

Case Study: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Visit to Coal Mine (1935)

In this case study students use a cartoon, a photo, and a magazine article to explore what it was like to be a coal miner during the Depression and consider how Eleanor Roosevelt, representing the New Deal, learn about miners – and begin to redefine what it meant to be a First Lady.

National History Standards

US History

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society.

Standard 2: How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state.

Historical Thinking Skills

Use secondary sources to establish a historical context.

Work effectively with primary sources.

Grade Levels

Appropriate for middle and high school students. (See modification for middle school students in step 6 of the activity.)

Historical Background

“The worldwide, decade-long Great Depression struck the United States like a biblical plague, shuttering factories, closing banks, foreclosing on farms, and putting as many as one out of three workers on the street. Mass unemployment and economic insecurity lasted for a full decade, searing the memory and transforming the politics of an entire generation. Although the vast majority of Americans owned no stock, few escaped the social impact of the 1929 market crash. Unemployment jumped from fewer than 500,000 workers to more than four million between October and December 1929. Millions more could find only part-time work. Average real wages fell 16 percent in just two years. Uninsured by either state or federal authorities, more than five thousand smaller banks failed during the first three years of the Great Depression. Nine million people lost their savings accounts.” (Rosenzweig, 391-2) And, because the effects of the stock market crash spread beyond the borders of the United States, banks failed and unemployment soared throughout the industrial world.

“Material deprivation was only part of the human cost of the Depression. The psychological strains were severe too. Almost everyone felt insecure. Those who had jobs feared losing them; those without work worried about what would become of their families.” (Rosenzweig, 394) Many people, employed and unemployed, fell behind on their rent and mortgage payments and lost their homes. “By 1932, a quarter of a million youths under age twenty-one (as well as many of their older counterparts) had left home in search of work or shelter, hitching rides or hopping freight trains in what one government agency called a ‘migration of despair.’” (Rosenzweig, 396)

When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as President in March of 1933, he responded to America's fears by asserting, "The nation calls for action and action now." FDR "did take immediate action with a wide array of programs—collectively known as 'the New Deal'—that were designed to restore production and stability in banking, agriculture, and industry... Industrial recovery was the greatest task confronting the new Deal. How could the downward cycle of falling wages, prices, profits, and employment be stopped?" (Rosenzweig, 425) In June 1933 Roosevelt pushed through "the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which mandated a government-sanctioned system of business self-regulation, coordinated by a National Recovery Administration (NRA)... The NRA used government power to regulate the market, raise prices, and increase wages... To end the downward cycle of wage cuts and price reductions, NRA codes spelled out permissible production and marketing practices for each industry." (Rosenzweig, 427) In theory, consumers, labor, and the government would help to write the codes; such was the case in the coal industry. But many "recognized that industry self-regulation required a strong labor movement... If labor had enough power, it could ensure that employers complied with the minimum wage standards and maximum hour regulations set out in the codes. But labor power would come only with successful union organizing. Section 7a of the NIRA gave employees 'the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing... free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers.'" (Rosenzweig, 427)

"During the first three years of the Great Depression... strikes were virtually nonexistent as union membership dropped to less than 10 percent of the national workforce." (Rosenzweig, 429) The United Mine Workers (UMW) too had languished. The United Mine Workers union was formed in 1890 to improve wages and working conditions for the miners. Coal miners had always faced harsh and unsafe working conditions. They worked from 12 to 14 hours a day for very low pay in mines where the shafts often exploded or caved in. Mine owners commonly paid their workers in scrip, company-printed money, rather than in US currency. Scrip was usable only in company-owned stores, where prices were significantly higher. Miners also lived in company-owned housing—in fact the companies sometimes owned whole towns which forced miners into debt to the owners. Company towns were a particular problem in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Finally, many mine workers were actually children, with mine owners commonly hiring boys as young as ten years of age to work in mines.

