans. Blues originally developed out of the spirituals, chants, and work songs sung by enslaved Africans. The rhythmic music usually told a sad story about lost love, hard times, or cruelty from whites. As

the style became more popular during the 1930s, artists were recorded and the blues spread from the South into urban areas. Once labeled "slave music" the blues would become one of the most influential music genres developed in America. The blues would influence rock and roll of the 50s, 60s, 70s, and today.

One character in the film, Tommy Johnson, was based on two real Mississippi bluesmen, Tommy Johnson and Robert Johnson. Both of these men were excellent guitarists; they are just two of the musicians who called Mississippi home during the years of the Great Depression.

The guitar above was owned by blues player Tobe Hudson from Gholson, Mississippi. He ordered it from the Sears and Roebuck Co. in 1932. Image courtesy of Museum Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Investigate More

You can visit these sites and museums across the state to learn more about Mississippi and the Great Depression!

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt...

This website is based on a book by Robert Cohen about the experiences of children during the Great Depression. On it, you can read actual letters that kids sent to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt asking for help during the Great Depression. Read some of the letters at <http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/index.htm>

The webpage is sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (FERI). The FERI is a non-profit organization devoted to honoring the legacy and preserving the values of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt through special grants and programs.

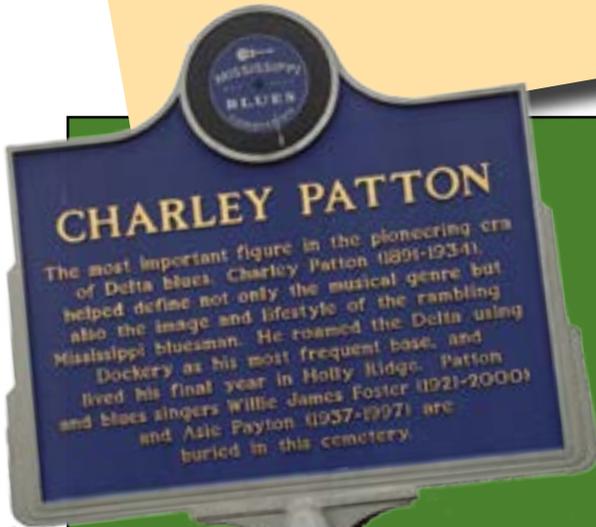
Your Friend,
The Mudcat



Canton Movie Museum

The town of Canton, Mississippi, was used as the filming location for a number of popular films including *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *My Dog Skip* (2000) because of its charming, well-preserved downtown district. The Canton Movie Museum is a great way to explore how films are made and how we can use them to learn more about our history.

Learn more at www.cantontourism.com.



CHARLEY PATTON

The most important figure in the pioneering era of Delta blues, Charley Patton (1891-1934), helped define not only the musical genre but also the image and lifestyle of the rambling Mississippi bluesman. He roamed the Delta using Dockery as his most frequent base, and lived his final year in Holly Ridge. Patton and blues singers Willie James Foster (1921-2000) and Asie Payton (1937-1997) are buried in this cemetery.



"THE NACHEZ BURNING"

One of the legendary fires in American history, the burning of the Natchez in 1845 is a story of destruction and rebirth. The Natchez, a large and powerful Native American tribe, was destroyed by a fire that burned for three days. The story of the burning is a testament to the resilience of the Natchez people and the power of nature.

Explore the Delta and Learn about the Blues

The Mississippi Blues Trail is a series of historical markers on sites that were important to the growth of the blues. There are over one hundred markers spread through every corner of Mississippi.

Visit www.msbluestrail.org to discover which markers are near your hometown.



BUD SCOTT

Clarence "Bud" Scott, Sr., led one of the most popular dance bands in the Mississippi Delta region for several decades beginning around 1920. Scott (1898-1978), a fitting Natchez resident, was renowned among both white and black audiences. Although the dance band was popular, the Scotts normally could have lived when he was from the delivery of the Natchez Collectionary at this site. Scott and Clarence, Sr. (1920-1945), also known as Bud, led the band to the later years.

Show What You Know!

