Lesson E-12

Florida in the 1920s and 1930s
By Liz Rivas, Sleepy Hill Middle School

I. Lesson Summary

Summary
This lesson is to help students make sense of Florida’s explosive growth during the 1920’s and 1930’s. There were many factors that lead to the “Boom:” cheap land, a growing middle class, better-paying jobs with paid vacations, available credit, etc. If the “Boom” happened overnight, however, it was certainly gone with the dawn; suddenly, the great era of materialism was over and Florida entered a deep economic depression a full three years earlier than the rest of the country.

Objectives
Students will:
1.) Understand the significance of the Florida Land Boom/Bust during the 1920s and 1930s;
2.) Synthesize some of the areas most affected by the Boom/Bust and what could have helped the fall.

U.S. History Event or Era
This lesson may be implemented into any unit on the “Roaring Twenties” and the growth of the American middle class.

Grade Level
This lesson has been developed for the middle school and high school classroom.

Materials
Overhead Transparency Masters E-12-1 & E-12-2, and one copy of “Florida’s Land Boom” and “Great Depression and the New Deal” for each student.

Lesson Time
One or two forty-five minute class periods.
II. Lesson Procedures

Procedures
1.) Make a transparency of Overhead Transparency Master E-12-1 (found in the “Activities” section) and display it in a prominent part of the room, where all students may see it.

2.) Greet students at the door and instruct them to look at the displayed pictures. Then have them answer the following questions: “What do you see?” “How do you think that the people in the picture feel?” “What are they doing?” “What do you think is happening?”

3.) After allowing sufficient time to view the pictures and answer the questions, lead a discussion of the results. Then show a transparency from Overhead Transparency Master E-12-2 and repeat the process.

4.) After allowing sufficient time to view this pictures and answer the questions, lead a discussion of the results. The underlying idea that your students should get from this activity is the different ways that altered Florida’s population dynamics forever.

5.) Show Overhead Transparency Master E-12-1 and/or E-12-2, and have the students pair up for a Kagan exercise called “Pair Share;” one student asks the question and the other answers it, then they reverse roles. The students will ask: “What do you see? What do you think is happening? What do you think they are thinking or feeling? What do you smell or hear?” The students will list these answers on a piece of notebook paper. Then ask a few students to share their thoughts and ideas with the class (NOTE: you may wish to pair students in mixed-ability groupings for the following reading activity).

6.) Give each student a copy of the reading passages and discussion questions on the “Florida Land Boom & Bust” and “Great Depression and the New Deal;” have students remain in their pairings to read the passages and answer the discussion questions.

7.) After you have gone over the materials with your students ask them what types of things could have prevented such a boom and a bust? What are some life lessons that we can apply to our lives from this part in history? How do you think people recovered after the Bust was over?

8.) Have students get out a half-sheet of paper and number the paper from 1 to 5. Then, have them write down the following five questions (Option: you may wish to have students do these questions as a homework assignment):
   a. How did the incredible “land boom” lead to the incredible “land bust”?
   b. What kinds of businesses did the land boom and bust affect?
   c. What types of industries were probably not effected by the boom/bust?
   d. Why did Florida start the Depression years before the rest of the country?
   e. How did Florida get out of the Great Depression?
III. Activities
By 1920, Florida had a population of 968,470 people. Just five years later, the population had grown to 1,263,540. What had caused such a rise in the population?

Following World War I, large numbers of Americans finally had the time and money to travel to Florida and to invest in real estate. Educated and skilled workers were receiving paid vacations, pensions, and fringe benefits, which made it easier for them to travel and to purchase real estate. The automobile was also becoming an indispensable way for families to travel, and Florida was the perfect destination. Many of the people who migrated into Florida were middle class Americans with families. Unlike visitors of the past, these newer arrivals wanted homes and land rather than resorts and hotels.

The “Roaring Twenties” was a time when a person’s wealth and success was measured by what he owned. At the same time, because the economy was prospering, credit was easy to acquire if one had a decent job. People who recognized this economic change and wanted to make money by selling land poured into Florida. These people, known as land speculators, bought land at cheap prices and sold it at a large profit.

