

AFTER THE FACT



The Art of Historical Detection

Fourth Edition

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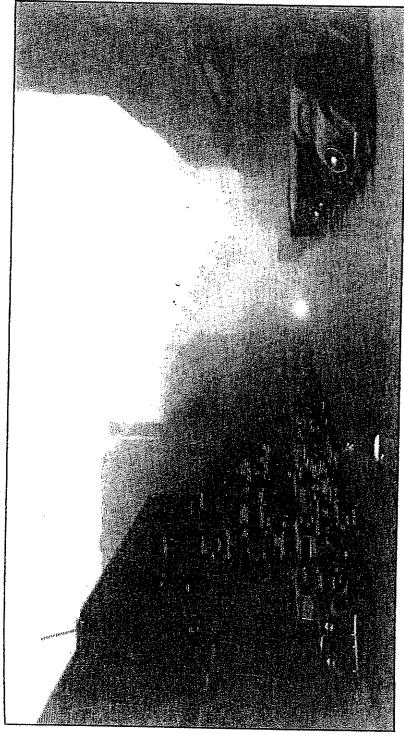
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Dust Bowl Odyssey

The story begins with dust—not the thin coating on the shelf or the little balls in the corner, but huge dark clouds of it. When the winds blew, they sucked the dust into the sky to create blizzards. The dust storms began in earnest on May 9, 1934. High winds captured dirt from Montana and Wyoming—some 350 million tons of it—and carried it eastward. By noon the dust began falling in Iowa and Wisconsin. That evening a brown grit fell like snow on Chicago—four pounds for each inhabitant. Then the storm moved on. It was dark in Buffalo at noon the next day and the midday gloom covered five states. On May 11 the dust sifted down as far south as Atlanta and as far north as Boston. The following day ships some 300 miles off the east coast noticed a film of brown dust on their decks.

Every year more storms blew: twenty-two in 1934, to a peak of seventy-two by 1937, then a gradual decline until finally the rains returned in the 1940s. Residents of the high western plains remembered 1935 as the worst year. February brought temperatures in the seventies. With no snow cover and no vegetation to hold it, the dirt flew. Even on calm days on the Southern plains a pervasive grit fell everywhere. “In the morning,” John Steinbeck wrote, “the dust hung like fog, and the sun was as red as ripe new blood. All day the dust sifted down from the sky, and the next day it sifted down . . . It settled on the corn, piled on the tops of the fence posts, piled on the wires; it settled on roofs and blanketed weeds and trees.” On May 15 Denver sent a warning that a dust storm was rolling eastward. Folks in Kansas under a clear blue sky paid little attention until around noon when the sky suddenly blackened. One movie patron leaving a theater expected to walk into the blinding glare of daylight. Instead he thought a prankster had thrown a bag over his head. As he stepped outside, he bumped into a telephone pole, tripped over cans and boxes, and finally found his way by crawling along the curb. A young boy was less fortunate. He wandered out the door, became disoriented, and suffocated in a dust drift.

No matter what they tried, people could not escape the dust. Open the door and the dust beat in your face. Shut the door tight and still “those tiny particles seemed to seep through the very walls. It got into cupboards and clothes closets; our faces were as dirty as if we had rolled in the dirt; our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth.”



The enormity of the dust storms at first inspired amazement and awe. That sense of wonder soon gave way to despair as the constantly blowing dust turned day into night and left people asking if “this was the wrath of God.” (Kansas State Historical Society)

Was this the wrath of God, as some plains dwellers thought? “This is the ultimate darkness,” one woman wrote in her diary. “So must come the end of the world.” Still, though the story of the Dust Bowl remains one of the saddest chapters in American history, its coming could be explained by causes more proximate than divine wrath. Drought had been a recurring feature of the high plains that stretched northward from the Texas panhandle, New Mexico, and western Oklahoma all the way through portions of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and the Dakotas. To survive extremes of heat and cold, wind and drought, prairie grasses had developed deep roots. Those grasses fed the buffalo and held the soil in place.

In the late nineteenth century farmers had seen the grass as a nuisance to be plowed under so they could exploit the rich soil beneath. Land that had been suitable enough for grazing was turned into fields of cotton, wheat, and corn. Little did farmers heed the warning of those who described the area as the “Great American Desert,” subscribing instead to the popular notion that “rain follows the plow.” Homestead farmers sought to create an agrarian kingdom in which they “busted” and “broke” the land into farms to feed their families, the nation, and the world.

In 1934, when the dust storms arrived in the midst of the Great Depression, the ensuing disaster shattered the dreams of a people who had always seen the West as the land of opportunity. The rains failed them, their crops withered, and the winds hurled the loose soil across the nation. As the soil eroded year after year, so did farmers’ resources and hopes.

That story was the one that John Steinbeck presented in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and that director John Ford turned into one of the most critically acclaimed movies of all time. Most Americans now associate the Depression era with the Okies—dispossessed farm families out of Oklahoma and other Dust Bowl states—and their rickety cars packed high with all they owned, heading along Route 66 to California. Whether in Steinbeck's words, in Ford's images, in the ballads of folk singer Woody Guthrie, or in the pictures taken by Farm Security Administration photographers like Dorothea Lange, the Okies and their flight from the Dust Bowl put a face on the tragedy of America during the Great Depression.

Steinbeck's novel told of the Joad family in a near biblical parable of suffering, endurance, and dignity in the face of adversity. The name Joad echoes the name Job, and the voice of God comes through the Reverend Jim



Photographer Dorothea Lange liked to place displaced Oklahoma migrants against a background that suggested a central irony of the Depression era—want in the midst of plenty. This picture reminded viewers that there was more than one way to make the trip to California. (Library of Congress)

Casy, whose initials link him to Jesus Christ. The Joads' trek across the desert to the promised land reminds us of Israel's lost tribes. It is a compelling story with three major sections: the opening in Oklahoma, in which the Joads are driven from their land; their odyssey across the desert on Route 66; and their journey through California in a desperate search for work.

The Joads are a simple family who for decades struggled to wrest a living cropping cotton on a forty-acre plot near Sallisaw, Oklahoma. At first there were five years of good crops "while the wild grass was still in her." Then it became an "ever" year kind of place. "Ever" year, Tom Joad told his friend Jim Casy, "we had a good crop comin' an' it never came." Bad crops forced the Joads to borrow from the bank. The crops kept failing, the debt kept growing, and soon the bank owned their farm. The Joads, along with hundreds of thousands of plains farmers, became sharecroppers who each year gave the better part of their crop to a landowner or the bank. When Tom Joad returns home after a stint in prison, he finds his family gone. His friend Muley Graves explains that they have been driven from their farm: "they was gonna stick her out when the bank come to tractorin' off the place." The tractor that leveled the farm house also severed the vital connection between the Joads and their land. They were almost literally uprooted and displaced.

Now the question became where to go. In the 1930s California beckoned more than any other destination. The agrarian dream of economic sufficiency and independence still glittered in the West. So the Joads piled all their worldly goods and a family of twelve onto a jalopy and headed down Route 66. Steinbeck described the highway as

the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the numbers of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight.

The road proves a cruel taskmaster. Each repair of their weather-beaten auto eats into the Joads' shrinking cash reserve. The weaker members of the family die or wander off. In the roadside camps, however, the Joads often meet other refugees who give help and comfort, share what little they have, and join the Joads in reestablishing ties to the places they have left behind.

