

The Great Okie Migration

The impact of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on rural Americans was substantial. The damaging environmental effects of the dust storms had not only dried up the land, but it had also dried up jobs and the economy. The drought caused a cessation of agricultural production, leading to less income for farmers, and consequently less food on the table for their families. The increased mechanization of farming began to consolidate smaller farms into large farms. Many farmers lost their land in bank foreclosures. Poverty became rampant. In his fictionalized autobiography, American folk singer **Woody Guthrie** commented on the dire straits: “They was hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of families of people living around under railroad bridges, down along the river bottoms, and in old cardboard houses, and in old, rusty beat-up houses that they’d made up out of tote sacks and old dirty rags and corrugated iron that they got out of the dumps and old tin cans flattened out, and old orange crates.”



Migrant agricultural worker's family, 1936, Dorothea Lange, [Library of Congress](#)

The survival of their families at stake, these **Okies** faced a difficult decision – stay on their land in the hopes that the drought would end, or leave in search of more fertile land with plentiful job opportunities. Tens of thousands of displaced and destitute people, dubbed **Dust Bowl refugees** by the press, journeyed west to California in search of farm labor jobs, in an event nicknamed the **Okie Migration**. These migrants came from a broad swath of southern plains states including Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. The two artworks featured here, *Dust Bowl* and *Valley Farms*, represent the journey migrants took from the Dust Bowl states to the fertile farmland of California.

They went out there for one reason, and absolutely one reason, and that was because they thought that they could get some work out there. – Woody Guthrie

Migrant Life in California

Since the days of the Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century, California had earned a reputation as a land where fortunes were made and opportunities were abundant. A favorable

climate, plentiful resources, and a visually arresting landscape were all compelling attractions for many Americans. This idyllic setting in captured in Ross Dickinson's *Valley Farms*. Dickinson was a young artist employed by the **Public Works of Art Project** (PWAP) when he created this scenic image of California's farm country. Water, green grass, and swelling earth conjure the "promised land"

"They were hungry, and they were fierce. And they had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred."—The Grapes of Wrath

described in **John Steinbeck's** classic novel *The*

Grapes of Wrath. Like the Joad family in Steinbeck's novel, nearly 40 percent of migrants wound up in California's San Joaquin Valley picking cotton and grapes.

Popular songs and stories extolled the virtues of California, exaggerating its plentiful attributes and depicting the state as a veritable promised land. Famed folk singer Woody Guthrie believed that it was the tales of California sunshine and plentiful employment which drew people to the Golden State. In his 1943 autobiography, Guthrie wrote:

Most of the people in the Dust Bowl talked about California. The reason they talked about California was that they'd seen all the pretty pictures about California and they'd heard all the pretty songs about California, and they had read all the handbills about coming to California and picking fruit. And these people naturally said, 'Well, if this dust keeps on blowing the way it is, we're gonna have to go somewhere.' And most of em, I'll dare say seventy-five percent of em, was in favor of going to California because they had heard about the climate there. You could sleep outdoors at night, and any kind of seed that you put down in the ground, why, it's grow back out again.

Additionally, America's major east to west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 (more commonly known as "**Route 66**") assisted the westward migration. A trip that spanned half the width of the country was not undertaken lightly in the days before interstate highways. But Route 66 provided migrants with a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to California's Central Valley.

The mass of migrants that arrived in California did not receive a warm welcome from the state of California, which was already overwhelmed by the amount on people on the state's relief roll. They were met at the state border by patrolmen who told them to turn back – that there was not enough work for them in California. Additionally, the established population of California was hostile towards the migrants due to differences in regional culture. They viewed the Okies as culturally and socially inferior, backward and uneducated – a view echoed in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The term "Okie" originally had the derogatory connotation of

“poor, white trash.” As the character of Tom Joad stated in *The Grapes of Wrath*, “Okie means you’re scum.”

Steinbeck’s classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was informed by his travels through California’s Central Valley when he was hired by the *San Francisco News* to write a series of articles about the migration called “The Harvest Gypsies.” Steinbeck traveled for two weeks exploring both the farms and the migrant labor camps in which the migrants lived in poverty. *The Grapes of Wrath* is Steinbeck’s attempt to expose the suffering of the migrants and the corrupt agricultural system which exploited human beings for a profit. Steinbeck’s observations formed the basis of his argument that the migrants should be given a fair chance at becoming productive members of the California farming industry:

If, as has been stated by a large grower, our agriculture requires the creation and maintenance of a peon class, then . . . California agriculture is economically unsound under a democracy. The new migrants to California from the dust bowl are here to stay. They are of the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful; and, if given a chance, socially responsible. To attempt to force them into a peonage of starvation and intimidated despair will be unsuccessful. They can be citizens of the highest type, or they can be an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need. On their future treatment will depend which course they will be forced to take.