During this boom, however, most people who bought and sold land in Florida had never even set foot in the state. Instead, they hired young, ambitious men and women to stand in the hot sun to show the land to prospective buyers and accept a “binder” on the sale. A binder was a non-refundable down payment that required the rest of the money to be paid in 30 days. Many people got rich quick from the commission they made from these sales. With land prices rising rapidly, many of the buyers planned to sell the land at a profit before the real land payments were due. Sometimes land buyers didn’t even have enough money to pay for the land; instead they had just enough money for the binder. They were depending on the prices to continually rise.

Laws were also written to help support the land boom. In order to get people to come to Florida and invest in real estate, the Florida Legislature passed laws that prohibited state income and inheritance taxes. During this time, horse and dog racing also grew in Florida as a way to attract rich gamblers. The railroads continued to grow throughout the 1920s, and Henry Flagler’s railroad that connected Southeast Florida with New York caused other rail routes to be built.

It was during this time that many vacation spots were created and some of our most popular cities were developed. Dave Davis, the son of a steamboat captain, built Davis Island in the Tampa Bay area. Barron Collier started Naples and Marco Island as winter resorts. In addition, Carl Fisher and John Collins bought and developed the mangrove island off the coast of Miami. Miami Beach began to develop into the world-famous resort that it is today.

Unfortunately, this land boom did not exist without problems. The demand for housing was so high that the cost of rent soared. Because the speculators had inflated the economy, many American who had migrated to Florida could no longer afford to live here. They began to write back home and tell people about their problems. Newspapers began writing stories that advised prospective residents to stay away from Florida.

At the same time, the demand for building materials overwhelmed the railway systems that transported them here. Railroads could not keep up with the needs and began to shut down. This acted as a brake on many developments, slowing down or stopping the boom’s momentum. Once land prices stopped going up, many speculators couldn’t sell at the high prices. There were suddenly thousands of acres of overpriced land without any buyers.

The boom stopped as suddenly as it had started. An unusually cold winter in 1925 followed by an extremely hot summer frightened away many potential buyers. It also cast doubts on the state’s reputation as “heaven on earth.” What was to follow was a series of natural disasters (freezes, hurricanes) that would send Florida into a tailspin, causing it to enter a Florida Depression four years before the 1929 stock market crash brought the whole country's economy down in the Great Depression.

1.) What exactly overwhelmed Florida’s railway system?
   a. the number of tourists  
   b. the demand for building materials  
   c. the need for new railroad cars  
   d. the amount of hot weather

2.) Which of the following was NOT a problem of the land boom?
   a. housing demand  
   b. high rent  
   c. inflated economy  
   d. vacation spots

3.) What laws did the Florida legislature pass to support the land boom?
a. laws that prohibited state income and inheritance taxes
b. laws that outlawed land speculators
c. laws that provided money for the construction of tourist attractions
d. laws that increased the price of land

4.) How did the land speculators in Florida make a huge profit? Use details and information in the reading passage in your answer.
The Great Depression and the New Deal

Although there was an economic boom in Florida during the early 1920s, the economy went downhill as the decade came to an end. Two severe hurricanes damaged a large portion of South Florida. The first one hit the Miami and Fort Lauderdale areas in the middle of the night, which came as a surprise to many people, including tourists. Severe flooding and wind damage crippled the community. The second one hit the Palm Beach area, which caused Lake Okeechobee to flood and drown over 2,000 people in nearby communities.

The next disaster occurred when there was an outbreak of the Mediterranean fruit fly in a grapefruit grove near Orlando. These insects quickly spread across the state and killed off most of the citrus crop. Because of a quarantine imposed on all remaining citrus, this was another blow to Florida's economy. These two hurricanes, the crop destruction, and an attempt to recover from the previous wars put a financial burden on Florida.

The Great Depression

All across the United States, people were facing economic difficulties. By 1929, our country was facing a depression, which is a situation when there isn't any money and there are very few jobs open to the public. "The Great Depression" began when the stock market collapsed. This was called the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929. People who invested their money in stocks began to lose all of their money. They couldn't pay their bank loans or personal bills.

