

## Constitutional Rights Foundation

[\*Bill of Rights in Action 21:3\*](#)

# Dust Bowl Exodus: How Drought and the Depression Took Their Toll

**In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, many farmers and farm workers left failed farms in the southern Plains for work in California. Suffering from the Depression themselves, Californians had a difficult time dealing with these refugees.**

California's population exploded in the first half of the 20th century. In just 10 years, between 1920 and 1930, more than 2 million people came to find "the good life," believing that they would make a new start and build a fortune under the state's sunny skies. The new migrants of the '20s were mostly middle-class people, including some farmers. They were drawn to a state where opportunity was booming. But things changed in the decade of the '30s. The stock market crash in October 1929 marked the beginning of the Great Depression. Banks closed, businesses folded, and by 1933 three of 10 Californians were unemployed.

Beginning in the early '30s, migrants from the states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri came to California in ever-increasing numbers. Farmers, who hired the migrant workers at 20 or 25 cents an hour to pick cotton, oranges, and peas, initially welcomed them. But by the end of the decade, they were the objects of scorn and prejudice.

These migrants were called "Okies." "Okie" is slang meaning "a person from Oklahoma." But during the Depression, the term was used to refer to people from states neighboring Oklahoma as well, and it was often used derisively.

### Leaving the Southern Plains

The southern Plains experienced a terrible drought during the early 1930s. Intense heat accompanied the drought. In the summer of 1934, Oklahoma reached 117 degrees on July 24, the 36th day in a row that it had been above 100 degrees. Fields and rivers dried up, and clouds of grasshoppers ate what was left of the wheat and corn. According to one Weather Bureau scientist, the drought of the '30s was "the worst in the climatological history of the country."

Drought was not the only cause of the westward movement of farmers and sharecroppers from the southern Plains. When prices fell because of oversupply following the end of World War I, many farmers lost their farms and became tenants or sharecroppers. As more and more farms were cultivated with tractors, the tenants and farm laborers lost their jobs, because tractors were much more efficient. And as the soil was tilled and retilled, it lost its fertility. Worn out, it lay naked and unprotected from raging winds.

In 1934, windstorms ravaged the Plains states. The incredible storms sent clouds of dust as far as Chicago, New York, and Boston. In 1935, the storms became even worse. For six weeks in March and early April, it was unusual to see a clear sky from dawn to dusk anywhere in the Plains states. In Kansas, 12 consecutive days of dust storms raged in March. One Kansas resident wrote in her diary: “This is the ultimate darkness. So must come the end of the world.” But in fact, it got worse. On April 14—“Black Sunday”—a deadly storm turned day into night. The storms resulted in more farms failing and more people out of work. Desperately poor, people began an exodus from the Dust Bowl.

### **Coming to California**

Of the half million people who fled Oklahoma and neighboring states during the Depression years, more than 300,000 went to California. Most were farmers or tenant farmers, and they came to California in search of farm work. One magnet was California’s cotton crop, which had exploded in size. In 1926, California farms planted 170,000 acres of cotton. By 1937, there were 600,000 acres of cotton fields in the San Joaquin Valley alone. Cotton was the state’s fourth largest crop. California’s cotton growers desperately needed trained pickers, and many people from the southern Plains had picked cotton for years. News of the new bumper crop lured people west on Highway 66.

Many stopped in Arizona to pick cotton. Following Route 66, they headed to California’s San Joaquin Valley and joined earlier migrants, who were camping on ditch banks or in vacant lots outside the towns. After the fall cotton harvest, they had little or no income (except welfare, then known as “relief”) until May, when the potato crop was ready for harvest. In the summer, many drove their jalopies north to the Sacramento Valley to pick citrus, peaches, grapes, and peas. To earn a living, they traveled for six to nine months a year. But while some did reasonably well, and a few earned as much as \$1,600 in a year, the median family income in 1940 was \$650. (The median family income for other white Californians in the San Joaquin Valley was \$1,510.)

Even for those who did not travel, living conditions were ghastly. The new migrants pitched tents along irrigation ditches or on the side of a road close to a spring of water. Some built houses out of corrugated paper tacked to wooden frames. Most camps had no toilets and no clean water. Public health officials grew alarmed. Outbreaks of smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria, and pneumonia were common in the camps.

