This lesson uses Steel Town to explore the making of steel and life in a steel mill town during the Great Depression. Moving through four centers, students explore resources such as photographs, first-hand accounts, recipes, and songs from the era to learn what life was like at a steel mill, in a steelworker’s home and neighborhood, and throughout the town. Based on their analyses of the resources provided, students compare the benefits and drawbacks of technology to answer the ultimate question regarding steel production: “Is it worth it?” This lesson was created for use in a second or third grade classroom but can be adjusted for older students with the extensions provided.

| NCSS Notable Trade Book Title: | Steel Town  
Written By Jonah Winter  
Notable Book 2009  
New York  
Atheneum  
Grade Level Pre-K to 3; Ages 4-8  
ISBN 978-1-4169-4081-4  
Lesson time: 3-4, 45 minute class periods |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book Summary:</td>
<td>Steel Town is set in America during the Great Depression. It depicts life in a town where men endlessly work to produce steel as towering smokestacks belch ash and soot into the sky. This is not merely a tale of deplorable working conditions and blue-collar drudgery, however, as beyond the steel mill, a close-knit community of friends and neighbors thrives. With lyrical poetry and powerful illustrations, Steel Town resurrects an era of industry, camaraderie, toil, and triumph where towns grew great and steel was king.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| NCSS Standards: | I. Culture  
II. Time, Continuity, and Change  
VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption  
VIII. Science, Technology, and Society |
### Materials:

**Exploration Phase**
1. Items made of steel, (e.g., fork, knife, bridge model, skyscraper model, nuts and bolts, and a car model)

**Development Phase**
1. *Steel Town* book by Jonah Winter

**Expansion Phase**
1. copies of *Steel Town* at each center opened up to relevant pages for the center topic
2. photographs of steel workers, machinery, factories, and homes in steel towns across U.S.
3. first hand accounts given by people living in a steel town during the Great Depression
4. YouTube documentaries of steel mills
5. 4 x 12 white paper (two per student)
6. 4 x 6 blank index cards (two per student)
7. cookbooks and recipes from the Great Depression era
8. lyrics of “Whistle While You Work” by Artie Shaw
9. YouTube video of Bing Crosby singing “Pennies from Heaven”
10. computer(s) with internet capability

### Objectives:

1. Students will examine and explore various objects made from steel.
2. Students will listen to and comprehend the book *Steel Town* by Jonah Winter.
3. Students will examine a variety of materials pertaining to working conditions of Great Depression era steel mills, and create a short classified advertisement outlining the skills and characteristics needed to work in a steel mill.
4. Students will observe and interpret a variety of materials about steelworkers and construct a postcard home describing their life in a steel town and their friendships/relationships with co-workers and neighbors of diverse backgrounds.
5. Students will explore materials and identify environmental risks posed by steel production and create a bumper sticker slogan encapsulating the tenets and spirit of environmental advocacy.
6. Students will observe and examine photos, recipes, and songs describing and depicting home life in Great Depression era steel towns and create a song title in accordance with the experiences, hardships, and realities of the period.
| Procedures: **Exploration/Introduction:** | 1. Place several items made of steel in the front of the classroom.  
2. Allow students time to observe and manipulate the various materials.  
3. Gather students in a group for questions, discussion, and a read aloud.  
4. Prior to reading *Steel Town* ask several probing questions about the items made of steel to initiate discussion:  
   a. Tell me something that all of these different objects might have in common?  
   b. What material are these items made out of?  
   c. Do you think it is easy to make these things?  
   d. Why do you think steel is used to make these items?  
   e. Who do you think makes things like this?  
5. Provide background information about steel, the Great Depression, and steel towns. Information to provide is as follows:  
   a. The steel industry has had vast and far-reaching effects on the course of American history. During the early twentieth century, the steel industry was the cornerstone of the American economy. Steel is an important resource because it is very strong and durable. It is used to make things like bridges, cars, and skyscrapers. It provided the resources necessary for the United States to take its place as a global power.  
   b. In addition, it drew and employed people from far and wide; chiefly those from southern and eastern Europe looking to achieve the American Dream and, by extension, a higher standard of living. This fostered cultural diffusion; created unique, heterogeneous communities; and bolstered the perception of America as an ethnic “melting pot.”  
   c. The steel industry had an indelible impact on the development of American society and culture: it glorified the American work ethic, fostered the spirit of ingenuity, and provided a medium for the expansion and improvement of the national infrastructure.  
   d. *Steel Town*, the book about to be read in class, is about ups and downs of life in a steel mill and town.  
   e. The events in the book take place during the Great | 7. Students will recognize and report the benefits and drawbacks of steel production and design a poster reflecting their positions about the question “Steel: Is it worth it?” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development:</th>
<th>Depression when people had very little money and struggled to survive.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. The teacher will read the book aloud to the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Throughout the reading of the book the teacher may ask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the following probing questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. “In Steel Town, it’s always dark.” How would this make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you feel if you lived there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. What are the different roles, jobs, and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>men and women have in Steel Town?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. What is it like to work in a steel mill?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. How is Steel Town similar to the city/town where you live? How</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>is it different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. “In Steel Town, the iron and steel mills never sleep. But</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sometimes the people do.” What do you these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>statements mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. Would you like to live in Steel Town? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Expansion: | 1. After students have listened and discussed the book, *Steel Town*, they will be divided into four groups and stationed at four different yet related centers around the room in which they will revisit the book *Steel Town* to interpret and analyze primary and secondary sources about life in a steel mill and town during the Great Depression. (see Digital and Text Resources For Centers and Appendix for resources and rubrics, respectively) |
|           | a. At the first center, entitled “work,” students will examine a   |
|           | variety of photographs and first hand accounts pertaining to       |
|           | working conditions in Great Depression era steel mills.             |
|           | *Assessment:* Using a 4 x 6 index card, students will create a     |
|           | classified advertisement for a position in the steel mill outlining |
|           | the skills and characteristics needed to do the job.               |
|           | b. At the second center, entitled “neighborhood,” students will    |
|           | examine a variety of materials regarding cultural diversity among |
|           | steelworkers and in steel towns. *Assessment:* Using a 4 x 6       |
|           | index card, students will imagine that they were living in a steel |
|           | mill town during the Great Depression and write a postcard home     |
|           | (i.e., Europe, Native American reservation, or American south)     |
|           | describing their life in a steel town and their friendships/       |
|           | relationships with co-workers and neighbors of diverse backgrounds.|
|           | c. At the third center, entitled “town,” students will watch       |
YouTube videos, read an oral history excerpt, and look at photographs about steel mill workers’ health conditions and the pollution level of steel mill towns during the Great Depression. *Assessment:* Using these sources, students will create a bumper sticker slogan on a 4 x 12 piece of paper demonstrating awareness of the negative environmental and health impact of steel mills.

