Iowa in the 1920s and ‘30s, Fact vs. Opinion

Subject: Social Studies

Estimated Time: 45-50 minutes

Grade Level: 4th and up

National Council for the Social Studies Standard(s):
III: People, Places, and Environments: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.
VII: Production, Distribution, and Consumption: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

Iowa Standard(s): Standard 4c: The teacher engages students in varied experiences that meet diverse needs and promote social, emotional, and academic growth.


Objective: The student will be able to identify characteristics of life in Iowa during the 1920s and ‘30s and distinguish between opinions and facts.

Lesson Procedures:
Have students answer these interest-building questions:
• What do you think Iowa was like in the 1920s and ‘30s?
• Who was Grant Wood? List anything you know about him.
Together as a class read and discuss “Iowa in the 1920s and ‘30s Summary.”
Divide students into small cooperative learning groups (3-4 per group).
Give groups a copy of the opinion chart. Review the difference between opinion and fact.

Students will discuss together whether the reality facts on the slip of paper either support or challenge the opinion. They will place or paste the reality fact in the opinion chart under the support or challenge heading.

Correct and discuss together completed charts.
Examine picture of Grant Wood’s Appraisal, discuss.

(Assessment) Have students answer these follow-up example questions:
• How was Iowa different in the 1920s and ‘30s than what you originally predicted at the beginning of this lesson?
• Describe the characteristics of life in Iowa during the 1920s and ‘30s.
• What does Grant Wood have to do with that time period?
The First World War ended in 1918. Iowans cheered home the soldiers who had fought in Europe to defeat Germany. Most people hoped that there would be a time with few problems, but that did not happen. The war brought changes that lasted even after the fighting had ended.

Farmers were some of the first to have trouble. During the war they had worked hard to produce more corn and livestock. The extra food helped to feed the American armies and our allies in Great Britain and France. When the war ended, farms in Europe began to produce food again. There was not as much need for American food.

Soon there was more corn, cattle, and hogs than people wanted to buy. The prices for farm products fell and farmers received less money. Many farmers had borrowed money from banks to buy new tractors and farm equipment. Some had bought more land. When prices fell, many farmers could not repay their loans to the banks. Without those repayments, the banks could not continue. In the early 1920s many banks in small Iowa towns had to close. People who had savings accounts in those banks lost the money they had invested.

In 1928 the United States elected Herbert Hoover to be president. Hoover was born in West Branch, Iowa, the only Iowan to be elected president. When Hoover was still a boy, his parents died and he moved away to live with relatives. After World War I many people in Europe were starving because they had no food. Hoover worked hard to get food to these people, and he was highly respected in Europe.

By 1930 and throughout the next few years farm prices dropped even lower. In some places farmers burned corn in their stoves rather than coal because corn was so cheap. Factories closed when people could not buy the products they produced. The people who worked at the factories lost their jobs. A depression is when many people are out of work and have little money. Things were so bad in the 1920s and ‘30s that it is called The Great Depression.

The government in Washington stepped in to try to help things. The government hired people to work on projects like building highways, schools, and bridges. It gave money to farmers who promised to produce smaller crops. While things got better for some people, many people in the 1930s had a hard time making a living.

There were some good things for farmers, however. An Iowan named Henry Wallace began experimenting with corn. He discovered how to grow a better kind of corn seed. It is called “hybrid” corn. When farmers plant it, they get more corn out of each field. In the 1920s and 1930s, farmers began using more hybrid corn. Henry Wallace became Vice President of the United States in 1940.

Some other good things happened during this time. Many more families bought automobiles. They took vacations to near and distant places. More Iowa children attended high school than ever before. Iowa built many miles of highways to make travel easier. By the end of the 1930s, some brave Iowans were even making trips in airplanes. Trucks were hauling goods from farms to towns and from towns to cities. Sports became popular. Radios and newspapers carried reports of football and basketball games. In 1939, Nile Kinnick, a football player at the University of Iowa, won the Heisman Trophy, the nation's highest award in college football.