In California the dream turns into a nightmare. The Joads do indeed discover the land of milk and honey. Rich farms and fertile fields roll across a vast landscape. Yet that abundance is off limits to the Okies. Californians treat them like vermin, vigilante mobs attack them, labor agents cheat them, strike breakers threaten them, and worst of all, work at a living wage proves nearly impossible to find. Unable to provide, the men lose their place at the head of the family. In the end Ma Joad's faith holds the remnants of the family together, but in a final irony these Dust Bowl refugees face the peril of rising floodwaters.

THE SPECIFIC VERSUS THE COLLECTIVE

Many Americans come away from the Joads' story convinced that Steinbeck recorded the central tragedy of America in the 1930s. Yet no single story, however powerful or popular, can capture the collective experience of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people. A historian wants to know just how typical were the Joads—of Americans, of migrants to California, or even simply of Okies during the Great Depression. After all, Steinbeck was a novelist seeking to tell a story of people dispossessed from the land. Unlike a historian, he was not bound by strict rules of evidence and explanation, only by the true expression of the human condition. Yet Steinbeck gained the respect of his readers in part because he based much of his novel on direct observation. Like many writers of the 1930s he used a reporter's techniques to research his story, visiting Oklahoma, traveling Route 66, and touring California's migrant labor camps.

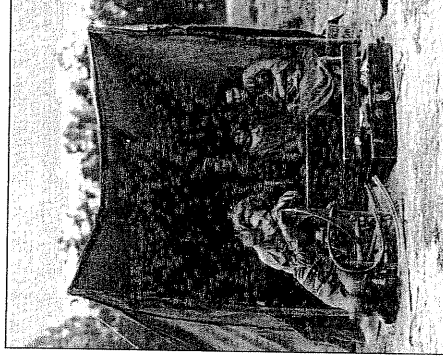
Social scientists and government officials of Steinbeck's day confirmed much of what he wrote. They too reported the drought conditions that drove farm families out of the plains, the hostility of Californians to refugees, and the destitution of many migrants. Yet we have already seen that the historian must rigorously question the testimony of social scientists and journalists as much as novelists. Even the apparently objective photographs taken by that "mirror with a memory" need to be scrutinized.

Take, for example, the case of photographer Dorothea Lange and her husband, Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist from the University of California at Berkeley. Like Steinbeck, Lange and Taylor followed the migrant trail from Oklahoma through Texas and across the desert to the migrant camps in California. Lange was one of many photographers hired by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to document rural life in the 1930s. She and Taylor published a book, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, that described the destruction of the plains and the impoverishment of a proud people. Yet Taylor and Lange were hardly disinterested observers—much to their credit, one can argue. Like Steinbeck, they believed that the migrants needed help. And all three went looking for evidence to make that case.

The story of Lange's most famous photograph is instructive. One March morning in 1936 she was driving up California Highway 101 toward San Francisco. Eager to be home, she hurried past a hand-painted sign directing passersby to a pea-pickers' camp. Some impulse made her turn back. What she saw staggered her, even though she had spent months investigating the conditions of migrant farm laborers. The camp contained more than two thousand men, women, and children huddled against the cold and driving rain in ragged tents and flimsy wood shelters. They had come to pick peas, but the weather left them without work or wages. And with nowhere to go and no relief from local, state, or federal officials, they waited. First their money ran out, then their food. By the time Lange arrived they were desperate. How was she to give voice to their need?



The collection of Dorothea Lange's work in the Library of Congress shows that she was far more than a "one picture" photographer. She traveled widely and photographed a wide variety of depression-era scenes. "Migrant Mother," her most famous photograph, was actually taken as the final in a series of six separate shots. What is it about Migrant Mother #6 (left) that makes it more affecting than Migrant Mother #1 (right)? (Library of Congress)



That day Lange took a photograph that must rank as one of the most widely viewed images of the decade. She entitled it "Migrant Mother." Her subject's name was Florence Thompson, at age thirty-two the recently widowed mother of six children. What Lange captured was the quiet dignity of a woman at the end of hope, cradling an infant in her arms with two young children clinging to her shoulders. She had just sold the tires off her car to buy food for her family. As Lange intended, the image put a personal face to a need so compelling, few people could turn away. Along with Steinbeck's tale of the Joads, "Migrant Mother" made Americans aware of the story of the dust bowl refugees.

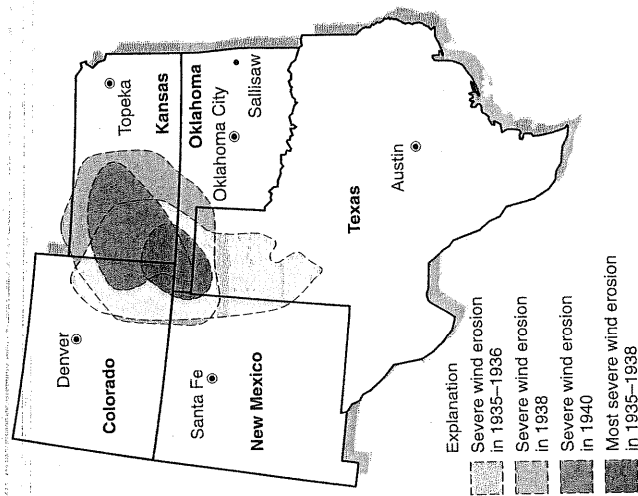
Lange and other FSA photographers did not simply arrive at a camp and begin taking pictures. To get the image she wanted, Lange often posed her subjects. She sometimes even suggested to them where to look or what to do with their hands. In the case of Florence Thompson, Lange recalled, "she seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it." Lange took six different photographs, each time looking for a more compelling shot. In the first, one child was smiling at the camera, defusing the desperation of the situation. Lange then tried a longer view of the tent; then moved in to focus on the mother and her baby. In the final, telling shot, Thompson, of her own accord, raised her

hand to her chin. "LOOK IN HER EYES," ran the headline in *Midweek Pictorial* when it first ran the photo. "This woman is watching something happen to America and to herself and her children who are part of America."

Both Lange and Steinbeck adopted the time-tested literary technique of allowing a part to stand for the whole. The two created images so vivid, stories so concrete, they would be remembered long after the bland generalizations of bureaucratic reports were forgotten. Yet here, in the matter of the concrete and the specific, is precisely where historians so often begin their skeptical cross-examinations. One way of identifying biases or limiting perspectives is to examine a broader sample. To what degree are Steinbeck's vivid stories and Lange's wrenching photographs representative of the collective reality they are taken to symbolize?

Even a casual glance at the Joads' story suggests that Steinbeck painted with a broad, sometimes imprecise brush. To begin with, the Joads did not live in what was physically the Dust Bowl. While drought affected a vast region from the Dakotas to Texas, geographers place the Dust Bowl in an area

EXTENT OF AREA SUBJECT TO SEVERE WIND EROSION 1935-1940



in the Texas-Oklahoma panhandle that spills over into western Kansas and eastern parts of Colorado and New Mexico. Sallisaw, from which the Joads hailed, lay in the eastern part of the state, several hundred miles outside the dust bowl. Rolling hills and oaks, not prairie and short grasses, formed the landscape. And corn rather than cotton was the primary crop. As one historian remarked, "Steinbeck's geography, like that of most Americans, was a bit hazy; any place in Oklahoma, even on the Ozark Plateau, must be Dust Bowl country, he assumed."

Still, this point seems a small one, given the wide reach of those rolling black clouds. Even if the Joads were not technically from the Dust Bowl, surely most of the Okies who migrated to California were farm refugees from the dust storms. Or were they? Here, too, the facts get in the way of the image Steinbeck made popular. Statistics show that California gained more than a million new residents in the 1930s. In fact, however, no more than about fifteen thousand to sixteen thousand of those people came from the Dust Bowl—well under 2 percent. In imagining the Joads, Steinbeck was implicitly portraying a much broader group of Southwestern emigrants from four states: "agricultural laborers" and "farm workers" not only from Oklahoma but also Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri. Because this group amounted to about one-third of the newcomers to California, we might say that, strictly speaking, the Joads are more accurately representative of displaced agricultural labor than of Dust Bowl refugees.

