

Migrant labor ✓

'California's Grapes of Wrath'

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California's 'Grapes of Wrath'

CALIFORNIANS are wrathful over *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's best-selling novel of migrant agricultural workers. Though the book is fiction, many readers accept it as fact.

By implication, it brands California farmers with unbelievable cruelty in their dealings with refugees from the "dust bowl." It charges that they deliberately lured a surplus of workers westward, to depress wages, deputized peace officers to hound the migrants ever onward, burned the squatters' shacktowns, stomped down gardens and destroyed surplus foods in a conspiracy to force the refugees to work for starvation wages, allowed children to hunger and mothers to bear babies unattended in squalor. It implies that hatred of the migrants is fostered by the land barons who use the "Bank of the West" (obviously the Bank of America) and the "Farmers Association" (the Associated Farmers) to gobble up the lands of the small farmers and concentrate them in a few large holdings.

These are a few of the sins for which Steinbeck indicts California farmers. It is difficult to rebut fiction, which requires no proof, with facts, which do require proof.

The experience of the Joad family, whose misfortunes in their trek from Oklahoma to California Steinbeck portrays so graphically, are not typical of those of the real migrants I found in the course of two reportorial tours of the agricultural valleys. I made one inquiry during the winter of 1937-38, following the flood which Steinbeck describes; I made another at the height of the harvest this year.

Along three thousand miles of highways and byways, I was unable to find a single counterpart of the Joad family. Nor have I discovered one during fifteen years of residence in the Santa Clara Valley (the same valley where John Steinbeck now lives),

which is crowded each summer with transient workers harvesting the fruit crops. The lot of the "fruit tramp" is admittedly no bed of roses, but neither is the bitter fate described in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

NO JOADS HERE

THE JOAD family of nine, created by Steinbeck to typify the "Okie" migrants, is anything but typical. A survey made for the Farm Security Administration revealed that thirty was the average age of migrant adults, that the average family had 2.8 children.

Steinbeck's Joads, once arrived in the "land of promise," earned so little that they faced slow starvation. Actually, no migrant family hungers in California unless it is too proud to accept relief. Few migrants are.

There is no red tape about getting free food or shelter.

The FSA maintains warehouses in eleven strategically located towns, where the grant officer is authorized to issue 15 days' rations to any migrant who applies, identifies himself by showing his driver's license, and answers a few simple questions about his family, his earnings, and his travels. In emergencies, the grant officer may issue money for clothing, gasoline, or medical supplies. The food includes standard brands of a score of staple products, flour, beans, corn meal, canned milk and tomatoes, dried fruit, and other grocery items. Before the 15 days are up, the grant officer or his assistant visits the migrant family in camp, and, if the need still exists, the ration is renewed repeatedly until the family finds work.

Shelter is provided by the FSA (a unit of the Federal Resettlement Administration) at model camps which Steinbeck himself represents as satisfactory. The one at Shafter is typical. A migrant family is assigned to a wooden platform on which a tent may be pitched; if the family lacks a tent, the camp has some to lend. The rent is a dime a day, and the migrant who wants to save the money can work it out by helping to clean up camp. The dime goes into a community benefit fund, administered by a committee. Camp facilities include toilets, showers and laundry tubs, with hot and cold running water, a community house. These thirteen camps cost around \$190,000 apiece, and each accommodates some three hundred families. Last summer there were vacant platforms, though in winter there is a shortage of space.

Various relief organizations divide the responsibility of providing food and shelter for California's migrants. Federal authorities, working through the FSA, assume the burden for

the first year. After a migrant family has been in the State a year, it becomes eligible for State relief. After three years, it becomes a county charge. State relief for agricultural workers averages \$51 a month in California, as compared with \$21 in Oklahoma, less for several neighboring States. The U. S. Farm Placement Service notes that WPA wages in California are \$44 per month, in Oklahoma \$32. California old-age pensions are \$32 per month, Oklahoma's \$20. These are U. S. Social Security Board figures. Records of the FSA grant offices indicate that many migrants earned under \$200 a year back home—or less than one third the relief allowance in California. Thus thousands of Okies, having discovered this comparative bonanza, urge their kinsfolk to join them in California, where the average migrant family earns \$400 during the harvest season and is able, after the first lean year, to draw an equal sum for relief during eight months of enforced idleness.