The twenty years after WWI were years of tremendous change. On Iowa farms and in Iowa towns and cities, people adjusted to the new ways as best they could.
Opinion Chart

Directions: Decide which factual statement about Iowa in the 1920s and ’30s fits the best with which opinion/belief. Next paste the factual statement under the "Support" heading if you think it supports the belief or "Challenge" heading if you think it challenges the belief. Not all the boxes will be filled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Supports the Opinion</th>
<th>Challenges the Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;People who work hard make a lot of money.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Iowa is a good place to live.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Iowans have done important things.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GRANT WOOD AT 5 TURNER ALLEY
## Iowa Fact List

**Directions:** Cut apart these statements about Iowa in the 1920s and '30s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the 1920s many banks in small Iowa towns had to close. People who had savings accounts in those banks lost their money.</td>
<td>The early 1920s saw a great increase in rural students attending high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most farm homes produced their own food, so hunger was less common in Iowa and small towns than in large cities.</td>
<td>Movies glorified city life as exciting and a challenge to rural values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular American authors ridiculed and made fun of Midwestern life.</td>
<td>Prices for farm products fell and farmers received less money for their crops and livestock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In 1928, the United States elected Herbert Hoover to become president.</td>
<td>Factories closed when shoppers could not afford to buy products. People who worked at factories lost their jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Iowan named Henry Wallace began experimenting with corn and produced “hybrid” corn.</td>
<td>In 1939, Nile Kinnick, a football player at the University of Iowa, won the Heisman Trophy, the nation's highest award in college football.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grant Wood, *Appraisal*, 1931, oil on composition board, 29 1/2 x 35 1/4in., Dubuque Museum of Art, on long-term loan from the Carnegie-Stout Public Library, acquired through the Lull Art Fund. LTL.99.08
United States in the 1920s and '30s

Summary

When the World War ended in Europe in 1918, the United States was a different nation than it was before the fighting began. Factories had grown and farms were producing record crops and livestock. Much of Europe lay in ruins, but the United States had become the strongest country in the world.

The American population was growing rapidly. In 1920 there were 106 million people living in the United States. In 1940 there were 132 million. Most of the growth had occurred in cities, not in farms or small towns. Because of the war and other problems, many people from other countries wanted to live in America. Some Americans feared that too many immigrants would come and bring new and unfamiliar customs. They feared that the newcomers would not learn English or understand how the government works. In 1924, Congress passed a law limiting the number of new immigrants who could come. Some countries could not send immigrants at all. Many years later the law was changed to allow more immigrants to become Americans.

In the 1920s the cities seemed to be better off than the farms. Factories were busy making cars, electrical appliances, clothing, and many other products. Farmers were having trouble because prices for farm products were low. In 1929, however, the whole nation began to have trouble. Factories began to close, laying off their workers. When the workers had no paychecks, they could not buy products. This meant even more factories had to close because they could not sell what they were producing. So many people were out of work with no money that it became The Great Depression.

In 1932 Franklin Roosevelt was elected President. Roosevelt and Congress created programs that put people to work building roads and schools, writing plays, teaching school, and many other tasks. They created the Civilian Conservation Corps that gave young men food and clothing and sent home some money to their families. The young men worked in parks and other nature projects. The government promised higher prices to farmers if they would agree to reduce the size of their crops and livestock herds. Still, for the rest of the 1930s, many Americans had little money.

In 1920 a law made it illegal to make, sell, or buy alcohol anywhere in America. Because the law "prohibited" alcohol sales, it was called "Prohibition." While many Americans supported the law because they thought alcohol increased crime, disease, and poverty, other Americans believed that individuals should have the right to choose whether or not to drink. Alcohol sales continued, even though they were illegal. Criminals, especially in the larger cities, set up networks to transport beer and liquor to private businesses that sold it. The police worked hard to enforce the laws, but too many people disobeyed it. Too much effort went into trying to enforce the law. Finally, in 1933 the law was changed, and each state was given the right to decide how liquor could be sold. National prohibition was over.

Many people remember the 1920s as a time of great change. Women got the right to vote. Young women especially began to have more freedom to go places on their own without adult supervision. Jazz music became popular. Its energy and wild rhythms seemed to represent a new lifestyle, free from old restrictions. Automobiles gave everyone more opportunities to travel and to go where and when they wanted.

In 1939 European nations again went to war. In 1941 Japan attacked United States ships at the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii. America entered World War II against Japan, Italy, and Germany. Suddenly there were jobs for everyone and Americans worked hard to support the soldiers.
IOWA IN THE 1920s AND ‘30s

Grant Wood's Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s was like the Iowa of his youth in some ways, but in others, it was changing rapidly. And the world in which that Iowa existed was also changing. While the fighting in Europe may have seemed a long distance from Iowa when World War I (1914-1918) started, young men from Iowa were fighting and dying in a new kind of warfare before it ended. As much as people wanted to forget the horrors of World War I, its aftermath cast a long shadow and planted the seeds for economic depression and a second world conflict.