In 1931, the Florida State Legislature created a State Racing Commission which legalized betting at both horse and dog racing tracks and at all Jai Alai frontons. When people won money from betting, a tax was taken out of the money. This partially aided the state, but not as much as the legislature planned. After all, people did not have enough money to bet! This idea that the Legislature hoped would pull Florida out of the depression did not work.

The depression affected the nation's banks as well. By 1932, many banks had closed their doors. This meant that people lost their savings. Without money, families could not afford a place to live or adequate food to eat. They also couldn't buy goods and services, which meant most businesses had to close as well. Over 12 million people across the U.S. were unemployed at the peak of the depression. In Florida, there were over 90,000 families affected by the depression.

During the first years of the Great Depression, Florida's government did little to help people. But the federal government gave help by providing Floridians with financial aid called relief. One-fourth of the people who lived in Florida were on relief.

Tourism supported Florida's economy a little during the winter months. Many people drove to Florida to enjoy the warm climate. Because Floridians were facing economic difficulties, however, Florida State Police were stationed at Florida's border; if people did not have enough money or a job to support them, they were not allowed to enter the state. Florida was having a hard enough time supporting residents without increasing the extra number of people who wanted to live in a year-round warm state but who didn't have the means to take care of themselves or their family.

The New Deal

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt became President of the United States. His presidency became known as the "New Deal" because of the promises that he made to Americans. This deal consisted of ideas to get the country and people back on their feet. Soon, millions of Americans were working again. One of the programs was called the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC. Young men from all over the country lived in work camps. About 40,000 Floridians participated in the CCC. They received food and clothing and their paychecks were sent home to their families. Some of the work in Florida consisted of cutting down millions of trees to build fire lines. The CCC also planted 13 million trees in Florida and created many of the state parks and wildlife preserves. Other New Deal workers built federal buildings and schools.
The CCC also rebuilt the Overseas Railroad connecting Miami to Key West, originally built by Henry Flagler, but destroyed in 1935 by a hurricane. The reconstruction finished in 1938 and the railroad was opened once again. It helped bring tourism to Key West. It is 100 miles long and has more than forty bridges. Florida owns many of its conservation projects, parks, and preserves thanks to President Roosevelt's CCC.

Another New Deal program was called the Works Progress Administration, or WPA. This program gave jobs to researchers, writers, and editors. One Floridian writer, Zora Neale Hurston, became a very well known African-American author who wrote about growing up in Florida.

Through the New Deal era, many Florida businesses began to redevelop. Industries grew and Florida's banking business was becoming stronger. Alfred DuPont, a wealthy businessman, took control of a few Florida banks and reestablished them. He bought forestland and used it to start the paper industry in Florida. Paper mills sprang up all around the state.

The citrus industry began to ship fruit to other parts of the country, and by 1939, three airlines scheduled flights into Florida. Because of new roads, businesses, and air flights, tourism started to flourish. The United States was coming out of the depression by the end of the 1930s. Once again, people were able to find jobs and take care of their families.

1.) What caused the Great Depression?
   a. the Mediterranean fruit fly outbreak  
   b. hurricane damage  
   c. the State Racing Commission tax  
   d. the stock market collapse of 1929

2.) Who was responsible for the New Deal?
   a. Alfred DuPont  
   b. Henry Flagler  
   c. Zora Neale Hurston  
   d. Franklin D. Roosevelt

3.) Which New Deal program gave jobs to writers?
   a. CCC  
   b. WPA  
   c. Conservation Projects  
   d. Work Camps

4.) What caused the economic downturn in Florida during the 1920s? Use details and information from the reading passage in your answer.

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
Teacher Information for Class Notes

*If you wish, use the following notes not like a script, but to add more enriching information to the lesson for your students’ understanding.

