

# The Migrant Experience

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A complex set of interacting forces both economic and ecological brought the migrant workers documented in this ethnographic collection to California. Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops and caused Great Plains farmers to increase their productivity through mechanization and the cultivation of more land. This increase in farming activity required an increase in spending that caused many farmers to become financially overextended. The stock market crash in 1929 only served to exacerbate this already tenuous economic situation. Many independent farmers lost their farms when banks came to collect on their notes, while tenant farmers were turned out when economic pressure was brought to bear on large landholders. The attempts of these displaced agricultural workers to find other work were met with frustration due to a 30 percent unemployment rate.

At the same time, the increase in farming activity placed greater strain on the land. As the naturally occurring grasslands of the southern Great Plains were replaced with cultivated fields, the rich soil lost its ability to retain moisture and nutrients and began to erode. Soil conservation practices were not widely employed by farmers during this era, so when a seven-year drought began in 1931, followed by the coming of dust storms in 1932, many of the farms literally dried up and blew away creating what became known as the "Dust Bowl." Driven by the Great Depression, drought, and dust storms, thousands of farmers packed up their families and made the difficult journey to California where they hoped to find work. Along with their meager belongings, the Dust Bowl refugees brought with them their inherited cultural expressions. It is this heritage that Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin captured on their documentation expedition to migrant work camps and other sites throughout California.

Why did so many of the refugees pin their hopes for a better life on California? One reason was that the state's mild climate allowed for a long growing season and a diversity of crops with staggered planting and harvesting cycles. For people whose lives had revolved around farming, this seemed like an ideal place to look for work. Popular songs and stories, circulating in oral tradition for decades (for more on this topic see "The Recording of Folk Music in Northern California" by Sidney Robertson Cowell), exaggerated these attributes, depicting California as a veritable promised land. In addition, flyers advertising a need for farm workers in the Southwest were distributed in areas hard hit by unemployment. An example of such a flyer, publicizing a need for cotton pickers in Arizona, is contained in Charles Todd's scrapbook. Finally, the country's major east-west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 -- also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," "The Main Street of America," and "Will Rogers Highway" -- abetted the westward flight of the migrants. A trip of such length was not undertaken lightly in this pre-interstate era, and Highway 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to an area just south of the Central Valley of California.

Although the Dust Bowl included many Great Plains states, the migrants were generically known as "Okies," referring to the approximately 20 percent who were from Oklahoma. The migrants represented in *Voices from the Dust Bowl* came primarily from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Most were of Anglo-American descent with family and cultural roots in the poor rural

South. In the homes they left, few had been accustomed to living with modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing. The bulk of the people Todd and Sonkin interviewed shared conservative religious and political beliefs and were ethnocentric in their attitude toward other ethnic/cultural groups, with whom they had had little contact prior to their arrival in California. Such attitudes sometimes led to the use of derogatory language and negative stereotyping of cultural outsiders. Voices from the Dust Bowl illustrates certain universals of human experience: the trauma of dislocation from one's roots and homeplace; the tenacity of a community's shared culture; and the solidarity within and friction among folk groups. Such intergroup tension is further illustrated in this presentation by contemporary urban journalists' portrayals of rural life, California farmers' attitudes toward both Mexican and "Okie" workers, and discriminatory attitudes toward migrant workers in general.

Todd and Sonkin also held recording sessions with a few Mexican migrants living in the El Rio Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp. Unfortunately, the glass-based acetate discs on which the Spanish-language musical performances were recorded did not survive. However, photos from El Rio and interviews with Jose Flores and Augustus Martinez provide a glimpse into the lives and culture of non-Anglo farm workers. This material illustrates that Mexican immigrants had long been an integral part of agricultural production in the United States and were not newcomers on the scene even in 1940. In fact, when the Dust Bowl families arrived in California looking for work, the majority of migrant farm laborers were either Latino or Asian, particularly of Mexican and Filipino descent. Voices from the Dust Bowl is particularly relevant for us today since it demonstrates that living and working conditions of agricultural migrant laborers have changed little in the intervening half century.