Economic Depression

While many textbooks relate the Depression to the 1930s, for Iowa farmers and the Iowa small towns and cities that depended upon agriculture, the Depression began a full decade earlier. During World War I, the Federal government had guaranteed high prices to encourage farmers to boost production of crops and livestock. Wartime posters of Uncle Sam appealed to farmers' patriotism and proclaimed "Food Will Win the War." Farmers responded enthusiastically. They put more acres into crop production and increased the size of their livestock herds. Corn, beef, and pork production hit record highs. Farmers' incomes were also higher than ever before.

All of this changed quickly. In the spring of 1920, the Federal government announced that it would no longer guarantee prices for farm products. With increased production capacity built up during the war, surpluses in key farm commodities led to a rapid fall in prices. Corn that was selling for $1.73 a bushel in July 1920 plunged to only 41 cents a year later. Throughout all of the 1920s, it averaged only 68 cents.

Land prices followed a similar pattern. From 1918 to 1920, there was a boom in the value of Iowa farm land. Believing that prices were only going up, investors, including many farmers themselves, began bidding hard for farm land in the spring of 1920, pushing up prices dramatically. In one county in west central Iowa, the value of an acre of farmland averaged $194 from 1917 to 1920. In a land boom in the spring of 1920, the price tag shot up to $271 per acre.

To add to their woes, many farmers faced larger debts. To expand production during the war, they borrowed money from local banks to buy land, new equipment, or more cattle and hogs. When farm prices fell, they could no longer meet their payments to the banks. Many farmers went bankrupt and lost their farms.

Farmers were hoping the banks could extend them credit in the hope of rising farm prices, but banks themselves were in trouble. Many farmers had mortgaged their land to obtain credit to expand, but the value of farmland itself declined as farm incomes fell. When they could no longer make payments, the bank had to foreclose. But in doing so, the banks took possession of farms worth less than their loans. Soon many small town banks' assets were less than their obligations to depositors. This led to runs on banks by anxious depositors, and when banks could no longer pay back their creditors, they too went bankrupt. "An epidemic of bank failures swept the state in 1921 and continued through the decade. In 1921 the number jumped to 505. It fell to 366 in 1922 but rose and remained over 500 for several years" (Prairie Grass Roots, Morain, 1988, p. 223).

Farm organizations pressured the Federal government to provide economic relief for agriculture. The most important proposal of the 1920s was the McNary-Haugen Bill, introduced in the House of Representatives by Iowa's Rep. Gilbert Haugen of Northwood. The plan proposed having the Federal government buy up all the grain American farmers produced. The government would then sell all the grain needed for the domestic market at the same price it paid for it. Surplus grain would be sold on foreign markets at whatever price it could receive. To cover any loss the government experienced, farmers would be charged an "equalization fee" on each bushel of grain they sold to the government. In theory, the government would neither make nor lose money. While Congress passed the McNary-Haugen Bill twice, President Calvin Coolidge vetoed it each time, claiming that it was an unlawful tax and would create a cumbersome Federal bureaucracy. Midwesterners, including even loyal Republicans, resented Coolidge's veto. The Federal government, they pointed out, promoted manufacturing by imposing high tariffs on imported items, raising the cost of things that farmers had to buy.
The Midwest continued to suffer throughout the 1920s. In the early 1930s, they got even worse. "It took a full year for the impact of the 1929 collapse of Wall Street to reach the rural Midwest, but when it did, a depressed farm economy sank even lower. From 78 cents in 1929, the price of a bushel of corn dropped to only 70 cents in 1930. In the next two years, however the bottom fell out, and Iowa farmers faced a truly bleak situation. Not even the collapse (in 1920) had been that bad. In 1931 the price averaged 43 cents and at some points dipped much lower. Throughout 1932 the statewide average was only 23 cents. These were the years when some farmers burned corn in their kitchen stoves rather than coal because corn was cheaper. The sharp drop in prices brought about another epidemic of rural bank failures in 1931" (p. 248).