Hostile treatment from the established population and limited economic opportunities was not the idyllic life migrants had imagined. The fact remained that there was simply not enough work for the approximately 2.5 million people that migrated from the Dust Bowl region during this time period. Many people lived in squalor – in roadside encampments and migrant campsites in tents and in the backs of cars or trucks. According to Guthrie, migrants camped “three or four families on a hillside, and three or four families on another hillside, they had a little old

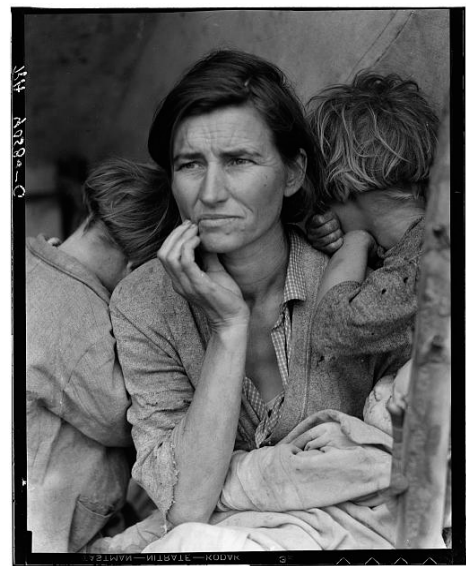


spring of water running around there somewhere, and they’d use this little spring of water, or little hole of water to do their washing in, to shave in, to take a drink of water out of, to wash their teeth in. They used that spring of water as sewage disposal. They used it for everything in the world.”

This idea that not everything was as perfect as it seemed is echoed in Dickinson’s painting. The artist introduces disquieting details, as if

to suggest that danger exists even in paradise. The tiny fire in the field at lower right, probably set to burn dry brush, echoes a massive column of smoke across the hills in the distance. The hills themselves have the orange-red look of the rainless months, when California's mountains become tinderboxes, and fires cans sweep down into valleys. Dickinson dramatized his home state's eternal confrontation of nature and man by exaggerating the steep slopes of the hills and the harsh contrast between the dry red wilderness and the green cultivated land. The artist stressed the centrality of water in California by including a river which winds through the verdant valley. Dickinson's painting captures the fear underlying America's hopes for better days during the Great Depression.

At this time the **Farm Security Administration (FSA)** photography program set to work to create a pictorial record of the impact of the Great Depression, focusing on rural Americans. Photographers, like **Dorothea Lange**, were hired to provide visual evidence that there was a dire need for assistance and that the FSA could provide that assistance. The approximately 80,000 FSA photographs created from 1935 to 1944 helped awaken many Americans to the plight of the thousands of Dust Bowl refugees. Lange's photograph known as "Migrant Mother" is perhaps the most iconic image of the FSA photographs. The image depicts Florence Thompson and three of her children in a migrant labor camp in Nipomo, California. The mother, gaunt and sun-burnt, her clothes dirty and tattered, stares off into the distance cradling an infant as two of her young children cling to either side of her, hiding their faces from the camera lens. Lange was photographing migrant farm laborers when she came across the "Migrant Mother" and her children. She later wrote of the encounter:



"Migrant Mother" (*Destitute pea pickers in California*), 1936, Dorothea Lange, [Library of Congress](#)

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children

huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

The conditions that the FSA photographers documented helped to raise awareness of the dire situation in which many Americans found themselves. Various agencies and programs created by the New Deal would provide aid to the nearly 2.5 million people who had migrated from the Dust Bowl region by 1940. These programs, along with the dawn of World War II, would put Americans back to work. Factories once again roared to life, spurring America's economic recovery and paving the road to its position as a world power in the twentieth century.

Glossary:

Dorothea Lange: (1895-1965) American documentary photographer and photojournalist. She is best known for her pioneering Depression-era work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

Dust Bowl: the term given to both the series of dust storms of the 1930s and the region in which those storms took place in the south central United States.

Dust Bowl refugees: the term given by the news media to the masses of migrants that left the Dust Bowl region for places like California.

Farm Security Administration: (FSA) created in 1935 as part of the New Deal, the administration was created to combat rural poverty during the Depression.

John Steinbeck: (1902-1968) American author. Born in California, he is best known for his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the plight of migrant workers during the Dust Bowl.

Okies: a term for those who migrated from the American Southwest (primarily from Oklahoma) to California. Used with disparaging intent, the term was perceived as insulting, implying the worker was ignorant, poor, and uneducated.

Okie Migration: the mass exodus of primarily farming families during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression era.

Public Works of Art Project: (PWAP) a program established to employ artists during the Great Depression as part of the New Deal series of social programs. The program ran from 1933 to 1934.

Route 66: established in 1926, the highway has become one of the most famous roads in America, with multitudes of cultural references in songs and movies. It served as a major thoroughfare for those who migrated west during the Dust Bowl.

Woody Guthrie: (1912-1967) American folk singer and songwriter known for his politically charged lyrics. He was a prolific songwriter, penning more than 1,000 songs in his lifetime, including his most famous "This Land is Your Land."