"Everything changed in 1933 when workers dramatically embraced collective action... The NIRA enabled labor organizers to assert that workers could make a patriotic contribution to the national recovery effort by joining a union. Organizers of the UMW toured the coal fields with leaflets that declared, 'The President Wants You to Join a Union!' ... The sudden rebirth of the UMW demonstrated how quickly unionists seized the opportunities that FDR's programs generated, both to revive their own organizations and, in the process, to transform the very meaning of the entire New Deal... Once it became clear that the NIRA would be passed, the miners' union gambled its remaining resources on a lightning-quick organizing campaign, throwing 100 organizers into the field. The response was tremendous. By June 17, the day after Roosevelt signed the

NIRA, 80 percent of Ohio miners had signed union cards. UMW president John L. Lewis, backed by the swelling membership, pressed mine operators to accept the union's version of a bituminous coal industry code. In September 1933, the mine operators gave in, accepting a code that raised wages, reduced regional variations in pay, outlawed child labor, established an eight-hour workday, and gave miners the right to select representatives who would ensure that they were properly paid for the weight of the coal they produced. Almost overnight, the UMW had democratized the distribution of power in the coal industry." (Rosenzweig, 429-430)

"By the end of 1934, however, the New Deal had acquired a powerful set of enemies." (Rosenzweig, 435) The recovery had stalled. On the right, many businessmen and bankers became alarmed with the growth of federal power and the rise of a militant labor movement, while on the left, some demanded that the New Deal do more to put Americans back to work. The NIRA, came under fierce attack by both those who believed that codes unfairly helped the large corporations, and the large corporations who thought there was too much government regulation and labor organizing. "By the spring of 1935, the New Deal was in disarray, and its main industrial recovery agency, the NRA, was falling apart. The final blow came on May 27, when in *Schechter v. United States*, the Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional. The Court ruled that in allowing the NRA to write legally enforceable codes, Congress had unlawfully delegated its own authority and, by applying the codes to local businesses, had unconstitutionally extended the federal power to regulate interstate commerce." (Rosenzweig, 436-439)

As a result, in May 1935, when the Court struck down the NIRA, Roosevelt decided to support and Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act. This act guaranteed workers the right to freely organize their own unions and to strike, boycott, and picket their employers. It banned "unfair labor practices" by the boss, including the maintenance of company-dominated unions, the blacklisting of union activists, the intimidation or firing of workers who sought to join an independent union, and the employment of industrial spies. To determine the will of the workers, the new law established a National Labor Relations Board, which would hear employee complaints, determine union jurisdictions, and conduct on-site elections. Whenever a majority of a company's workers chose a union, management had a legal obligation to negotiate with the union over wages, hours, and working conditions.

Source: *Who Built America?* Volume Two. Roy Rosenzweig, Nelson Lichtenstein, Joshua Brown, and David Jaffe (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), pages 391-439.

Specific Context of the Sources

Before becoming First Lady as the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt had carefully crafted a life that suited her needs. From 1917 to 1928 ER expanded her political networks and honed her political skills through writing, editing, and public speaking. Working closely with powerful women's organizations in New York State, including the Women's Division of the Democratic State Committee, the Women's Trade Union League, and the League of Women Voters, she brought enthusiasm, dedication, and a lively interest in other people. In addition to her political activities, ER taught

American history and literature at the Todhunter School, a private girls' school in Manhattan. Then in 1933 she was expected to give up her own life to stand by her man, affirming and silent. Mrs. Roosevelt derived little comfort from the examples of previous First Ladies. Many of whom took to their beds, broken down by their efforts to cope with unending publicity, criticism, their husbands' wrath or neglect, and the demanding but poorly appreciated responsibilities of political wifery.

Eleanor Roosevelt determined that she would be a different kind of First Lady. She would not be confined by empty social ritual. Instead she would make the job of First Lady a vehicle for her own interests in social and political reform. "It is easy in Washington to think that Washington is the country and forget that it is a small place and only becomes important as the people who live there truly represent the other parts of the country. ... I want to know the whole country, not a little part of it." (Cook, 12) One of ER's major concerns as First Lady was to improve conditions for those who suffered. FDR supported her efforts. His wife was his advisor, partner, and inspector general of choice. He relied on her advice and trusted her vision.

By June 1933 ER's travels garnered headline attention across the country. In 1933 a *New Yorker* cartoon poked fun at the idea that she might dare go into a coal mine. Then on May 21, 1935 Eleanor Roosevelt made headline news: "First Lady Tours Coal Mine in Ohio" (*New York Times*). Invited to go down a coal mine, ER was accompanied by Clarence Pickett, head of the American Friends Service Committee, and Lorena Hickok, a newspaper reporter and close friend. Hick had first described the deplorable conditions of the mine workers and their families in her reports to Harry Hopkins, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1933. It would be a two-hour trip ER told Hick "and we will get dirty. So wear suitable clothes, if you know what is suitable. I confess I am stumped." (Cook, 262)