In 1932, many Midwestern farmers who normally voted Republican abandoned their party and its incumbent President, Iowa-born Herbert Hoover, and helped to elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Democratic governor of New York. Roosevelt appointed an Iowan, Henry A. Wallace, to be Secretary of Agriculture, and charged him to develop a program to provide relief to farmers.

Wallace was willing to support Federal price guarantees, but he added a new provision to address the problem of farm surplus: production controls. Farmers who wanted a guaranteed price for their products had to agree to reduce their production. This concept was embodied in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, one of the most innovative and far-reaching bills passed as part of FDR's "New Deal." Through the AAA, Federal assistance began flowing to farmers and helped them meet bank mortgage payments and tax bills. Although it is debated whether the AAA really helped to raise prices, it did give farmers hope and helped to ward off violence that had occasionally erupted in small pockets. It did, however, convert many farmers into permanent Democratic voters.

Iowa towns and cities suffered along with the farms. When farmers had no money, they couldn't buy tractors or field equipment or other products of Iowa factories. Retailers suffered everywhere. While most farmers could raise much of their own food, unemployed city dwellers faced real hunger and often had to accept assistance from welfare programs to keep their families from starving. The Iowa that Grant Wood experienced in the 1920s and 1930s, whether in Cedar Rapids or the farms surrounding it, was not a place of prosperity.

WWI stimulated farmers to increase their output. When the war ended, government price supports ended. When government purchases and overseas markets shrunk, a surplus of crops and livestock emerged and prices dropped sharply. For Iowa farmers and the towns and cities that depended on agriculture, the Depression began in the 1920s, not in 1929 with the collapse of the Stock Market.

**Regional tensions**

It was not only on the economic front that times were tough for the Midwest. The 1920s and 1930s saw cultural values that many Midwesterners supported come under attack. After WWI, the world witnessed the struggles of many "DPs" in Europe, "Displaced Persons" who were uprooted by the fighting and disruption of familiar patterns of life. In a symbolic way, many Midwesterners came to feel something like "Displaced Persons" as the world they had known seemed to be crumbling with the rise of eastern cities, radio, movies, and critics of small-town life.

During the 19th Century, evangelical Protestant churches like the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists had achieved remarkable success in winning members, especially throughout the Midwest. They went on to translate those numbers into legislators at the local, state, and national levels who enacted laws that reflected the evangelical Protestants' vision of what a good society should be. Many Midwestern towns had laws that prohibited recreation and commercial activities on Sunday, which they believed should be given over to quiet contemplation. Laws prohibited gambling and prostitution.

Their major crusade was to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol. They rejoiced in 1918 with the passage of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that made Prohibition the law of the land. But their hopes faded when they discovered that Federal Prohibition spawned a thriving bootlegging industry and that law officials in many areas, particularly eastern cities, did not intend to enforce the law vigorously. Chicago especially became synonymous with mobsters and gangs who often seemed to be from eastern or southern European immigrant groups. Instead of being repelled by the development, many Americans, especially in the East, joked openly about the easy access to bootleg alcohol in speakeasies and city night clubs and characterized Prohibitionists as prudish remnants of the past. The repeal of national Prohibition came in 1933.
Another concern was the growing number of immigrants, most of whom settled in the cities. Before the Civil War, most immigrants to the United States came from the nations of northern Europe: Germany, the British Isles, Scandinavia, Holland, and France. Many others migrated from Canada. Most immigrants settling in Iowa in the 19th century were from Germany and Ireland. In the closing decades of the century, however, rising numbers of immigrants to America came from southern and eastern Europe: Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the Balkan countries. They supplied much of the labor for the tremendous growth of American factories in cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston. They brought with them languages, customs, political views, and religious beliefs that seemed strange or threatening to Americans who had been born here. In the 1920s, Congress passed a number of measures seeking to restrict immigration from eastern and southern Europe. There were severe restrictions on the number of Asians allowed to enter the United States.

Many Midwesterners supported these restrictions because they feared that these new ethnic groups could gain too much political power and undermine "American values."