The minute we begin talking about collective experiences, of course, we run headlong into numbers. To understand the great migration of the depression decade, historians must place the Joads in a statistical context. What links them to the million people who reached California between 1930 and 1940? Unfortunately the mere mention of numbers—statistics or columns of figures—is enough to make the eyes of many readers glaze over. It is only natural to prefer Steinbeck's way of personifying the Dust Bowl refugees.

Yet the numbers cannot be avoided if we are to paint an accurate picture. The challenge for the historian lies in bringing statistics to life so they tell a story with some of the human qualities that Lange and Steinbeck invested in their subjects. In looking at the 1930s in particular, historians are lucky because social scientists and government officials tried hard to quantify the human circumstances of the era. In particular, historians of the Dust Bowl era have been able to benefit from the federal population count of 1940, which was the first modern census.

The federal census had been taken every decade since 1790, because its data was needed to apportion each state's seats in the House of Representatives, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. For the first fifty years federal marshals did the actual counting, by locating households within their districts and recording the number of people living there. Over time the nature of the information collected became broader and more detailed; it included social statistics about taxes collected, real estate values, wages, education, and crime. In 1880 Congress shifted responsibility for the census from the marshals to specially appointed experts trained to collect not only

population statistics but also data on manufacturing and other economic activities. By 1890, punch cards were being used to record data and an electric tabulating machine was used to process those cards. Mechanization, by vastly reducing calculation time, made it possible to accumulate more complex and varied information.

The census of 1940, because of advanced statistical techniques used by the enumerators, was even more comprehensive than its predecessors. Social scientists and opinion pollsters like George Gallup had experimented during the 1930s with probability sampling. To measure unemployment rates in 1940, for example, they constructed a group of some 20,000 households to represent a cross section of the nation as a whole. The data from this small sample gave the social scientists statistics that accurately (though not exactly) reflected the national employment pattern. Other questions in the 1940 census were asked of just 5 percent of the households. That allowed the Census Bureau to publish detailed tables on many more subjects, not the least of which was internal migration. In so doing, they provided historians with a way of determining how representative the Joads actually were of the Dust Bowl refugees.

HISTORY BY THE NUMBERS

Historian James Gregory went to the census records in his own attempt to analyze the Dust Bowl migration. In each of the censuses from 1910 to 1970, he was able to find statistics on Americans born in western regions of the South (Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas) who had moved to California. By comparing these numbers decade to decade, he could also estimate how many new Southwesterners arrived every ten years. Take a moment to look at the table on page 265.

The story of the Joads would lead us to hypothesize that between 1930 and 1940 a large number of migrants left the Southwestern plains states for California. Drought and economic hardships drove them out. Because so many settled in California, we would further assume that conditions special to that state drew the refugees there.

At first glance, the statistics support the hypothesis. The number of Southwesterners in California in 1940 is 745,934. Subtracting the residents that were already there in 1930 (430,810) we discover that some 315,124 Southwesterners moved to California during the decade in which the severe dust storms took place (this number is shown for 1940 in "Net California Increase"). Of course, there is a certain false precision here. Common sense tells us that at least some Southwesterners living in California who were counted in the 1930 census must have returned home, moved to an entirely new state, or died over the next ten years. In that case, the actual number of migrants arriving must have been greater, though we have no reliable way of knowing how much greater. But the bureau has estimated that the total

Western South Natives Living outside the Region, 1910-1970

	Living outside region	Living in California	Net Calif. Increase	Percentage of Calif. pop.
1910	661,094	103,241		4.3%
1920	1,419,046	187,471	84,230	5.5%
1930	2,027,139	430,810	243,339	7.6%
1940	2,580,940	745,934	315,124	10.8%
1950	3,887,370	1,367,720	621,786	12.9%
1960	4,966,781	1,734,271	366,551	11.0%
1970	5,309,287	1,747,632	13,361	8.8%

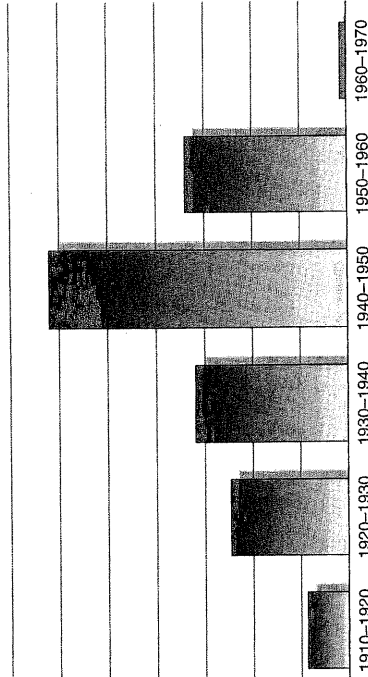
Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the United States, Population: 1910, Vol. 1, 732-33; 1920, Vol. 11, 628-29; 1930, Vol. H, 155-56; 1940, State of Birth, 17-18; 1950, State of Birth, 20-24; 1960, State of Birth, 22-23; 1970, State of Birth, 28-29.*

number of Southwestern emigrants might have been as many as 400,000. In other words, the number in our table—315,124—may have been off by 85,000 people, enough to populate a medium-sized city.

A migrant total approaching half a million is surely high. But we must ask another question. Is there a *causal* connection between the drought and migration, or is the link merely coincidental? The anecdotal evidence of one journalist suggests an intriguing clue. He reported seeing Oklahoma farmers "in their second-hand flivvers [inexpensive Model-T Fords], piled high with furniture and family . . . pouring through the divides by the hundreds." It is the kind of literary detail that might have come straight out of Steinbeck. The problem is that the reporter was writing in 1926, eight years before the first dust storm. We begin to see the reason that James Gregory, in compiling his table, sought data over a sixty-year period. The broader time span provides a better yardstick of comparison. To make the point visually, we have taken the information from the "Net California Increase" column and displayed it as a bar graph (see page 266).

As the bar graph reveals, during the 1920s nearly a quarter of a million Southwesterners migrated to California—nearly as many as came during the "dirty thirties" of the Dust Bowl years. Small wonder that a reporter could speak, in 1926, of hundreds of flivvers crowding the mountain passes. And the 1920s, by contrast, were years of average rainfall. Equally notable, the number of arrivals virtually doubles during the 1940s, a time when rain and better economic times had returned to the region, mostly because of massive industrial growth stimulated by World War II. Even in the postwar decade of 1950-1960, the migration of Southwesterners remained heavy. Such numbers suggest that factors besides drought, dustbowl, and depression were driving people from the Southwestern plains or drawing them to California.

WESTERN SOUTH NATIVES ARRIVING IN CALIFORNIA, 1910-1970



Steinbeck's powerful imagery provides one suggestion for explaining this broader trend: the tractor that knocked down the Joads' house. Why, we might ask, were tractors rumbling across the farmland, driving people from their homes? Steinbeck offered an explanation: "At last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop." The owners took no responsibility for what they and their tractors did. It was "the bank" that gave the order, and the bank was "something more than men. . . . It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it." When the tenants protest that their families had "killed the weeds and snakes" to make way for their farms, the owners show cold indifference. "The bank, the fifty-thousand acre owner, can't be responsible," they explain. "You're on land that isn't yours." When the tenants complain that they had no money and nowhere else to go, the owners respond, "Why don't you go to California? There's work there and it never gets cold."