WAGES, HEALTH CONDITIONS

THE ADVANTAGES of life in California for migrant workers are not limited to the salubrious climate and largess.

When the harvest is on, the base wage for agricultural workers on California farms is \$2.10 per day with board, as compared to \$1.00 in Oklahoma, \$1.35 in Texas, and 65 cents in Arkansas. These figures are from the U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Cotton pickers in California's San Joaquin Valley are paid 90 cents per 100 pounds. In Oklahoma, the pay is 65 cents a hundred, in Arkansas and Texas 60 cents. California has 180 separate crops to harvest, and some crop is ripening somewhere in the State every month of the year. A fortunate migrant may work eight to ten months each year. Back home he was lucky to work three months.

Another advantage of life in California is the free medical service. Few of the migrants had ever seen the inside of a hospital or employed a doctor, dentist, or nurse before they came to California. Each FSA camp has a full-time nurse and a part-time doctor to serve the migrant families without charge. Medical supplies, too, are free.

At the Shafter camp, I asked how many babies had been born in camp this year.

"None," the manager replied. "The mothers all go to Kern General Hospital."

At the hospital, supported by Kern County, I learned that, of 727 children born to migrant mothers in the County during the first 5 months of this year, 544 were delivered in the hospital,

without charge. In fact, under State law, no general hospital may refuse a mother in labor. Yet in the Steinbeck book a camp manager is obliged to act as midwife.

It is a fortunate break, not only for the migrants but for the Californians as well, that the incoming streams of dilapidated "jalopies," piled high with beds and utensils, converge at Bakersfield, seat of Kern County. As large as Massachusetts (and wealthy, thanks to oil), Kern County maintains a remarkable health service under the direction of Dr. Joe Smith, who believes that an ill person is a menace to others and that it is the County's duty to make him well. Dr. Smith's eighteen nurses, each with a car, spend most of their time in schools and labor camps, checking the health and diet of children. Any migrant family needing medical service can have it free at Kern General, and some with contagious diseases receive it against their will.

Kern County, strategically located, is California's front-line defense against epidemics. Few migrant families manage to cross the huge area without at least one examination. Other counties to the north likewise employ nurses to visit the migrant camps, but they are not as selfishly altruistic as is Kern. Though resisting the nurses' attentions at first, the migrants are now eager for them.

One of the accusations in the Steinbeck novel is that State and county peace officers hound the migrants from camp to camp, to push them into strikebreaking jobs. But inquiry reveals that officers invade camps only when appealed to by health officials.

The health officer of Madera County found a group of migrants camped atop a huge manure pile. "It's warmer here," they protested, when he ordered them to move. Only when he invoked police authority would they budge.

One health deputy discovered a case of smallpox in a camp. Telling the family to stay indoors, he hurried to town for vaccine. When he came back, the entire camp had evaporated into the night, and, before all the exposed migrants could be traced and rounded up into isolation camps, health officers of the neighboring counties had to cope with over six hundred cases of smallpox.

Investigating a typhus outbreak, a health officer found that several families had chopped holes in their cabin floors for toilets, without digging pits. In Santa Clara County, migrants were found camping around a polluted well. One of them explained, "The folks that was here before us used it," and they stayed on until deputy sheriffs removed them forcibly.

Outside nearly every agricultural community, from El Centro on the Mexican border to Redding near the Oregon line, is a shantytown or squatter camp. These are frightful places in which to live, devoid of adequate sanitation, often without pure water. Local authorities can do little about these rural slums, because they are outside city limits.

