

→ American History Play

Riding the Rails

During the Great Depression, a teenage “boxcar boy” saw firsthand the faces of a nation in need

Characters

Prologue narrator

John Fawcett*

Mick McKinley*

Railroad bull

Kind woman

Hobo

Okie woman

Arkansas men 1-3

Vendor, at the Texas Centennial

Old hobo

Narrators A-E

Epilogue narrator

*John and Mick were real people.

All others are composite or fictional characters.

→ Words to Know

- **boxcar** (*n*): a railroad car used to carry freight (goods or other cargo).
- **centennial** (*n*): the 100th anniversary of an event; Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836.
- **hobo** (*n*): a person who travels without a regular home or job.
- **Okie** (*n*): a common nickname given to homeless travelers from Oklahoma during the 1930s and 1940s.

PROLOGUE

Prologue narrator: The 1930s were a desperate time for many Americans. The United States was in the midst of an economic collapse called the Great Depression. Triggered by the stock market crash of 1929, the worldwide crisis lasted nearly a decade. During that time, millions of Americans lost their life savings. As many as one quarter of them lost their jobs.

By the thousands, they took to the road, looking for jobs or simply a place to live. Most did not have cars, so many hitched rides by sneaking into or on top of railroad **boxcars**. This was illegal and dangerous.

Among those travelers were about 250,000 teens—known as boxcar boys and girls. For one 16-year-old, riding the rails started as a grand adventure. But what he learned about ordinary people stuck in the depths of poverty would change him forever.

SCENE 1

Narrator A: John Fawcett, who lives near Wheeling, West Virginia, is among the lucky ones in the U.S. His father is an eye doctor, and their family has not felt the sting of the Depression. In 1936, John and

his friend Mick McKinley have other things on their minds.

John Fawcett: So, the plan is, we'll go to the Texas **Centennial** fair, right? I've got to get away from that military school my dad wants to send me to.

Mick McKinley: Yeah, then we'll stay out West and work as cowboys! We can get there in boxcars.

John: I can't wait to be free!

Narrator B: The boys sneak out of their homes and hop a train at the edge of town. Around midnight, they suddenly find a flashlight in their eyes—and a gun. They are facing one of the feared railroad security officers, called “bulls.”

Railroad bull: Move it, you punks. You two are going to jail.

Narrator C: In jail, the boys' money is stolen. They get out two days later, broke and hungry in a strange town.

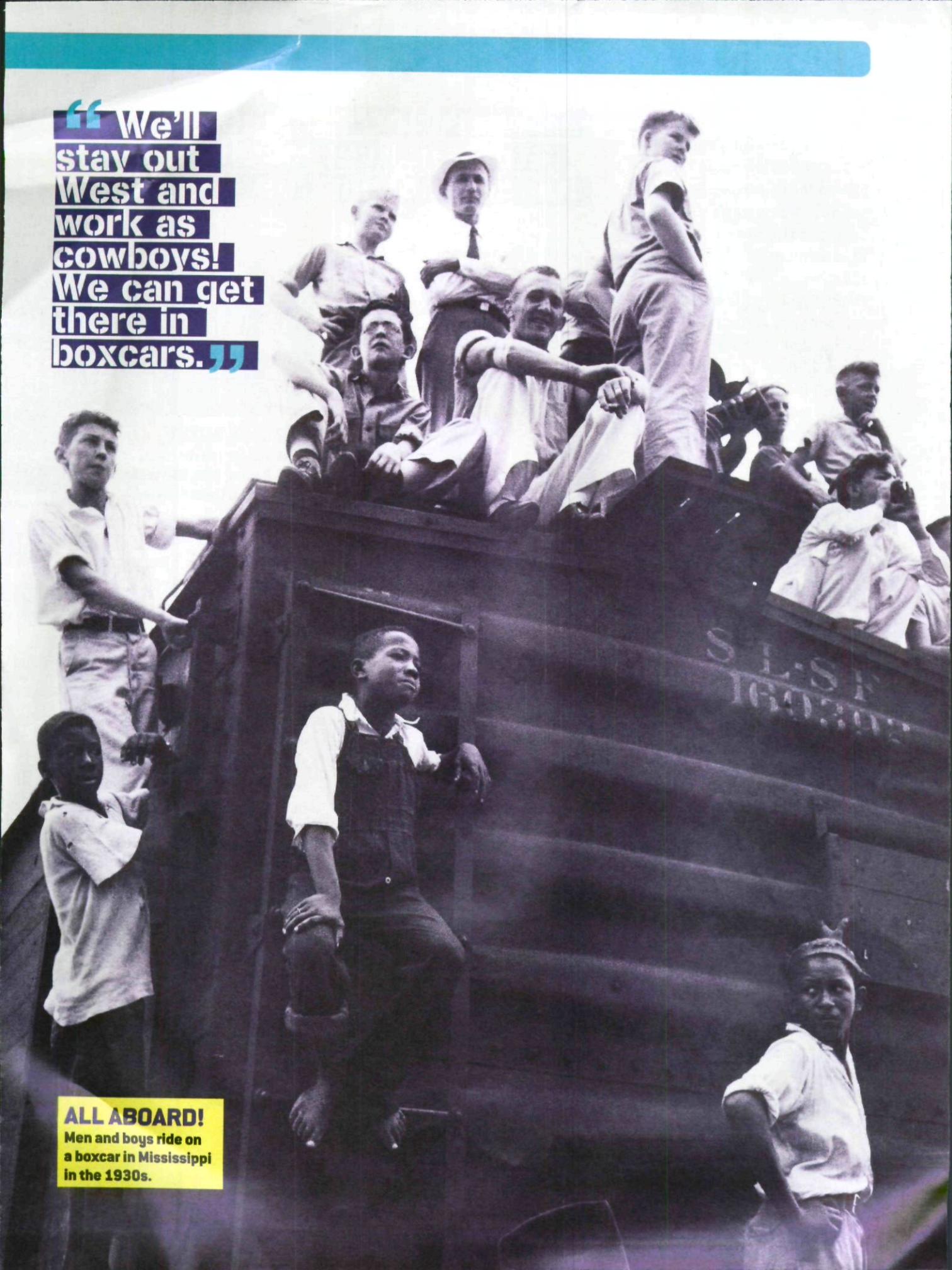
John: I haven't been this hungry in my entire life. Let's split up and see if anyone will give us a meal.