The tractor is a symbol for a complex process of agricultural reorganization through absentee landownership, mechanization, and corporatizing. During the late nineteenth century farmers had flooded into the Southwestern plains—the nation's final agricultural frontier. Through World War I they realized generally high prices for their crops. All the same, many farmers had arrived with few resources other than the labor they and their families could perform. One bad crop, one dry year, and they were facing debt. Once in debt, they had to buy on credit and borrow on future crops. As a result, sharecropping and tenantry had become widespread even in flush times.

During the 1920s, though industry boomed, the agricultural economy went into decline. Prices for agricultural staples like cotton, wheat, and corn fell. Overfarming depleted the soil. Such factors created conditions under which too many people were trying to farm land that could no longer sup-

port them. Between 1910 and 1930, well before the great dust storms, the number of farmers and agricultural workers in the region fell by about 341,000 and some 1.3 million people left. About 430,800 settled in California. A majority of the farmers who remained in the region rented land or cropped on shares. By the 1930s, landowners had come to realize that they could increase profits by driving off their tenants, by consolidating their acreage into larger, more efficient farms, and by using tractors and other machines rather than human labor.

So the explanation for the exodus from the plains would need to include a discussion of agricultural reorganization and the mechanization of farming. Steinbeck's vivid portrait of the bankers' tractors acknowledged this reality, but the novel's pervasive images of dust overwhelms it somewhat. These findings do not mean we should dismiss *The Grapes of Wrath*, merely that we should study the numbers on migration a little more closely. Were those migrants who left between 1910 and 1930 the same kinds of people who left in the 1930s? Did they leave for the same reasons?

Because the 1940 census was so much more comprehensive than those that preceded it, we actually know more about the Dust Bowl-era migrants than about those who traveled in previous decades. The 1930 census tells us, for example, that rural counties in Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas lost population in the 1920s, but not whether people left the region. Many may have gone into the cities or to work in the booming oil fields. All the same, it seems most likely that the migrants of the 1920s were a more prosperous group than those of the next decade. Despite the popular image of the West as a "safety valve" for the poor from the East, over the course of American history the majority of pioneer farmers were neither rich nor poor. The West attracted largely middle-class folk drawn to the promise of economic opportunity rather than driven out by harsh circumstances.

Elbert Garretson seems representative of the middling sort of people making up migrants before the Great Depression. Garretson saw that lower crop prices and declining soil fertility had weakened his chances to succeed at farming. So he packed up his family and took a job in a California steel mill. His plan was to get on his feet financially so he could continue to farm in Oklahoma. Several times the Garretsons returned to Oklahoma, but each time the lure of California proved stronger. Finally Garretson sold the farm as a bad bet.

During the 1920s the lure for migrants was even stronger because California farmers faced a shortage of agricultural labor. To attract workers, they often paid railroad fares of Southwesterners who would emigrate. "The farmers would meet you at the trains," one woman recalled. Another family went "because we could see the promise of the cotton future here, and we were cotton ranchers." Poorer people like the Joads surely felt the draw too, but they were more likely tied by debt to their "ever year" farms.

What differed in the 1930s was not so much the numbers of those who went but their identities. Of all the regions of the United States, none suffered more economic devastation during the Great Depression than the

Southwest plains. The once-robust oil industry collapsed in a glut of overproduction. Unemployment in the region hit one-third of all workers. Infestations of locusts and boll weevils added to the woes of farmers long afflicted by drought and low crop prices. In the two years before Franklin Roosevelt became president, creditors foreclosed the mortgages of some 10 percent of Oklahoma's farms. As a result, the migrants of the 1930s included many more desperately poor and displaced families like the Joads.

When Franklin Roosevelt launched the New Deal in 1933, he placed the agricultural crisis at the top of his agenda. Still, it was far from clear what government could do to ease the farmers' plight. One of the New Deal's most ambitious measures during the president's Hundred Day program for relief, recovery, and reform was the Agricultural Adjustment Act. New Dealers sought to ease farm distress by providing credit, reducing overproduction, and raising prices. One strategy was to offer farmers a cash subsidy to take land out of production. Over the next eight years desperate Southwestern farmers so eagerly sought the subsidy that they reduced their cotton acreage by 12.5 million acres, or more than 50 percent.

This strategy contains one of the central ironies of the Dust Bowl crisis. Along with the drought and the "monster" bank, the good intentions of the federal government helped to account for the wave of tractors driving people like the Joads from their land. To receive a crop subsidy, landowners had to reduce the acreage they planted. The easiest way to do that was to evict tenants. Landowners could consolidate their best lands and farm them with tractors while letting tenant lands return to grass. One landlord boasted that "I bought tractors on the money the government give me and got shet o' my renters." So common was that practice that by 1940 tenantry had decreased by 24 percent. "They got their choice," the same landlord remarked curtly. "California or WPA [a federal relief agency]."

If only the choice had been so simple. Unlike the 1920s, when California and the urban centers of the Southwest attracted rural folk with new opportunities, displaced tenants in the 1930s had few practical options. By this time California had a glut of agricultural workers, and the Southwestern cities had higher unemployment than the rural counties did. The New Deal did offer help. During the early duster years of 1934 and 1935, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration provided funds to some 2.5 million Southwestern families, about 20 percent of the population. But the aid proved woefully inadequate. In most areas of the country the states supplemented federal relief payments, but not in the Southwest. Throughout the 1930s some 20 percent to 35 percent of all families in the region suffered from extreme poverty and unemployment. This situation is one area in which the story of the Joads brings the plight of 1930s migrants into clear focus.

THE ROAD

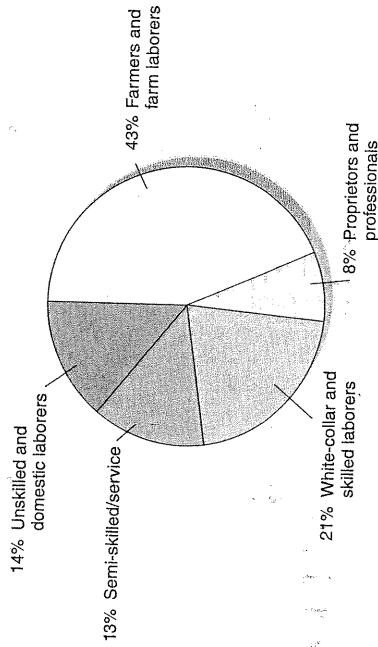
As the Great Depression worsened, Roy Turner and his family migrated to a shanty town outside the Oklahoma City stockyards. These encampments (often nicknamed Hoovervilles, after President Herbert Hoover) grew up in

many urban areas. In Oklahoma City, the Turners joined some 2,000 others living off a mixture of relief, part-time jobs, and declining hopes. The Turners described their home as "old automobiles, old lard cases, buckets, paste board." For food they had little more than the milk from the stock pen cows. When conditions became unbearably grim, the family pulled together what few belongings they had and headed down Route 66—"walking, me and my wife and two babies," hoping to hitch rides on the 1,200 mile trip to California.

Here indeed is a family much like the Joads, though their path to California involved a stop for several years in an urban center. But the Turners and Joads—desperately poor, without jobs, and without prospects—were only one element of the Southwestern surge to California. When James Gregory examined the Census Bureau statistics as well as other surveys, he discovered some surprising percentages. For example, in 1939 the Bureau of Agricultural Economics surveyed the occupations of about 116,000 families who had come to California in the 1930s. The results of that data are displayed in the graph below.

As the chart indicates, only 43 percent of Southwesterners were doing farm work immediately before they migrated. Farmers were a definite minority. In fact, nearly one-third of all migrants were professional or white-collar workers. The 1940 census showed similar results. Southwesterners who moved to California between 1935 and 1940 were asked to list their residence as of April 1, 1935. Only 36 percent reported that they were living on a farm.