d. At the fourth center, entitled “home,” students will be exposed to materials like common recipes, popular songs, and photographs depicting home life during the Great Depression in a steel town. *Assessment:* After exploring these various materials, students will formulate a song title that captures the experiences, hardships, and realities of the time period. Students will then write the title on a 4 x 12 piece of paper.

**Assessment:**

1. After the students have rotated around to each center, the teacher will lead the class in an open discussion around the question, “Steel: Is it worth it?” The teacher will probe the students’ thinking about the benefits (e.g., ethnic diversity, economic advancement, creation of steel products) and drawbacks (e.g., pollution, poor working conditions) of steel production.

2. After the discussion, the teacher will assign the final assessment, a poster reflecting students’ positions about the question, “Steel: Is it worth it?” After the students complete their assessment, the posters will be hung in the classroom or hallway. They will then be instructed to do a wall walk and view each other’s posters comparing the positive and negative effects of steel production in society.

**Suggested Extension Activities:**

1. Have the students create a CD cover and a list of several song titles about life in steel towns.
2. Have students create a safety manual for the steel mill employees.
3. Have students create a classroom museum exhibit about steel town life in the Great Depression utilizing all their postcards, posters, advertisements, bumper stickers, and song titles created during the center work.
4. If the school is near or resides in a steel town, plan a class field trip or invite local steel workers to give a class
5. Have students investigate modern day former steel towns and answer the question, “Steel: Was it worth it?”
6. For older students, have them create a picture book about other major occupations during the Great Depression to share with younger students.

**Accommodations:**
1. Create a word list for students to use when writing postcards, classified advertisements, letters, and bumper stickers at the centers.
2. Allow students that may need support to work with a partner.
3. If short on time, reduce the number of centers.

**Additional References and Web links:**

**Work Center Resources:**
1. Steelworkers in Chicago at the end of the shift.
2. Artistic depiction of steelworkers handling molten steel. (scroll down)
3. Various photographs of the interior of a steel mill and steelworkers hard at work.
   [http://www.jaha.org/edu/discovery_center/work/img/mill_interior/pages/cus34.html](http://www.jaha.org/edu/discovery_center/work/img/mill_interior/pages/cus34.html)
4. Granddaughter’s account of grandfather’s life working for a steel mill.
   “My Grandfather worked in the open hearth and they shoveled all of the stuff in by hand. Every other week he would go to work on a Sunday afternoon and work a double shift from 3:00 on Sunday afternoon until 7:00 on Monday Morning. Sunday evening, Mom would pack his supper. I can still see it; he would have his oval aluminum lunch pail. They would put hot water in the bottom and there was a tray on top and she would have dinner, meat and potatoes, or whatever and she would put it in there. Then, she would send us over with Pop’s supper.”