The most unsanitary squatter camp was that in the river bottom just north of Bakersfield, where squatters had made themselves at home on property of the Kern County Land Company, one of the State's major land "barons." The land company offered no objection to the squatter camp, but the citizens of Bakersfield did when the migrants' children came over the line to school and epidemics of flu, skin diseases, chicken pox, and other ailments depleted the classrooms. There were threats of vigilante action from irate parents, but what happened was quite different. Deputies from the county health office surveyed the camp, discovered that most of the occupants were employed and could afford to rent homes, that some of them had been there for seven years. After six months of patient persuasion, all but twenty-six families were induced to move to town. When the twenty-six refused to budge, the health officer had their flimsy shacks moved to higher ground. They are still there. The vacated shacks were pushed into a pile and burned by order of the health department. That is the prosaic story behind the lurid burning of Bakersfield's "Hooverville," as dramatized in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

THE GREAT MIGRATION

THE GREAT flood of the winter of 1937-38, with which Steinbeck drowned the last hopes of the Joad family, hit the migrants hardest in Madera County, where thousands of them worked in the cotton fields. Near Firebaugh, the San Joaquin River rose in its rampage to wash out eight hundred campers. It was after dark one Saturday night when a deputy sheriff reported the plight of these unfortunates to Dr. Lee A. Stone, the wiry old health officer, an ex-Southerner formerly on the staff of the U. S. Public Health Service. Dr. Stone mobilized all the trucks and cars he could find, hurried to the scene, moved the eight hundred refugees thirty miles through the blinding rain to the little city of Madera, and sheltered them in the schools. Then he raised funds by phone for temporary quarters.

Discovering that most of his unexpected guests had but recently come to California, he hit on the idea of returning them to their kinsfolk in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. When he

had raised the necessary funds to buy railroad tickets, he hurried over with the news.

They listened in stony silence.

Finally, one of the men spoke up. "Thanks, Doc," he drawled. "Here we be and here we stay and we ain't a gonna leave the promised land."

"No sirree, we ain't a gonna leave California," chorused the rest. And they didn't.

Almost all the counties in the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys have standing offers of free transportation back home for any migrant family. Not one family in a hundred has accepted.

No one knows how many migrants have poured into California since the last census was taken, because the count was not started until 1935, when the State Department of Agriculture instructed the plan-quarantine inspectors at the border to check and report incoming farm workers. To date, 285,000 of them have been reported, but the count is incomplete because many thousands have ridden in on freight trains.

The migrants' trek dates back to 1925, when cotton first became a major crop in California. Some authorities think that almost a hundred thousand families have moved into the State, mostly from the dust-bowl area. This would mean half a million individuals, a migration exceeding the gold rush of pioneer days. Others who have studied the trek of the Okies—so called because forty-two out of every hundred migrants come from Oklahoma—place the figure at three hundred thousand.

In either case, it is a tremendous lump of impoverished population for the people of the Great Interior Valley to assimilate. It is as if the entire population of Cincinnati were to visit Cleveland and, once there, decide to remain indefinitely as star boarders. And it has taken the combined resources of the State, the counties, the federal government, and the individual farmers to meet the emergency. Madera County, for instance, which had 15,000 residents when the invasion started, now has double that population; and most of the newcomers are public charges part of each year. Kern County has a population of 130,000 persons, of whom 35,000 are on relief. The County hospital budget has increased from \$100,000 in 1926 to the present figure of \$970,000, all of which except some \$8,000, contributed by the federal government for the aid of crippled children, is paid by Kern's taxpayers.

CALIFORNIA'S SPECIAL PROBLEM

OWING TO THE peculiarities of agriculture in the Far

West, the farmers of California are as hopelessly dependent on the migrant workers as the migrants are dependent on the farmers for jobs. For California agriculture differs from farming elsewhere in several ways.