With these numbers, as with all statistics, it is important to look critically at the method of collection. The census enumerators of 1940 reported that rural residents, to simplify answering the question of residence, would



Pre-migration occupations of California migrants from west south central states. (Data from *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* by James N. Gregory. Copyright © 1991 by James N. Gregory. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.)

sometimes merely list the nearest town or city, which gave the mistaken impression that those people lived in an urban area. Even taking these biases into account, however, it seems that Steinbeck (and many historians as well) have exaggerated the numbers of farmers in the migrant stream.

Other factors distinguish the actual migrants from the Joads. Of the twelve travelers in the Joads's old Hudson, five were well over forty years old. By contrast, most of the actual migrants were younger—60 percent of the adult travelers were under age thirty-five. Unlike the Joads, the actual migrants were slightly better educated than those who remained behind. The Joads were typical in gender balance since the majority of migrants traveled as families. (In the broader history of American migration this family movement is rather unusual, because single males more commonly predominate among migrating populations.) All the same, large extended families like the Joads were rare. The average Southwest migrant family had 4.4 members.

Finally, there is the matter of race. Like 95 percent of all Southwestern migrants to California, the Joads were white. This was not because few African Americans lived in Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, or Oklahoma. In 1930 the black population in those four states was approximately 1.7 million. Many of these African Americans were farmers or agricultural laborers, and thousands left the region between 1910 and 1930. However, most migrated to urban centers in the North and Upper Midwest, such as Chicago and Pittsburgh, where they already had relatives or friends. Among those black Southwesterners who headed to California, the great majority settled in Los Angeles. Even so, by 1940 the black population there was only about 64,000 out of 1.5 million residents. (And a mere 5,000 African Americans resided in San Francisco.)

Steinbeck's account of the Joad's trip west leads us to another question—about the quality of the trip itself. *The Grapes of Wrath* devotes a third of its tale to the Joads' struggle to reach California. The book gives no exact dates, but the Joads were on the road long enough to have many hardships and adventures. They reached California weeks after their journey began. Reading of such tribulations, a reader might well wonder why so many people risked the trip if it was such an ordeal.

But the collective portrait that historians have assembled about migration journeys suggests that, for most people, the odyssey was not so wrenching. Here, the evidence is mostly anecdotal. The census collected no systematic information on the length of the journey or conditions along the way. But social scientists and reporters interviewed Okies and recorded oral histories of their experience. Although the individual misfortunes that Steinbeck ascribed to the Joads no doubt happened to some migrants, most found the trip less harrowing.

Take, for example, the hopes that drew people to the road. To the Joads, California was little more than a blurry set of ideas based on rumors, legends, gossip, and handbills sent to Oklahoma by labor agents. Certainly, many people headed for California with unreasonable expectations. Two young researchers who were hired by the Library of Congress to collect folklore recorded this verse:

They said in California
that money grew on trees,
that everyone was going there,
just like a swarm of bees.

State tourist agencies encouraged such illusions. California was the place to come for a grand vacation of sun and fun. The Hollywood film industry portrayed the state as a glamorous alternative to the dark urban settings it used for films about social problems and crime.

But precisely because California officials feared that their state would be overrun by destitute job seekers, they repeatedly sought to dispel such fantasies, sending word that conditions in California were desperate. A billboard along Route 66 near Tulsa announced in bold letters:

NO JOBS in California
If YOU are looking for work—KEEP OUT
6 men for every job
No State Relief available for Non-residents

Neither the dire warnings nor the glamorous tourist brochures were accurate. Although California's economy suffered and unemployment remained serious, the state in the 1930s was much better off than most of the nation. Its farms grew some one hundred different crops, and such diversification made California agriculture less vulnerable to overproduction and falling prices. Other industries also weathered the depression better than most. Industrial workers in California generally received higher hourly wages than did the same workers in other regions. The state economy actually grew during the 1930s. For those unable to find work or who lost jobs, the state had the nation's best relief benefits—\$40 per month as opposed to \$10 to \$12 in the Southwest. All these facts suggest that folks who left the southern plains had reason to pick California as their destination. As one Texan remarked, "Well, if they have lots of work out there and if relief is good, then if I don't find work I'll still be all right."

Furthermore, unlike the Joads, many of the migrants traveling along Route 66 had relatives and friends already living in California. By 1930 more than 400,000 former Southwesterners resided in the state, creating a solid base for what demographers call "migration chains." Much like worldwide immigrants to America did, Southwesterners wrote home to relatives. Such letters "gits the folks back home to talkin' that work is pretty good in California," explained one Oklahoman, "so they decide to pull up stakes and come." One message made a particularly powerful impression: "Everyone writes back that he's healed. He's got him a job." Equally important, relatives offered newly arrived migrants a place to stay and help in getting started. During the 1920s and 1930s entire communities of Okies and Arkies (migrants from Arkansas) sprang up in California's agricultural valleys. Unlike the Joads, more than half of the Dust Bowl migrants left for California with a destination in mind.

Novelists and reporters dramatized the hardships of the road because it made a good story; indeed, much of *The Grapes of Wrath* fits the popular literary genre of a "road novel." Just as Huck Finn's character deepened as he and the runaway slave Jim floated down the broad Mississippi, so the Joads were transformed by their trials along Route 66. But as one historian observed, Steinbeck wrote in tones "more justly reserved for the era of covered wagons." By the 1930s good highways, bus routes, and railroads linked the Southwestern plains to California. A family with a decent car could make the trip in about three or four days.

One reason that Southwesterners knew so much about California was that, because the trip was not difficult, their relatives returned home to visit. People noticed the signs of prosperity that the visitors brought with them. "They left in an old wreck and come back in a good car," one migrant told a social worker. Because the trip was manageable, migrants did not necessarily see their move as permanent. Many families sent a few members to scout out the prospects. Some, such as Elbert Garretson, left their farms behind with the idea that they could always return.

CALIFORNIA

About 150 miles after crossing the state line, Route 66 entered the town of Barstow, California. There, travelers faced a significant choice. Should they follow the highway as it veered south into the sprawling city of Los Angeles? Or should they take the smaller road out of Barstow, not entirely paved, that wound through the Tehachapi Mountains and into the San Joaquin Valley? The decision was a fateful one.

The Joads chose the route to the valley. But as you may have suspected (based on the census data we have already reviewed), most Southwestern migrants did not. The majority hailed from urban areas, and during the years 1935 to 1940 at least, nearly 70 percent chose to make their residence in urban California. That figure is somewhat misleading because, as we shall see, many agricultural laborers settled in cities and migrated to various farm jobs from season to season. Still, Los Angeles remained the most popular destination for Southwesterners, attracting more than one-third of all migrants.

Why do we hear so little about these urban migrants? The reason, most likely, is that their stories are at once less colorful and more familiar. The movement of the American population from the country to the city had accelerated in the last half of the nineteenth century, a broad trend that continued throughout the twentieth. Furthermore, Los Angeles assimilated its new population with less strain. To be sure, many Okies were shocked by the vast, sprawling city. Arriving was "like going into an entirely different world," recalled one migrant. "It seemed like you could drive forever and never get out of a town." And the depression's tough times made it more difficult to find work than it had been during the 1920s. But the diverse urban economy offered a wide range of jobs, which were eagerly taken by new arrivals. By 1940, 83 percent of all men in the city eligible to work had found jobs.