Journalists and activists who visited the squatters’ camps described what they saw. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1937 told about conditions in Kern County camps where “migrants live in almost unimaginable [sic] filth . . . “ The *Berkeley Gazette* reported on “hungry ‘Dust Bowl’ refugees . . . living in the fields and woods ‘like animals.’ ”

### **From Welcome to Hostility—and Worse**

In the early '30s, owners of large farms had feared an inadequate labor supply. They had relied on Mexican laborers. These laborers had come north after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and subsequent unrest in Mexico. But in the 1930s, many Mexican laborers began returning to Mexico because of the Depression, stability in Mexico, and prejudice against them. Many of the remaining Mexican field workers were beginning to organize into unions and go on strike in the fields. The arrival of the refugees from the Dust Bowl calmed the growers' fears of a labor shortage. And the new arrivals, who were penniless and not yet eligible for state relief, were willing to accept lower wages than Mexican laborers.

Unlike the Mexican farm workers, the refugees from the Plains did not disappear when the harvest season ended. Nor did they spread themselves throughout the state. Because they came to work on farms and had hopes of getting a farm of their own, most settled in farming counties. They soon began converting squatter camps into "Little Oklahomas" around many of the valley's older towns. The new arrivals required health services, and their only recourse was to seek aid at county-supported public hospitals. They had children who needed schooling. It cost public money to provide for them, and as tax rates began to rise, long-term residents blamed the migrants.

From 1935 to 1938, as the migration continued to increase, the problems experienced in the farming counties were largely ignored in the rest of California. But floods came to the San Joaquin Valley in early 1938 washing out ditch banks and leaving the migrants cold, sick and hungry. Journalists recorded the horrible conditions, and suddenly the migrants were headline news.

A new federal law cut back cotton acreage from 618,000 to under 400,000 acres. The cut in acreage meant less demand for agricultural labor. And the floods ruined other crops as well. There were now "ten pickers to every pea in the pod," and panic spread throughout the state. The sea of antagonism continued to rise. The Dust Bowl migrants were portrayed as "shiftless trash who live like hogs" and accused of "stealing jobs" from native Californians.

### **How the New Deal Helped and Hurt**

The Depression that began in 1929 created suffering throughout California. In 1933, the unemployment rate in Los Angeles was 33 percent. Banks were locking doors, and people stuffed what money they had under their mattresses. When Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, he spoke in his first inaugural address of the grim reality that faced the nation: a time when "the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone."

To address the devastation of the Depression, the Roosevelt administration introduced and passed social-welfare legislation that came to be known as the "New Deal." Bills were passed providing workers with a right to bargain collectively (the National Labor Relations Act); minimum wage and maximum hour protection (the Wage and Hours

Bill), and support in old age (the Social Security Act). But farm laborers received none of these benefits. They were exempted from each of these acts because of pressure from farming states.

One piece of New Deal legislation even contributed to the hardship of farm workers. In an effort to control farm prices, the Agricultural Administration passed a law in 1933 that paid farmers to withdraw land from cultivation in return for cash payments. According to the law, the farmers were supposed to share the payments they received with their tenants and sharecroppers. But most of them kept the money for themselves. And with fewer acres being farmed, more and more tenants and croppers were evicted. "I let 'em all go," said one Oklahoma farmer. "I bought tractors on the money my government gave me and got shet o' [rid of] my renters."

The New Deal made attempts to alleviate the distress of rural workers. In 1933, Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), which gave grants to states "to aid needy persons who have no legal settlement in any one State or Community." By 1935, over 200,000 migrating poor families received federal aid, and California was the state most dependent on FERA funds. With funds from the Farm Security Administration, the State Emergency Relief Administration also began a migrant housing program. In 1935, two model camps were built, in Marysville and Arvin. The camps provided tents, one-room cabins, and most important, buildings with toilets and showers. But with room for only 400 families, the camps did not come close to solving the hideous living conditions of most migrant workers. And in August 1935, the federal government shut down the federal Transient Service, which had been the sole source of cash relief to unemployed migrant workers during their first year in California. For migrants who had depended on federal relief, all that was left was state relief—and that was available only after they had lived in the state for one year.

### **"Anti-Okie" Hysteria Explodes**

When the federal government discontinued cash aid to transients in 1935, Californians began to worry about the wave of indigent migrants. The panic was particularly fierce in Los Angeles. In February 1936, Police Chief James Davis dispatched an "expeditionary force" of 150 police officers to points along the border with orders to enforce a "bum blockade." Mayor Frank Shaw defended the legality of the blockade, declaring that Los Angeles "would not be the dumping ground of charity seekers."