They arrived at noon, ER "smiling with eagerness as she reached the mine shaft" where she received "a large bouquet of roses and spring flowers as a token of esteem from the Mine Workers' Union." Mrs. Roosevelt declined the new pair of overalls provided for her, but accepted a grey coat, donned a miners' hard hat, and sat in the first car of a six-car train, heading two miles into the mine. The men defied an age-old superstition that it brought bad luck for a woman to go into a coal mine. Adolphus Pacifico, vice president of the local of the United Mine Workers, was in charge of explaining the mine operations. For over an hour and a half they watched four hundred miners working in the two-mile stretch in what was thought to be a model mine, one of the safest in the nation. (O'Farrell, chapter 2)

"Standing with one foot on a pile of coal, under a mountain two and a half miles from daylight," reported the UMW Journal of June 1, 1935 "the President's wife today discussed wages and working conditions, safety precautions and mining methods, with miners black with coal dust... Farther into the mountain the cars came at last to the 'regular workings,' where Mrs. Roosevelt got off and walked along a narrow passage to see how they do it. There was a great machine. Mrs. Roosevelt wanted to know how

much the miners make here, how steady their work is, how the machines work.”
(O’Farrell, chapter 2)

ER emerged from the mine late in the afternoon and spoke briefly with three hundred miners who were ending their shift. She was pleased to have the opportunity to see how and where they worked, and wished them success. Afterward, ER addressed the first graduates of “the People’s University,” in Bellaire, Ohio. A community-involved adult education miners’ school that featured over forty courses, the university was initiated by local activists, teachers, unionists, and housewives, who taught two hundred students without salary. ER considered it an inspiring project and told her audience of 2,500: “We must educate ourselves to study changes and to meet these changes.” Americans must begin to “know each other’s problems.” ER was told by a miner at the school that he had not only learned skills to earn more money, but ways to “lead a more satisfying life.” That, ER insisted, was what all education must be about. She worked to see such schools emerge throughout the country, as part of the Works Progress Administration. (Cook, 262)

Then on August 24, 1935 *The Saturday Evening Post* published Eleanor Roosevelt’s “In Defense of Curiosity” in which she responded to the earlier cartoon and those who said “there certainly was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much.” This article was originally published below a reprint of the *New Yorker* cartoon and a photo of ER’s visit to the mine, with the caption “(Above) The Prophecy, the Famous New Yorker Cartoon of June 3, 1933. (Right) The Fulfillment, Neffs, Ohio, May, 1935.”

Sources:

Eleanor Roosevelt: The Defining Years, Volume 2, Blanche Wiesen Cook. (New York: Penguin Group, 1999)

She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Labor Movement, Brigid O’Farrell, forthcoming.

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project’s website, Questions and Answers about Eleanor Roosevelt <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teachinger/>

Analysis of the Sources

Cartoon from the *New Yorker* published June 3, 1933

- Students might notice that the cartoon was published in June of 1933, that it depicts two miners shoveling coal with lights on their hats, “for gosh sakes” tone seems like a satire or sort of disbelief that “Mrs. Roosevelt” – the First Lady – could be found down in a coal mine and that this behavior is surprising or unusual for a First Lady.
- Students might ask: What inspired Robert Day (the cartoonist) to create this cartoon? Did ER actually visit a coal mine before this cartoon was published? What did the Robert Day think of ER’s extensive travels? What was the public’s reaction to this cartoon? What was ER’s response? FDR’s response?

Photo from ER's May 21, 1935 visit to Bellaire, Ohio: Eleanor Roosevelt riding a coal car with miners

- Examples of what students might notice include: ER is smiling, she's wearing a hat with something on the front similar to the man who looks like he's driving the car, the car is open/not closed in for protection, it looks like it's on rails, it looks like there's another woman behind ER in the car, there's a man sitting next to ER who does not look like a miner.
- Students might ask: Why is ER in this car? What kind of a car is this and where are they going? How many people fit into these cars? Who are the others in the car with ER who are not miners? Was this photo published in the newspapers at the time? If so, what was the reaction? Was ER afraid to go into this mine?