Only 28 percent of the Dust Bowl's refugees found their way, like the Joads, to the San Joaquin Valley. Most of those who did harbored the same dreams that had inspired so many Americans throughout the nineteenth century: to take possession of their own family farms. California, after all, boasted plenty of cotton fields, just like back home. Migrants assumed they could work in the fields at a living wage until they could save enough to purchase some land. It was the same pattern of hope that had sent many of their forebears to the Southwest. But California surprised them.

The sights greeting newcomers to the San Joaquin Valley were both tantalizing and troubling. As the Joads rolled down the highway, Pa stared at the countryside transfixed: "I never knowed they was anything like her." Before him lay the "peach trees and the walnut groves, and the dark green patches of oranges." Just the look of the place struck migrants as somehow more vast and strange than the plains they left behind. And something else seemed odd. Amidst the broad fields and orchards spreading for miles and miles, migrants saw few signs of the agrarian kingdom of small farms they were expecting. "Where are the farmers?" one newcomer asked. And even more puzzling: "Where are the farmhouses?"

Indeed, in its economic, social, and political structures California's San Joaquin Valley—and the larger Central Valley of which it was a part—was a foreign land. By the 1920s the state had pioneered the techniques of what later would come to be called agribusiness. Again, the census data helps fill out the collective portrait. The state's farms commanded more capital and produced products worth more than twice the national average. Those crops required more water, more machinery, more chemical fertilizers and weed killers, and more paid labor than did crops grown in other areas of the United States. To exploit the valley's soils, irrigation projects initiated by large landowners and private corporations eventually fell under the control of state and federal irrigation agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers. These agencies diverted the waters of the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and other smaller rivers into the fields of valley farms and ranches.

To be sure, small farms had hardly vanished from the landscape. In 1929 some 90 percent of California's 135,000 farms produced crops valued at less than \$30,000 a year. Thirty percent had crops worth less than \$1,000. But those smaller farmers lacked political or economic clout. Of all American farms producing crops worth more than \$30,000 a year, more than one-third lay in California. Thus the state's agriculture was dominated by large corporations and landowners. Some crops, like citrus fruits and raisins, were organized into centrally controlled marketing cooperatives. (Sunkist was one such example.) Cotton, the crop Okies knew best, was a bit less organized. Even so, just four companies ginned two-thirds of the cotton, and a web of corporate farms, banks, and the San Joaquin Valley Agricultural Bureau kept a tight rein on production levels and labor costs. In fact, California only permitted farmers to grow one kind of high-quality cotton.

Most migrants coming into the valley had little time to think of buying land; they faced the more pressing task of simply surviving. Like the Joads,

most timed their arrival in California for September, the beginning of the cotton harvest. Growers estimated that a good worker might earn \$3 to \$4 a day, about twice the wage in the Southwest. But agricultural employment in cotton virtually ceased between December and March. That was the rainy season, when temperatures, though milder than back home, often dipped into the thirties. Some lucky families found shelter in labor camps. A few landowners allowed migrants to stay on in one-room shacks. More often, home was a squatter village of tents, old cars, and shanties made from wood scraps. Under conditions of poverty and malnutrition, disease spread quickly, especially among the old and young. This was the scene that Dorothea Lange discovered when she photographed her "Migrant Mother."

So *The Grapes of Wrath* remains closest to history when Steinbeck describes the plight of the Joads during 1937–38, the worst and wettest California winter of the era. In 1937, when the Roosevelt administration cut back on spending in the belief that the nation was on its way to recovery, the economy collapsed. Unemployment returned to levels much like those before the New Deal. Not surprisingly, migration reached a peak that year. And then the rains came. Floods, as Steinbeck depicted, wiped out entire squatter camps, often leaving the residents homeless. The situation became so desperate that private charities and government agencies finally swung into action—just as Lange and Steinbeck had hoped. The Farm Security Administration offered medical care and relief to families who could not meet California's one-year residency requirement for public assistance.

After that winter, the worst was over. Within two years the rains returned to the plains, while World War II brought back prosperity and a virtual end to unemployment. No longer did migrants face the same struggle for survival that the Joads experienced in California.

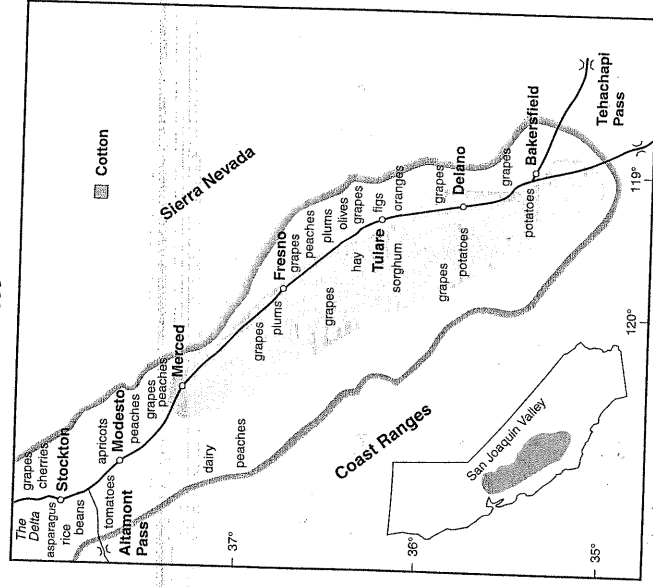
THE OTHER MIGRANTS

The collective portrait of the Okies, drawn by Gregory and other historians, demonstrates the strengths of Steinbeck's searing novel as well as its limitations. In effect, the census and other numerical data serve as a framework, within which we can set not only Steinbeck's specific tale but also the newspaper reports, photographs, contemporary sociological studies, and oral recollections that have been left behind in the historical record. The structure of the numbers allows us to give Steinbeck and the other evidence its proper due without mistaking a part for the whole.

In the same way, the discipline of the numbers is also invaluable for placing the newly arrived Okies within their larger California context. Because Steinbeck's tale focuses on the Okies alone, historians have come to appreciate that the tale is inevitably partial in the picture it gives of California's agricultural labor force. Another set of numbers makes the point. In 1930, that labor force was 43 percent white, 21 percent Mexican, 17 percent European, 8 percent Filipino, and 7 percent Japanese.

That multicultural influence is mirrored by another data set, this one illustrating the wide diversity of crops grown in the San Joaquin Valley. The map below shows not only cotton but also grapes, potatoes, peaches, plums, olives, figs, oranges, rice, beans, cherries, tomatoes, and so on. Small wonder Pa Joad was taken aback. And the diversity of both the agriculture and its labor force are related. Americans today take for granted the variety of California produce. But these crops are hardly "natural." Most were not raised by the original Spanish settlers, nor were they the choice of Anglo newcomers from the East during the mid-nineteenth century, whose preference was to plant familiar crops like wheat. The diversity of California agriculture arose only in the late nineteenth century—at the same time that its labor force was becoming increasingly diverse.

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY 1930



A rich array of fruits and vegetables grow in California's San Joaquin Valley. Such variety reduced the impact of the depression on the state's agricultural economy and helps explain why the valley became a destination for families like the Joads. (From *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* by James N. Gregory. Copyright © 1991 by James N. Gregory. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.)