A new generation of American writers emerged in the 1920s who established careers by ridiculing the Midwest and its values. Sinclair Lewis published Main Street in 1920, a scathing indictment of the cultural poverty of the Midwestern small town. He followed it up with several other novels attacking businessmen and even the clergy. Edgar Lee Masters took similar aim in his Spoon River Anthology as did Sherwood Anderson in Winesburg, Ohio. The most scathing attacks came from H. L. Mencken writing in the American Mercury magazine. When farmers were pushing for Federal support of crop prices, Mencken's essay entitled "The Husbandman" savaged the farmer as "a tedious fraud and ignoramus, a cheap rogue and hypocrite, the eternal Jack of the human pack. Any city man, not insane, who sheds tears for him is shedding tears of the crocodile." Accustomed to being praised as the essence of the best in America, farmers and small-town residents now found themselves ridiculed as provincial, dull, and self-serving.

The city was finding new ways to penetrate the small town. Hollywood movies were becoming a staple of small-town life, often replacing the live entertainment of traveling companies or summer Chautauqua troupes. Glamorous movie stars with attitudes toward sex, alcohol, dancing, and many other restricted topics for evangelical Protestants promoted a different lifestyle than small town youth were learning at home or at Sunday school. A new style of music gave its name to the era, and the radio brought it into homes all over the country. "The Jazz Age" exploded in full force after WWI in raucous and rhythmic energy. It too was associated with night clubs where bootleg liquor flowed freely. The "best people," it seemed, "the smart set" were no longer in sync with Midwestern, small-town values.

Even religion seemed to be coming under attack. In the previous century, some scientists like evolutionist Charles Darwin seemed to be challenging Biblical accounts of the story of creation. In his Origin of Species, Darwin argued for a theory of evolution that upset religious conservatives. When the state of Tennessee made teaching evolution illegal, a court case in Dayton captured the attention of a nation. John T. Scopes, a young biology teacher, was charged with teaching a theory of evolution contrary to the Bible. Clarence Darrow was the primary attorney in Scopes defense. Three-time Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan was a chief advocate for the prosecution and even testified as a Bible expert. The eastern press tended to make fun of the rural setting and advocates for a literal interpretation of the Bible, once again signaling a retreat from 19th-century evangelical Protestant values. It was just one more way in which Midwesterners seemed to be becoming "Displaced Persons" without ever leaving home.

Farm vs. City

Within Iowa itself, there were some geographic tensions. Farmers were especially sensitive to changing times. Technology was bringing wonderful changes but the benefits were not distributed equally. Iowa cities and small towns seemed to be improving much more rapidly, and farm families, already hit by economic hard times, were finding that life on the farm was not keeping pace with the many advances.

The automobile had brought many changes to farm life even before WWI. Sales of the Ford Model-T starting in 1909 made a cheap, dependable vehicle possible for most families, town or country. Automobiles brought demands for better roads, and with them, the question of who should pay for road building and maintenance. Farmers feared loss of local control over the roads they traveled daily and unsuccessfully tried to block the creation of a State Highway Commission. On the other hand, automobiles made it possible for farm teenagers to commute to and from school on a daily basis, and more farm students enrolled in high school. In an effort to support education beyond the neighborhood one-room school, many rural school districts consolidated with nearby town districts to support high schools. Driving back and forth to town became easier, and farm wives no longer limited trips to Saturday night only. Automobiles did much to end the isolation of the farm and to help integrate farm families with the towns.
But through much of the ‘20s and ‘30s, an important technological resource remained beyond the reach of most farm families. While most Iowa cities and small towns had electricity well before WWI, most farm families remained without service until the late 1930s and beyond. Running wires through the country seemed too expensive. Farm homes of even the most prosperous farm families lacked electric lights, indoor plumbing, electric refrigerators, radios, and other appliances that town homes were taking for granted by the 1920s. A gap in the standard of living between town and country undercut the appeal of farm life. In 1936, Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act that provided low-cost loans to rural electric cooperatives. It took several years for some areas of the state to bring in the new service (World War II made the purchase of copper wire and other equipment difficult), but electrical service had become a reality on the farm by 1950.

Automobiles and electricity did much to reduce the gap between those Iowans who lived on the farm and those in small towns and cities. With the end of World War II, farming began to be less of a complete way of life and more like other occupations.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Grant Wood was creating the works of art that would make him world-famous, Iowa was going through some difficult transitions. The 1920 census revealed that for the first time, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. The dream of Founding Fathers like Thomas Jefferson that the United States would be a nation of small farmers, not of city dwellers, had not become a reality. The city was to become the driving force in American culture. The realization of what that meant came as a surprise for many Iowans in the 1920s.