### Neighborhood Center Resources:

1. Photographs of African American Steelworkers  
   [http://cwcs.ysu.edu/resources/cwcs-projects/culture/african-american-steelworkers](http://cwcs.ysu.edu/resources/cwcs-projects/culture/african-american-steelworkers)

2. Photograph of Hungarian American Steelworker  

3. Photograph of Mohawk Steelworkers  
   [http://www.mushkeg.ca/fot_season_one.html](http://www.mushkeg.ca/fot_season_one.html)

4. Photograph of Russian Steelworkers  
   [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/question2.html](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/question2.html)

5. Photograph of Irish Steelworkers  
   [http://cwcs.ysu.edu/resources/cwcs-projects/culture/irish-american-steelworkers](http://cwcs.ysu.edu/resources/cwcs-projects/culture/irish-american-steelworkers)

6. Photograph of Eastern European Steelworkers  
   [http://www.albertglinsky.com/Alleghenyquartet1.html](http://www.albertglinsky.com/Alleghenyquartet1.html)

7. “During the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression and the reforms of the New Deal, steelworkers in the Chicago area and across the nation finally won substantial gains through unionization. The successful unionization efforts of the 1930s brought together tens of thousands of workers of various ethnic backgrounds. At the turn of the century, most steelworkers in the Calumet and Indiana mills had been immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. During the 1910s and 1920s, large numbers of Mexican and African American men found work in the mills. Often, area steel companies attempted to exploit ethnic differences among workers to fight unionization. For many years, steelworkers were divided by ethnicity and craft distinctions. But in the late 1930s, after New Deal legislation made unionization easier, workers were organized across the industry.”  

8. Interview of a steelworker who describes the decline of ethnic hostility in the 1930s.  
   [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/134/](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/134/)

9. “For the first half of the century, Gary, Indiana served as a testing ground for the assimilation of European immigrants. Many of the city’s institutions—its schools,
churches, workplaces, settlement houses, political systems, and newspapers—focused on the struggle to Americanize the steelworkers as quickly as possible... By contrast, African American and Mexican workers were marginalized and isolated behind powerful walls of racism, segregation, and discrimination”

10. Interview with 82-year old Pittsburgh steelworker (2007). Interviewer: Over the years how have Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania changed?
JS: I’d have to say, as far as [the environment], it’s much better ‘cause they got rid of the mills; they got rid of all that dirt. People are living longer. (They didn’t live that long before. It had to be from the dirt from the mills, the soot and all that stuff.) In other ways I think it’s worse. People aren’t the same. Half the people in my neighborhood, I don’t even know—whereas, before, you’d go “Hi, Joe!” “Hi, Jim!” “Hi, Bill!” You knew everybody. It’s better environmentally, but you don’t have the camaraderie with the people.
http://www.carnegielibrary.org/research/pittsburgh/oralhistory/

Town Center Resources:
1. Power and Smoke: A Nation Built on Coal YouTube video
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM4I8VDhoDI
2. Steel Industry Safety in 1936 YouTube video
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHa8Ghs6aYc&playnext=1&list=PL99262D970A141884
3. Pittsburgh Town lyrics
4. “The steel mill had been a hard thing for my father. He’s always suffered from back trouble. There were times when just the burden of walking and bending over those steel ingots just knocked his back out and he’d be in pain for days and weeks at a time.”

Home Center Resources:
1. Lyrics for *Whistle While You Work* (1937)
   http://lyrics.filestube.com/song/6586dfc9e108942b03e9,Whistle-While-You-Work.html

2. Recipes from the Great Depression era.
   http://marysdepressionrarerecipes.blogspot.com/2008/12/more-great-depression-recipes.html

3. YouTube video of Bing Crosby (1937) *Pennies From Heaven*
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uROuR3Jm6M

4. Steel mill and surrounding homes, Birmingham, Alabama (1939).
   http://popartmachine.com/item/pop_art/LOC+1293244/STEEL-MILL-AND-WORKERS

5. Lyrics and information about blue-collar steel mill folk hero, Croatian, Joe Magarac
   http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/JoeMagarac.html

   http://www.flickr.com/photos/trialsanderrors/3034377433/

Additional Digital Collections:

American Iron and Steel Institute/Keller Collection

Historic Pittsburgh Image Collection
http://digital.library.pitt.edu/images/pittsburgh/joneslaughlin.html

Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area
http://hspa-pa.org/old_phoenix_iron_and_steel_co_photos.html

Lukens Steel Company, Photograph Collection, 1810-1973

Additional References:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Authors**

Jill M. Gradwell is Associate Professor and coordinator of social studies education at Buffalo State College. She teaches graduate courses in history, social studies education, and museum education. Her research interests focus on teaching, learning, and assessing history. She can be reached at E-mailgradwejm@buffalostate.edu.

Jonathan Amidon is pursuing his Master degree in Social Studies Education at Buffalo State College. Currently, he is a substitute teacher for Orchard Park Central School District in Orchard Park, New York.

Danielle LaJudice is a preschool special education teacher in western New York. She has a Bachelor degree in Elementary Education and Exceptional Education from Buffalo State College where she is also currently completing her Master degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Her undergraduate studies concentrated in the content area of Social Studies and she has an extension in Early Childhood Education.

Mary Westlake-Douds is a currently a graduate student at Buffalo State College pursuing a Master degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Before attending graduate school, she taught Kindergarten and first grade in northern Virginia.