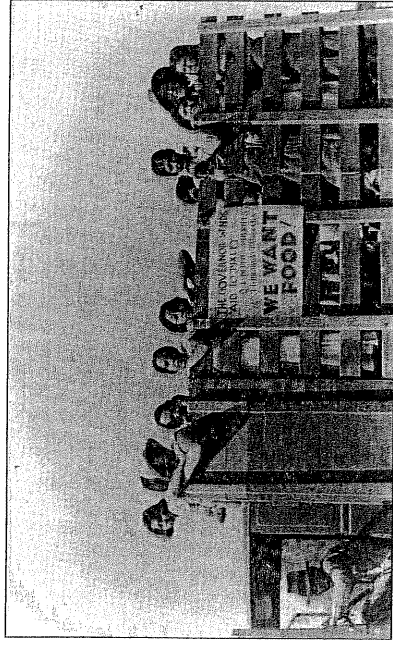
To begin with, the Chinese who arrived in the wake of the 1848 gold rush played a vital part in introducing fruit orchards. Many Chinese immigrants who had once farmed along the Pearl or Yellow Rivers turned their energies in America to constructing irrigation channels, dikes, and levees in the delta regions of the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers. Swampy land that sold for only \$28 an acre in 1875 was soon being snapped up at \$100 an acre. The Chinese also brought valuable horticultural experience in growing orchard and garden crops. One immigrant to the United States, Ah Bing, bred the renowned Bing cherry; in Florida, Lue Gim Gong developed a frost-resistant orange.

Anti-Asian nativism, especially strong in California, led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning the entry of Chinese laborers after 1882. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants continued the transformation of California agriculture, especially after 1900. By 1910 Japanese farmers were producing 70 percent of California's strawberries. By 1940 they grew 95 percent of its snap beans as well as spring and summer celery, and they actively cultivated a host of other crops. As Colonel John Irish, president of the California Delta Association, commented in 1921, Californians

had seen the Japanese convert the barren land like that at Florin and Livingston into productive and profitable fields, orchards and vineyards; by the persistence and intelligence of their industry. They had seen the hardpan and goose lands in the Sacramento Valley, gray and black with our two destructive alkalis, cursed with barrenness like the fig tree of Bethany, and not worth paying taxes on, until Ikura, [a Japanese immigrant], decided that those lands would raise rice. After years of persistent toil, and enduring heartbreaking losses and disappointments, he conquered that rebellious soil and raised the first commercial crop of rice in California.

The restrictive immigration acts of the 1920s, however, once again reshaped California's labor pool, drastically limiting the inflow of workers from most nations and banning Asian immigration entirely. No longer could Californians find European or Japanese immigrants to tend their fields. Facing a labor shortage, they turned to Mexicans and, to a lesser extent, to Filipinos, who were still allowed entry because the Philippines was a U.S. territory.

A look at the numbers and background of Mexican laborers dispels a stereotype similar to the one we have already rejected about Southwestern immigrants. Most Mexicans who labored in California in 1930 were hardly simple peasants straight from the Mexican countryside. More often they were laborers possessing a variety of skills, whose migration resulted from the industrialization spreading through Mexico after the 1890s. For example, Braulio López, a worker who picked cotton in the San Joaquin Valley, had worked on the Mexican railroad before coming north. In the United States López had also worked as a miner, laid tracks for the streetcar in Los Angeles, and worked on road construction between Los Angeles and San Diego.

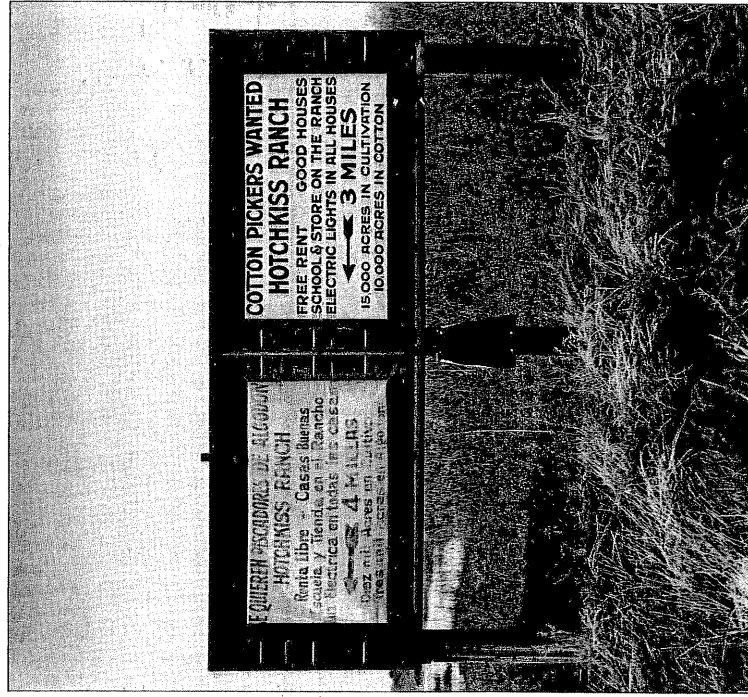


Mexican farm workers organized a number of major labor actions against California's growers. Such action is one reason the growers were so willing to replace them with Southwestern migrants. The Dust Bowl migrants had no similar tradition of labor activism and community organization. The Mexican women on this truck were making an appeal to strikebreakers to join their strike. (The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

This pattern of varied labor was common among both Mexicans and Filipinos. Although many workers called Los Angeles or some other city their home, they moved seasonally to jobs they knew they could count on. "You start out the year, January," one Filipino laborer recalled, "you'd find a place and it was usually an asparagus camp. . . . From asparagus season, we would migrate to Fairfield, to Suisun and there the men worked out in the orchards picking fruits while the women and even children, as long as they could stand on their boxes, worked cutting fruits." Historian Devra Weber has argued that these more regular patterns of migration became a source of stability in a chaotic labor regime by providing a combination of jobs that allowed families to make ends meet.

Such regular migration depended on members of the community helping one another. Mexicans had a long tradition of mutual assistance. In addition to formal community organizations—*mutualistas*—informal employment networks existed in which families and friends from the same region in Mexico would live and work together in California. Women created informal networks, sharing food when needed or cooking for several families when one mother was sick. The Japanese relied on similar social associations, called *kenjinkai*. "If you hold *hoshi* [chopsticks] individually," explained one farmer, "you can certainly break them all, but if you put them together, why you can't break a bunch of *hoshi*. And so, like that, as a family we should stick together, but also as a community we should be sticking together."

Now that we are aware of these patterns of agricultural labor, we can place the Okies' arrival in context. In doing so, it becomes evident that not one but two large migrations were going on during the 1930s. Over the decade, as we have seen, as many as 400,000 Southwesterners came to the state. During that same period, however, anywhere from half a million to a million Mexicans returned to Mexico from the United States. (Exact figures for migration in and out of Mexico are difficult to obtain.) With the coming



The faded Spanish on the older sign to the left offers mute testimony to the shift from Mexican to Southwestern migrants in California agriculture. Notice that the Hotchkiss Ranch has been able to expand production of cotton despite the depression (from ten thousand to fifteen thousand acres in cultivation; from three thousand to ten thousand acres in cotton). The glowing description on the signs is a far cry from the actual conditions under which most migrants lived and worked. (Oakland Museum of California. Dorothea Lange Collection. Gift of Paul S. Taylor)

of the depression and scarce employment, many local governments either encouraged or coerced Mexican laborers into leaving the country. Many laborers who were forced out had been born in the United States and thus were legal citizens. "My father left his best years of his life in this country because he worked hard in the mines and in the fields," recalled one San Joaquin Valley resident, "and when hard times came around, we were expendable, to be thrown like cattle out of this country."

These odysseys were as wrenching as those of the Okies, and very similar. Life was "muy dura," recalled Lillie Gasca-Cuellar—very hard.

Sufrió uno mucho. Mucho trabajo. No teníamos estufa. No teníamos camas. Dormíamos no más con cartones, no teníamos casa—y a veces en las calles durmiéndonos.

[We suffered a lot. Lots of work. We didn't have a stove. We didn't have beds. We had only cartons to sleep in, we didn't have a house—and at times we slept in the streets.]