California was emphatically not the promised land of the migrants' dreams. Although the weather was comparatively balmy and farmers' fields were bountiful with produce, Californians also felt the effects of the Depression. Local and state infrastructures were already overburdened, and the steady stream of newly arriving migrants was more than the system could bear. After struggling to make it to California, many found themselves turned away at its borders. Those who did cross over into California found that the available labor pool was vastly disproportionate to the number of job openings that could be filled. Migrants who found employment soon learned that this surfeit of workers caused a significant reduction in the going wage rate. Even with an entire family working, migrants could not support themselves on these low wages. Many set up camps along irrigation ditches in the farmers' fields. These "ditchbank" camps fostered poor sanitary conditions and created a public health problem.

Arrival in California did not put an end to the migrants' travels. Their lives were characterized by transience. In an attempt to maintain a steady income, workers had to follow the harvest around the state. When potatoes were ready to be picked, the migrants needed to be where the potatoes were. The same principle applied to harvesting cotton, lemons, oranges, peas, and other crops. For this reason, migrant populations were most dense in agricultural centers. The territory covered by Todd and Sonkin in this project ranged from as far south as El Rio, just north of Oxnard, to as far north as Yuba City, north of Sacramento. Much of the documentation was concentrated in the San Joaquin Valley.

The Arvin Migratory Labor Camp was the first federally operated camp opened by the FSA in 1937 and the starting point of the Todd/Sonkin expedition. The camps were intended to resolve poor sanitation and public health problems, as well as to mitigate the burden placed on state and local infrastructures. The FSA camps also furnished the migrants with a safe space in which to retire from the discrimination that plagued them and in which to practice their culture and rekindle a sense of community. Although each camp had a small staff of administrators, much of the responsibility for daily operations and governance devolved to the campers themselves. Civil activities were carried out through camp councils and camp courts. Proceedings of council meetings and court sessions can be found among the audio files in this online presentation. Project fieldnotes provide further information about the composition, operation, and context of these bodies as well as details about camp occupancy and organization.

When they were not working or looking for work, or tending to the civil and domestic operations of the camp, the migrants found time to engage in recreational activities. Singing and making music took place both in private living quarters and in public spaces. The music performed by the migrants came from a number of different sources. The majority of pieces belong to the Anglo-Celtic ballad tradition. Songs such as "Barbara Allen", "The Brown Girl", "Nine Little Devils", "Father Rumble", "Lloyd Bateman ", "Pretty Molly ", and "Little Mohee" all reflect this tradition. Gospel and popular music are other sources from which migrants took their inspiration. The minstrel stage, tin pan alley, early country, and cowboy music were all popular music sources that fed the performers' repertoires. The works of the Carter Family, Jimmy Rodgers, and Gene Autry were particular favorites of the migrants. Although all the music in this collection gives us a sense of the informants' cultural milieu, those pieces that document the migrant experience are especially poignant. Songs like Jack Bryant's "Sunny Cal" and Mary Sullivan's ballads "A Traveler's Line" and "Sunny California" all speak of hardship, disappointment, and a deeply cherished wish to return home.

In addition to songs and instrumental music, the migrants enjoyed dancing and play-party activities (singing games accompanied by dance-like movements). Included in this online presentation are square dance calls, such as "Soldier's Joy" and "Sally Goodin", and play-party rhymes like "Skip to My Lou" and "Old Joe Clark." Newsletters produced by camp residents provided additional details about camp social life and recreational activities.

As World War II wore on, the state of the economy, both in California and across the nation, improved dramatically as the defense industry geared up to meet the needs of the war effort. Many of the migrants went off to fight in the war. Those who were left behind took advantage of the job opportunities that had become available in West Coast shipyards and defense plants. As a result of this more stable lifestyle, numerous Dust Bowl refugees put down new roots in California soil, where their descendants reside to this day. Voices from the Dust Bowl provides a glimpse into the everyday life and cultural expression of a group of people living through a particularly difficult period in American history. Charles L. Todd's articles "The Okies Search for a Lost Frontier" and "Trampling out the Vintage: Farm Security Camps Provide the Imperial Valley Migrants with a Home and a Hope" give an overview of the historical, economic, and social context in which this collection was created.

