

Half a Million Joads: The Dust Bowl Migration

The roots of the Great Depression are as dry and snarled as a dead orchard. If you want to watch two economists fight, just ask them what caused the October 1929 stock market crash. Easier to unearth, though, are the roots of the Depression-era Dust Bowl migration to California.

In the mid-nineteenth century, migrants had come to California for gold. In the twentieth they came to California just to stay alive, and the failure rate was high. The migrants came from Oklahoma and the states around it. They came because the post-World War I recession had forced them to buy new machinery to increase their yield, so they bet on the easy credit of the 1920s and lost. They came because a seven-year drought dried up their topsoil and blew it all away, and the bankers foreclosed on their farms. They came, too, because the Depression unemployment rate was pushing 30 percent, and California entrepreneurs were spreading rumors of better days to the west.

All told, between 300,000 and 500,000 migrants came to California during the 1930s from Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and, most typically, from Oklahoma. The general name for them that fit easiest into headlines was "Okies," and among Oklahomans it still rankles as deeply as any ethnic slur. These migrant families were practically invisible to the general public because they followed the crops from farm to farm, well outside of major population centers.

The gradual end of the Dust Bowl crisis in the late 1930s had as many causes as its beginning. Federally run Migratory Labor Camps, like the one founded in Arvin by Steinbeck's good friend Tom Collins, began to ease the misery of some California field hands. The state's shipyard and aerospace mobilization before and during World War II lessened competition for California agricultural jobs. And Steinbeck's own work, first in a series of articles in the San Francisco News and eventually

transmuted into *The Grapes of Wrath*, caught the conscience of a nation and resulted in somewhat improved conditions.

"*The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, both repels and attracts you. The horrors of the picture, so well drawn, make you dread sometimes to begin the next chapter, and yet you cannot lay the book down or even skip a page. The book is coarse in spots, but life is coarse in spots, and the story is very beautiful in spots just as life is...Even from life's sorrows some good must come. What could be a better illustration than the closing chapter of this book?"

—Eleanor Roosevelt, from her column, *My Day*, on June 28, 1939

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