By 1940, whites constituted 76 percent of the workforce in the San Joaquin Valley, an area that formerly had been a stronghold of Mexican labor. Of those white workers, half were Southwestern emigrants.

As we have seen, the Okie migration was unusual in that it consisted more often of families than of single individuals. Even so, the newcomers in the 1930s lacked the extensive network of family and community connections built up by Mexican families during the previous two decades. Those Southwesterners who already had family in California adapted best. But other newcomers could not anticipate the harvest schedules of crops they had never grown, so that they sometimes arrived at picking fields early, losing precious time, or came too late, when there was no work to be had. Furthermore, the picking style for California cotton proved different from that of the plains. Jessie de la Cruz, an experienced Mexican picker, noticed that some Texans in her field "weren't used to this kind of picking. . . . It had to be clean, no leaves, you had to leave nothing but the stalk." The newcomers picked forty-five pounds to her hundred. Such difficulties compounded the problems faced by newcomers like the Joads.

In theory, Southwestern migrants might have made common cause with Mexican and Filipino laborers to strike for better wages and working conditions. As migrants poured into the San Joaquin Valley, established local residents treated them with increasingly open hostility. *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays the comments of a service station attendant at Needles, California: "Them Okies got no sense and no feelings. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and so miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas." Other journalists and investigators reported similar prejudices. "You take some of these guys," complained a California grower, "and give them the best land in the Garden of Eden and they'd starve to death."

But cultural prejudices made cooperation between ethnic groups difficult. Okies often found California's ethnic and racial diversity threatening.



California had both ladder crops—tree fruit that workers climbed to pick—and stoop crops—those that required long hours of painful bending and squatting to pick. Growers of stoop crops generally preferred Filipino and other Asian American workers because those workers had conditioned themselves to the painful positions involved. Such conditioning did not mean they did not suffer greatly from the physical demands of the work. (Library of Congress)

Compared to the southwest plains, California simply had too many “foreigners.” As one Okie put it, “the farmers ain’t got no business hirin’ them fer low wages when we native white American citizens are starvin’.” At an FSA labor camp in Arvin, California, migrants from Texas objected when a Mexican family moved in. “Remember the Alamo! Either us or them,” they told the camp manager. “Can’t have both of us here.”

The competition for jobs intensified resentments. Some Okies found it degrading to pick for Italian and Japanese growers or to find work through Hispanic labor contractors—*contratistas*. There were certain kinds of farm work the Okies could not or would not do. Vegetables like asparagus required them “to squat and walk, like a Mexican,” which most could not. Mexicans and Asians did the more backbreaking work associated with ground crops like vegetables and potatoes. “White men can’t do the work as well as these short men who can get down on their hands and knees, or work all day long stooping over,” commented a California newspaper editor in 1930, and his sentiments were echoed by a Japanese farmer, who applied the same prejudice to the Filipino workers he hired. “The Fils do all the stoop labor. They are small and work fast.” As might be expected, such judgments

were not shared by the workers themselves. “Many people think that we don’t suffer from stoop labor, but we do,” remarked one Filipino.

In the end, the oversupply of labor drove wages down, making life worse for Okie, Mexican, Filipino, and Japanese laborers alike. The census shows that with the influx of Southwestern migrants, the income for all workers fell. Even so, the Okies earned more than the minorities they displaced. Once again the census provides key evidence. In 1940 Southwestern families who arrived in the valley before 1935 had average annual incomes of \$1,070. Those who arrived between 1935 and 1940 averaged \$650, while other white Californians received \$1,510. Those Mexican families who had not returned to their homeland earned just \$555 a year and usually found even New Deal relief programs beyond their reach. California law barred alien Mexicans from public work projects and local rules also kept many Mexicans, even those who were American citizens, from WPA jobs.

In short, the structure and dynamics of agricultural labor in California were far more complex than *The Grapes of Wrath* could suggest within the tale of a single family’s tribulations. Why did Steinbeck ignore that complexity, with its often darker side? The answer is perhaps not so difficult to understand. Instinctively, he viewed the Okies as victims, not victimizers. From his perspective, the real tragedy of the farm crisis of the 1930s was the destruction of Jeffersonian agrarian ideals. Steinbeck wanted the government to give the loads more than a handout; he advocated a second revolution that would recreate an America of small farmers rooted in the land. He failed to acknowledge that the ideals he cherished too often applied only to white Americans and, in any case, had become increasingly irrelevant to the kind of industrial agriculture that was transforming America.

In the half-century since the dust storms swept across the southwestern plains, the United States has been transformed by a civil rights revolution. It has been reminded, too, of its diversity, by the renewed tide of immigration springing up in the wake of the Immigration Reform Act of 1964. Historians have worked to give voice to that diversity. In doing so, they have drawn not only on statistics but folk songs, photographs, anecdotes, and observations from ordinary people like the Turners, the Garretsons, and Lillie Gasca-Cuellar. Among this abundance of evidence, the impersonal numbers of the census may have seemed, at first blush, the most lifeless of voices. But in the aggregate, the mass of their ones and zeros provide the structure that gives a collective portrait weight and balance. And with proper study, the tales they tell can prove to be nearly as gripping as those of a novel.

➤ ➤ ➤ ADDITIONAL READING ➤ ➤ ➤

Because the narrative in this chapter begins with “dust,” interested readers might well begin with Donald Worcester, *The Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979). For an idiosyncratic view, Worcester would

ect readers to James Malin, *The Grasslands of North America* (New York, 1906). John Steinbeck actually began *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 1939) series of articles for the *San Francisco News* and published them as *Their World Is Strong* (New York, 1938). A similar study that historians find valuable is Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields* (Boston, 1939). On "Migrant Mother," we recommend Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York, 1939). That book is hard to find, but Lange and her work are the subject of Milton Kupper, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York, 1978). Dorothea Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime* (New York, 1996) is a recent reprint with much of her work. The story of "Migrant Mother," *The Grapes of Wrath* as a novel and movie, and other aspects of the Dust Bowl in American cultural memory are wonderfully told and illustrated in Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence, 1997). Many of Lange's photographs, including "Migrant Mother, 6," are available online through the Library of Congress at its American Memory site: <http://memory.loc.gov>.

Two historians, through their work, have contributed heavily to this essay. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989) not only conceptualized the problem of collective history, he also models the way in which quantitative analysis and anecdotal narrative interact to produce history that is both informative and to read. In that same spirit, Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley, 1994) has captured migrant farm workers' experience with special attention to Mexicans. A vivid account of life for middling farmers before the Dust Bowl, we recommend Thad Sitton and Dan Utley, *From See to Can't See: Texas Cotton Workers in the Southern Prairies* (Austin, 1997). The politics and labor strife in California during the 1930s are among the topics covered in Kevin Starr, *Unsettled Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York, 1996). In an effort to obtain additional information on Mexicans in California we also consulted Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York, 1993); Leo Grabler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Newman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York, 1970); Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of the Mexican Americans* (New York, 1972); and Renatoaldo et al., *Chicano: The Evolution of a People* (Minneapolis, 1973). An additional source on repatriation in the 1930s is Francisco E. Balderrama and Donald Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Berkeley, 1995).

Gregory and Weber both discuss Asian American migrants, but we also found useful Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of the Chinese in America* (New York, 1989) and Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: Interpretive History* (New York, 1991). We did try to puzzle out why so many African Americans joined the Dust Bowl migration to California. In that effort we consulted Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks'*

Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930 (Urbana, Ill., 1987) and James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989). The footnotes from these many sources inevitably lead back to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1975), which is supplemented annually. Internet users can access the Census Bureau at <http://www.census.gov>.