**Florida’s Land Boom and Bust**

- After WWI workers got paid vacations, pensions, benefits, and had extra $. Automobiles became affordable and credit was easily accessed
  - Land was cheap, bought on credit, and then sold for a higher price.
  - Most of the people who bought land had never been to Florida
  - Many people planned on selling before they had to pay the 1st monthly payment.
  - **Binder** – young men who collected $ and did physical transactions; took down payment = creation of a new job to relieve realtors from being in heat, sun and bugs (“binder” was also the name given to the $ that was put done to hold the property for 30 days).
  - Binder boys didn’t get paid until the down payment check cleared, which sometimes took weeks
  - FL laws helped encourage the boom by disallowing income taxes and inheritance taxes, and encouraging horse and dog races.
  - Railroad stretched from Miami to NYC, bringing thousands of tourists and potential land buyers
  - Vacation spots were created like resort communities on Davis Island, Naples, Marco Island, and Miami Beach
  - Owning land was a status symbol (the decade of the 1920s was very big on materialism)
  - Prior to the ’20s, FL’s travelers were elderly, ill, or extremely wealthy.
  - Land boom greatly benefited middle-class families
  - Northern papers glamorized FL as the “Sunshine State”
  - People and investors made huge profits selling land
  - Palm trees, beaches, golf courses helped FL become known as the “American Riviera”
  - “Tin Canners,” or “Tin Can Tourists”– poorer tourists that came by truck, car w/ tents, and tin-can food supply for their vacations; they couldn’t afford the hotels and restaurants or to play tennis or golf.
  - Cabins were built for Tin Canners at some campgrounds
  - Highways were developed across the Everglades so that people could travel by car to South Florida
  - Engineers waded through alligator infested water, heat, and bugs to connect roads to Miami
  - Prohibition also helped tourism; FL was close to the Bahamas & Cuba, where rum was made – “rum running,” or smuggling, soon followed; boats were equipped with secret compartments to hide the illegal liquor, and to detect Coast Guard and outrun them.
  - Tampa, Miami, and Palm Beach were filled with speakeasies and gambling halls
  - Even Al Capone liked FL & had a home in Miami

**The Great Depression and the New Deal**

- Land became extremely over priced
- Northern papers started writing negative things about FL along with warnings about buying land in the Sunshine State
- People couldn’t sell their land; the only market was for selling, but no one was left to buy.
- Large cities felt the result first: St. Petersburg and Key West were the most in debt.
- The Sept. Hurricane of 1926 pummeled the Miami area with winds up to 125 miles per hour; the storm included a huge tidal wave that left hundreds dead
- The next calamity was the Mediterranean fruit fly infestation that crippled the citrus industry
- Many companies had to lay off workers due to the lack of funding from the Bust in 1925
- Towns overextended their credit to build roads, which made the towns go broke
- Cold winter and an extremely hot summer didn’t help either
- Racism and xenophobia increased
- FL went into the Great Depression 4 years before the rest of the country.
IV. Assessment

The following five general questions could be asked for an assessment of the lesson:

a. How did the incredible “land boom” lead to the incredible “land bust”?
b. What kinds of businesses did the land boom and bust affect?
c. What types of industries were probably not effected by the boom/bust?
d. Why did Florida start the Depression years before the rest of the country?
e. How did Florida get out of the Great Depression?

- Have the students create a cause-and-effect tree using information from the passage on Florida's land boom (what caused it to begin, and/or what caused it to end?). Follow the outline below:

  A “cause-and-effect tree” helps students identify cause and effect relationships. It is important to stress that sometimes one cause may have several effects, or several causes may lead to one effect. There is not always a one-to-one relationship in cause and effect.

  - The students read an informational or literary text.
  - The students brainstorm cause and effect relationships found in the text.
  - The teacher introduces a visual aid of a tree with many branches either on the board or chart paper, as well as on worksheets for each student.
  - The students write the cause on the trunk of the tree.
  - On each branch the students write the effects of the cause. If there is more than one cause and effect relationship in the text, use another tree.
  - The students share their cause and effect trees and/or extend them into paragraph form.

- Invite a local realtor to speak to the students about buying and selling land in Florida. Have the students compare and contrast how land is purchased today, to how it was during Florida’s land boom.

- Have the students create a timeline detailing the events of the Great Depression.

- Contact a local resident who lived through the Great Depression to come and speak to the students about the hardships he experienced.
V. Resources

Florida in the 1920’s: The Great Florida Land Boom -
http://www.floridahistory.org/floridians/1920's.htm

The Florida Center for Instructional Technology at the University of South Florida – Florida: Then
and Now Reading Passages: “Florida’s Land Boom
(http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/ld_boom/ld_boom1.htm)” and “Great Depression and the New
Deal (http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/depress/depress1.htm)”