The "bum blockade" garnered attention, and criticism, throughout the state and nation. After the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit in federal court, Chief Davis backed down, and the "bum blockade" ended. But the "anti-Okie" sentiment continued. Three years later, in 1939, police in the Central Valley counties began arresting migrants under a law that made it a crime to knowingly bring an indigent person into the state. One person arrested under the indigent law was a lay preacher named Fred Edwards. He was arrested for driving his brother-in-law, Frank Duncan, from Texas to California. After he had been tried and convicted, the ACLU came to his defense and filed an appeal that was eventually heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In *Edwards v. California*, the court ruled unanimously that California's indigent act (and similar laws in 27 other states) was unconstitutional. But the court was divided on the basis for its ruling. The majority opinion held that the law violated the interstate commerce clause, by interfering with the free movement of people.

Four other justices agreed that the law was unconstitutional, but for different reasons. In a concurring opinion, Justice William O. Douglas wrote that the right of people to move freely "occupies a more protected position in our constitutional system than does the movement of cattle, fruit and steel and coal across state lines." Because the right to move freely from state to state is a right of national citizenship, Douglas invoked the privileges and immunities clause of the 14th Amendment. It provides that "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States." (Justice Douglas was joined by Justices Black and Murphy.)

Justice Robert H. Jackson also invoked the privileges and immunities clause. Indigence alone, he said, cannot be used by a state to limit a person's rights as a citizen. "We should say now, and in no uncertain terms," Jackson wrote, "that a man's mere property status, without more, cannot be used by a state to test, qualify, or limit his rights as a citizen of the United States . . . I think California had no right to make the condition of Duncan's purse . . . the basis of excluding him or of punishing one who extended him aid."

In 1837, the U.S. Supreme Court had referred to the poor as a "moral pestilence." The *Edwards* case marked a significant departure from the prejudice against paupers and vagrants. But by the time the opinion was issued in early 1941, the migrant farm workers' problems had begun to disappear.

## **A Happier Time**

Although relatively few Americans paid attention to the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants during the early '30s, a small group of reformers was documenting the problems in the fields and squatters' camps. Two, in particular, brought the issue to national attention. One was a photographer, named Dorothea Lange, whom the Resettlement Administration had hired to document the lives of farm workers. The *San Francisco News* published Lange's photographs in 1936 under the headline, "Ragged Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live In Squalor." Another of her photos published later that year—the "Migrant Mother"—became one of the most famous photographs of American history.

Also in 1936, the *San Francisco News* published a series of articles titled the "Harvest Gypsies," which depicted the plight of the migrant farm workers in excruciating detail. The articles were written by John Steinbeck, a novelist who had become concerned about the problem and spent months during 1936 living with the farm workers in the ditch banks and the FSA camps. Two years later, Steinbeck transformed the documentary material into a novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which within a few weeks became the nation's bestseller. *The Grapes of Wrath*, which also became an immensely popular movie, recounted the lives of the fictional Joad family, as they moved from Oklahoma to California and struggled to survive in the fields.

Lange's photographs and *The Grapes of Wrath* created a storm of publicity and focused the nation's attention on the problem of migrant farm workers. The president sent emissaries to visit the camps, and Eleanor Roosevelt herself came to California for five days to visit with the migrants and talk to Californians about their migrant problem. Congress established the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. In 1940, the committee held hearings around the country and collected yet more evidence about the problems of the migrants.

But developments elsewhere in the world made the committee's work almost irrelevant. In March 1939, Germany's Adolf Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. In September, he invaded Poland, and Britain and France declared war. Ill-prepared for war, Britain and France urgently needed American airplanes and weapons. Thus began a program of military preparedness that brought with it new prosperity and employment. As the defense boom gained momentum, many of the migrants left the farms and went into the cities for work.

Because the migrants were able to get new jobs in the cities, fewer remained on the farms. Those who stayed were needed as workers. By the end of World War II, the "Okies" were assimilated into California. It was war—not the New Deal—that solved their problem.

### **For Discussion**

1. What were some of the causes for people living in the Dust Bowl to leave and head for California?
2. What social and economic impact did these people have on California?
3. What was the case of *Edwards v. California*? What did the court agree and disagree on? Which opinion do you most agree with? Why?
4. What problems of poverty do you see today in the United States? What, if anything, do you think should be done about these problems?