“In Defense of Curiosity,” Eleanor Roosevelt, the *Saturday Evening Post*, August 24, 1935. An excerpted version of this magazine article is provided below. The complete version is available at

<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/documents/articles/indefenseofcuriosity.cfm>

Below are some guiding questions – with possible answers – that students can use to analyze this document on their own:

- Why did ER write this article? [This article appears a few months after her visit to the mine and well after the cartoon was published. In it Mrs. Roosevelt claims the miners responded “with undisguised horror” – do students agree with her? Apparently ER received a lot of criticism for taking this trip to the mine and she wanted a chance to explain/defend her behavior.]
- Who do you think her target audience was for this article? [It is likely that readers of this magazine were mostly women and men who believed women's place was in the home. ER was addressing her critics.]
- What do you think ER believes, values, or thinks? [ER agrees that home is—and should be—the rightful concern of women, but ER defines home broadly and sees one's home as connected to other homes and the needs of other people in our country and around the world. She discusses how money, wages, prices, and buying power make us interconnected and interdependent. And she notes that concern for one's children needs to be seen in the context of local, state, national, and international affairs. ER makes a strong case for the advantages of curiosity – intellectual, artistic, and emotional.]

Activity

1. Begin by asking students to share their associations with the words “First Lady” and write their associations on the board or chart paper as a web around the words “First Lady.” Then do the same with the words “coal miners.” Save these webs for later.
2. Working with the whole class, project the cartoon from the *New Yorker* on a screen (or make and distribute copies) and ask students to look carefully at the cartoon, and jot down what they notice and then list any questions they have. Then ask students to share their observations and questions, and make a composite list on the board under NOTICE and QUESTIONS.
3. Next use the information provided in the sections above to channel, expand on, and clarify their findings—and to create an historical CONTEXT for this photo.

4. Once you have modeled this process with students, have students work in small groups to practice this process. This time project the photo of ER and miners riding in an open car on a screen (or make and distribute copies) and ask students to look carefully, discuss what they see, note any questions they have, and include relevant events from this time (context). Circulate among the groups/pairs and use information in the above sections to channel and expand students' discussions.
5. Explain that Mrs. Roosevelt received criticism about her visit to a coal mine—and that in response she wrote an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, a widely circulated, general interest weekly newsmagazine that catered to mainstream tastes.
6. Students' next task will be to read an excerpted version of this article to find out what she said. Copy the excerpt, distribute it to students, encourage students to underline what they think are key words and phrases, and write in the margins. Direct students to use these three guiding questions as they read:
 - Why did ER write this article?
 - Who do you think her target audience was for this article?
 - What do you think ER believes, values, or thinks?

NOTE: For middle school – have students predict what they will find in the article, direct them to pause half way through it to check for understanding, then have them finish reading the article and answer the guiding questions.

7. Reconvene the class as a whole and ask for volunteers to summarize the excerpted article.
8. Complete this activity by going back to the original webs for “First Lady” and “coal miners” and ask students to work in small groups to use what they learned in this case study to create two new webs: one for “First Lady” and one for “coal miners.” Provide each group with a large piece of chart paper and two markers.
9. Post the completed webs around the room and give students a chance to look at each. Note the changes they made before and after the case study.
10. Ask students to make connections to events in our contemporary world. Among the points they might note are the controversies surrounding: “clean coal,” mining by taking off the tops of mountains, coal ash flooding in the TVA area, accidents in coal mines, as well as the changing concepts of what it means to be “First Lady.”

Sources for Students

Cartoon from the *New Yorker*, June 3, 1933, the Cartoon Bank.



"For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt!"

Photo from May 21, 1935 in Bellaire, Ohio: Eleanor Roosevelt riding a coal car with miners, courtesy of Bettman/Corbis.



Excerpted version of Eleanor Roosevelt's "In Defense of Curiosity", The Saturday Evening Post, August 24, 1935

A short time ago a cartoon appeared depicting two miners looking up in surprise and saying with undisguised horror, "Here comes Mrs. Roosevelt!"

In strange and subtle ways, it was indicated to me that I should feel somewhat ashamed of that cartoon, and there certainly was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much.

Somehow or other, most of the people who spoke to me, or wrote to me about it, seemed to feel that it was unbecoming in a woman to have a variety of interests. Perhaps that arose from the old inherent theory that woman's interests must lie only in her home. This

is a kind of blindness which seems to make people feel that interest in the home stops within the four walls of the house in which you live. Few seem capable of realizing that the real reason that home is important is that it is so closely tied, by a million strings, to the rest of the world. That is what makes it an important factor in the life of every nation.

Whether we recognize it or not, no home is an isolated object. We may not recognize it, and we may try to narrow ourselves so that our interest only extends to our immediate home circle, but if we have any understanding at all of what goes on around us, we soon see how outside influences affect our own existence. Take, for example, the money we have to spend. The economic conditions of the country affect our income whether it is earned or whether it is an income which comes to us from invested capital. What we are able to do in our home depends on the cost of the various things which we buy. All of us buy food, and food costs vary with conditions throughout the country and world.

