

American Experience: Zoot Suit Riots

PBS Teacher's Guide*

*No longer available online

Zoot Suit Riots offers insights into American history topics including teenage rebellion, World War II, immigration and assimilation, race relations, conflicts between law enforcement and minority groups, and the history of Mexicans in America. You can use part or all of the film, or delve into the rich resources available on this Web site to learn more, either in a classroom or on your own.

Civics

1. Read about the Sleepy Lagoon murder and about Clem Peoples and the Los Angeles Police Department. The Los Angeles Police Department's decision to round up several hundred Mexican American zoot-suiters following the murder of José Díaz is an example of what is today called "racial profiling," or focusing police investigations on certain individuals because they belong to a particular racial or ethnic group. Racial profiling gained new attention at the end of 2001 in connection with the federal government's war on terrorism. Write an editorial in which you present and defend your position on whether racial profiling should be permitted.
2. Los Angeles in the 1940s, like the nation as a whole, was dominated politically by Americans of European descent. In recent decades, though, the number of Hispanic American leaders -- including mayors, state and federal lawmakers, and others like union leader Cesar Chavez -- has grown enormously. Select one of these leaders and write a brief biography of him or her.

History

1. Form groups of three students each. Each group should prepare a presentation entitled "Teenage Rebels, Then and Now," showing how teenagers in a previous decade (such as the "flappers" of the 1920s, the "greasers" of the 1950s, or the "hippies" of the 1960s) expressed themselves and how teenagers express themselves today. Each group may choose the form its presentation will take. Groups may, for example, write and act out skits in which teens from the two time periods argue with their parents over clothing, dating, or other issues. Alternatively, groups may create a collage of photographs showing teen fashions during the two time periods; collages should be annotated to identify particular items of clothing, hair styles, and so on. Or, groups might create a "teen lexicon" listing popular teenage expressions during the two time periods.
2. Read about Clem Peoples and the Los Angeles Police Department and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. "Zoot-suiters" were criticized both by their parents, who saw their clothing styles and use of English as signs that they were rejecting the parents' culture, and by some non-Mexican Americans, who regarded them as alien and dangerous. Write a first-person account from the perspective of a young zoot-suiter in which you describe your feelings about being caught between your parents' fear that you are becoming "too American" and others' fear that you are "not American enough."

Economics

1. Manufacturers of clothing and other consumer products for teenagers often seek to boost sales by presenting their products as symbols of individual expression. Visit the Web site of a recent PBS documentary entitled "The Merchants of Cool," which explores the ways manufacturers target teenage consumers; read the synopsis of the documentary and other parts of the site that interest you. Then select two manufacturers with which you are familiar and prepare an oral presentation for the class that compares and contrasts the advertising messages of the two firms. Do the firms' ads suggest that using their products will make a teenager more popular, or more powerful, or more desirable? What do you find significant about the slogans they use, the models they show, or the moods their ads present? In your presentation, use at least three ads from each manufacturer.

2. Half a century after the zoot suit riots, Los Angeles experienced a far more destructive riot that likewise reflected racial tensions. In 1992, large-scale riots erupted in the city after an all-white jury found four white policemen not guilty of assault against an African American named Rodney King. The officers had beaten King after he resisted arrest. An eyewitness had videotaped the beating, and this videotape had been shown repeatedly on television. More than 50 people were killed in the violence, thousands more were injured, thousands of jobs were destroyed, and several hundred million dollars in damage was inflicted. Lack of economic opportunity for the city's poorest African Americans has been cited as a factor in the riots, yet it was the poor neighborhoods that suffered most of the damage and the lost economic opportunity. Hold a class discussion or have students write essays on what might cause people to participate in destructive acts like this.

Geography

1. Draw or trace a map of the present-day United States. On that map, mark in a special color the areas that the United States acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican War. In which states are these areas located?
2. View the map of Los Angeles neighborhoods in the 1940s and review the timeline of the riots that occurred in the city. On the map, identify the places that are referred to in the timeline. How do the relative locations of these places help explain why violence occurred in 1943?