Narrator D: Most households have no food they can part with. At one home, a woman with a weathered face opens the door for Mick.

Mick: I'm sorry, ma'am, but I haven't eaten all day. I'll work

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**“ We'll
stay out
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We can get
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boxcars.”**



ALL ABOARD!

Men and boys ride on
a boxcar in Mississippi
in the 1930s.

HISTORY

for any food you can give me.

Kind woman: Wait a minute.

Narrator E: The woman leaves him on the doorstep. After a minute, she returns with a hunk of sausage wrapped in a newspaper.

Kind woman: This is all I can spare, son.

Mick: Thank you so much.

Narrator A: John and Mick share the sausage while riding on the top of a boxcar rattling south.

John: I'll never take a forkful of food for granted again.

Mick: Me neither—or kindness.

That woman had so little, yet she shared what she could.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: The days and nights pass as the boys hop a series of freight trains. Often they end up spending the night in a “**hobo** jungle”—a makeshift camp filled with nomadic people. One night, as the boys reach a campfire . . .

Hobo (to John): Hey, kid, you're new to these parts. Chop wood for the fire, and you can sleep here.

John: Thanks, mister. Those people over there are washing clothes. Can we wash ours too?

Hobo: Sure. Go into town and get some food to share, and you can do whatever you want.

Narrator C: The boys manage to acquire a head of cabbage to throw into a common meal. Later that night, John wanders around the camp. He sees an **Okie** family keeping to itself. A sad-looking mother holds two dirty children, who hide their faces when he nears.

John: Are they OK, ma'am?

Okie woman: Yes, but it's been rough for them. We left our farm in Oklahoma two months ago. Ain't had hardly a drop of rain there in six years. Crops all died,

“ We're too ashamed to beg. Everyone is hungry, not just us. ”

and now there's nothing but dust.

John: Where are you headed?

Okie woman: California. We hear there's work there.

Mick: Your kids look so hungry. Won't anyone give you food?

Okie woman: We're too ashamed to beg. Everyone is hungry, not just us. I reckon we'll be fine once we get to California.

SCENE 3

Narrator D: One day, the boys hear of a sawmill in Marshall, Arkansas, where they can get jobs. John rides on ahead of Mick. But when he arrives in Marshall, all he finds are dozens of men sitting around.

John: Excuse me, sir. Where is the sawmill? I'm looking for work.

Arkansas man 1: You came to the wrong place, kid. No sawmill in this town.

Arkansas man 2: No jobs, period. It's been a blow to our pride not being able to work.

ON THE MOVE

At the height of the Great Depression, 250,000 teens roamed the United States.

Arkansas man 3: I feel worse for my kids. The schools are closed. They have no food, no shoes. What kind of future will they have?

Narrator E: After a lonely night at the train station, John finds Mick coming in on a freight train.

John: Hey, pal—bad news. There is no sawmill. Let's keep moving.

Mick: Things just seem to get worse the farther we go. No one has work, and we spend all of