It took us some time to realize that there was a relationship between the farm situation and the situation of the rest of our country, but eventually wage earners in the East did feel the results of the lack of buying power on the farms in the Middle West. To keep an even balance between the industrial worker and the agricultural worker is an extremely difficult thing. Every housewife in this country should realize that if she lives in a city and has a husband who is either a wage earner or the owner of an industry, her wages or her profits will be dependent, not only on the buying power of people like herself but upon the buying power of the great mass of agricultural people throughout the country. The farm housewife must realize, too, that her interests are tied up with those of the wage earner and his employer throughout the nation, for her husband's products can only find a ready market when the city dweller is prosperous.

There is ever present, of course, the economic question of how to keep balanced the cost of living and the wages the man receives. The theory of low wages and low living costs has been held by many economists to be sound, for they contend what money one has will provide as much as high wages do in countries where living costs are also high.

We have gone, as a rule, on the theory, in this country, particularly in eras of prosperity, that high wages and high costs make for a higher standard of living, and that we really obtain more for our money, even though our prices are higher.

This question is argued back and forth, and the method by which one or the other theory shall be put into practice is an equally good field for arguments.

It may seem like an academic discussion, but any housewife should know that it is the first way in which her home brings her in touch with the public questions of the day...

To go a bit further afield, trouble with sheep in Australia may mean higher cost on winter coat, and a low standard of living in a foreign country may affect our own standards. The child whom we cherish within our home may suffer from health conditions quite beyond our control, but well within the control of the community or state. Having grown to manhood, this same child may be taken away from us and die defending his country and

its ideals. Unless we have seen our home as part of this great world, it will come to us as somewhat of a shock that the world crowds in upon us so closely and so much.

So many of us resent what we consider the waste of war, but if in each home there is no curiosity to follow the trend of affairs in various nations and our own conduct toward them, how can we expect to understand where our interests clash or to know whether our Government's policies are fair and just or generally selfish?

Out of the homes of our nation comes the public opinion which has to be back of every Government action. How can this public opinion be anything but a reaction to propaganda unless there is curiosity enough in each home to keep constant watch over local, state, national and international affairs?

Therefore, anyone who fully appreciates the value of home life must, of necessity, reach out in many directions in an effort to protect the home, which we know is our most valuable asset. Even the primitive civilizations reached out from the home to the boundaries of their knowledge, and our own pioneer homes reached back into the countries from which they came and out into the new lands which they were discovering and subduing to their needs.

It is man's ceaseless urge to know more and to do more which makes the world move, and so, when people say woman's place is in the home, I say, with enthusiasm, it certainly is, but if she really cares about her home, that caring will take her far and wide.

People seem to think that having many interests or activities must mean restlessness of spirit which can only indicate dissatisfaction and superficiality in an individual. It may be that an interest in the home may lead one to dissatisfaction with certain phases of civilization, but the fact that one is active or busy does not necessarily mean that one is either restless or superficial. Some of the people who are the most occupied remain unhurried in what they do, and have the ability to relax and rest so completely in the time which is free...

Intellectual curiosity, which makes you read history and science, will add greatly to your knowledge. Artistic curiosity will open up innumerable new fields in painting and sculpture and music and drama. If you have an opportunity to travel, you can add enormously to what you have already read in books or what you have experienced in art, by seeing with your own eyes some of the artistic masterpieces of the world in architecture and sculpture and in painting, by hearing great musicians and artists perform in their own countries. ...

These things, however, will hardly be understood if, in addition to intellectual curiosity, you do not have what we will call emotional curiosity, because without that, these things will not become alive to us or ...speak to us from generation to generation in a language which we can understand. . . .

In its simplest form, curiosity will help you to an all-around education. That is why little children are so often living question marks. They naturally desire to know about the world in which they live, and if they lose that curiosity, it is usually because we grown people are so stupid. . . .

The great experiences of life are the same wherever you live and whether you are rich or poor. Birth and death, courage and cowardice, kindness and cruelty, love and hate, are no respecters of persons, and they are the occasions and emotions which bring about most of the experiences of life. You cannot prevent unhappiness or sorrow entering into any life... but curiosity will insure an ever-recurring interest in life and will give you the needed impetus to turn your most baleful experience to some kind of good service. . . .