Vocabulary

Chain gang: groups of prisoners chained together to perform physical labor as a form of punishment.

Drought: a period of dry weather that harms crops.

Great Depression: a severe economic crisis in the U.S. lasting from 1929 through the 1930s.

Great Migration: the movement of six million African Americans out of the South during the early and mid-twentieth century in order to find work and escape racial violence and discrimination.

Lay off: the act of dismissing employees.

Migrate: to move from one country, region, or place to another.

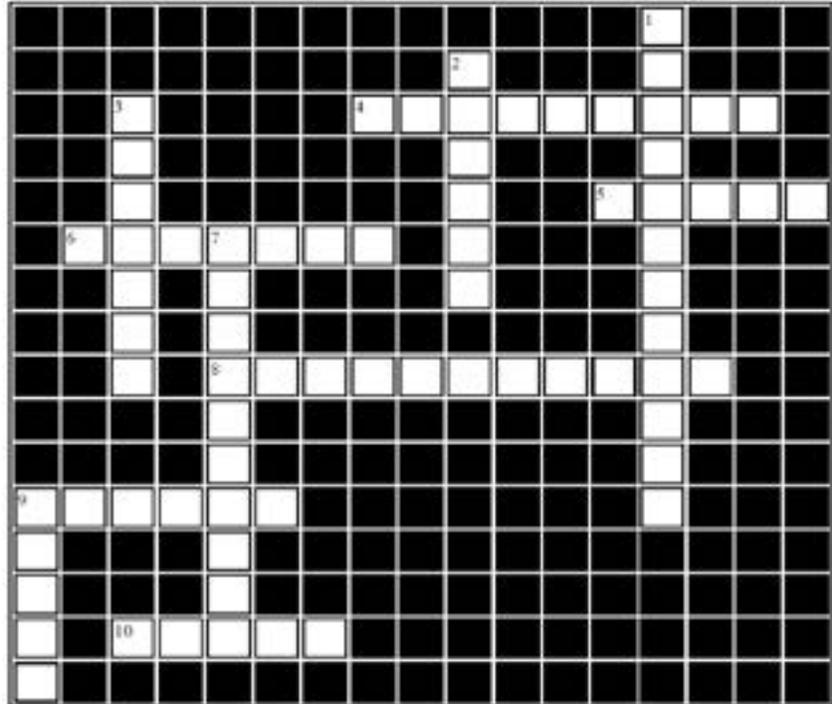
Poverty: the condition of being poor.

Sharecropper: a tenant farmer who pays a share of the crop as rent.

Unemployed: without a job; out of work.

Crossword Puzzle

Fill-in the correct answers to the clues below



Across

4. Groups of prisoners who were made to do manual labor while shackled and chained together (2 words)
5. The region of Mississippi where the blues was born
6. A period of dry weather, especially one that is long and damages crops
8. The state where *O Brother, Where Art Thou* was filmed
9. Primary crop in Mississippi in the 1930s
10. The new technology that allowed

Americans to listen to news and entertainment for the first time during the Great Depression

Down

1. A tenant farmer who pays a share of the crop as rent
2. The act of dismissing employees, especially temporarily (2 words)
3. To go from one country region, or place to another
7. Without a job; out of work
9. The Stock Market _____ of 1929

Crossword Answer Key: Across: 4.chain gang; 5.Delta; 6.drought; 8.Mississippi; 9.cotton; 10.radio. Down: 1.sharecropper; 2.lay off; 3.migrate; 7.unemployed; 9.crash

Create a Catfish Competition

How **would you like to see a catfish of your own creation on the cover** of the *Mudcat*? If you're an artist – or even if you're not! – **craft a cool catfish graphic**, send it in to the *Mudcat*, and

YOUR catfish could win a coveted spot on the cover of the next issue!

Send all entries via mail or email to:

Congratulations to James G. of Southaven, Mississippi, for this issue's winning Mudcat!

Outreach Programs Coordinator Museum Division, MDAH
P.O. Box 571, Jackson, MS 39205-0571 outreachprograms@mdah.state.ms.us