Most California crops are so extremely perishable that they must be harvested on the day of ripening—not a day earlier or a day later. This is true of fresh fruits, such as peaches, apricots, and pears, which must be picked, packed, iced and shipped to the hour. It is true also of field crops like lettuce, tomatoes, melons. Asparagus is actually harvested twice a day. Timely and uninterrupted handling of these perishables means the difference between a \$300,000,000 yearly income and a multi-million expense for intensive planting, cultivating, irrigating, spraying, thinning, and harvesting. Most of the California farmers' customers live two to three hundred miles distant, beyond two mountain ranges, and it costs as much to deliver the foodstuffs to them in good condition as it does to battle the perennial droughts, the insects, the vagaries of soil and atmosphere in the struggle to grow the crops. Including nonperishables, the annual take from the soil totals around \$600,000,000 and is the State's main livelihood.

Another peculiarity of California agriculture is the manner in which it is broken up into "deals," to use the local term for crops. There are about 180 deals in all, and they, too, are often migrant. The lettuce deal begins in mid-winter in Imperial Valley, near the Mexican border; it migrates first to Arizona, then to the Salinas Valley, which from April to November is the country's salad bowl. Melon, tomato, spinach, fresh-pea deals likewise follow the sun north each spring and summer. Navel oranges ripen in midwinter south of the Tehachapi range, Valencias in midsummer north of these mountains. The peach deal trails the apricot deal; then comes the prune deal, the grape deal, and finally cotton.

California is a long, slender State, broken up into a score of agricultural "islands." In the San Diego island, the growers concentrate on avocados and bulbs. The Santa Clara Valley is the prune and apricot island. The Sacramento Valley produces nine tenths of the country's canned peaches. There are three grape islands, two lettuce islands, an asparagus island behind the dikes of the delta country—a sort of little Netherlands. There is a cotton belt in the San Joaquin Valley. In all these highly specialized, intensively cultivated regions, harvest time comes with a vengeance.

For generations, transient workers have appeared by the thousands at harvest time.

The Mexicans pitched their tents in orchards or made camp in rude summertime shelters. They picked the fruit, collected their wages, and faded over the horizon to the next crop. They were good workers, with an instinctive touch for ripening fruit and melons, and better help than the Orientals who preceded them. In 1934, the migrations of these Mexican workers ended abruptly, as their new agrarian government back home offered each returning family a slice of a confiscated estate.

The exodus of the Mexicans coincided with the influx of dust-bowl refugees. For a time, the Okies were the answer to the farmers' prayers. They still are, for that matter, except that there are now too many of them for the available jobs and they have brought with them serious social problems.

Three years ago the University of California assigned Dr. R. L. Adams, Professor of Agricultural Economics, to survey the State's farm-labor requirements. Dr. Adams says the crops require 144,700 workers in the peak months, over and above the year-round hired hands. By midwinter this demand has fallen off to 59,000. In May, it is back to a hundred thousand; in August it is 134,000. Thus there are at times nearly 86,000 more workers than jobs, even if there is no labor surplus. Today there is a surplus of fifty to seventy thousand workers, even at the harvest peak. Early this year the influx was tapering off, but in June 1,600 more agricultural workers were at the border than in June a year earlier.

HOUSING: A STUMBLING BLOCK

UNLIKE THE Mexicans, the Okies do not disappear over the horizon at the end of each harvest. They linger on in the flimsy shelters intended only for the rainless California summer. When rains come, in the fall, the camp sites are seas of mud; rubbish and filth accumulate; and the farmers are taken to task for the facilities provided for their unwelcome guests. Hence the migrant-worker problem is essentially a housing problem.

The FSA has sought a solution in low-price cottages, costing \$1,000 to \$1,500 per unit and renting for \$8.20 per month, including heat, light, and water. Each is surrounded by a half-acre of land for a garden. These cottages are snapped up as soon as they are completed, but there are not enough of them, and they are usable only for workers who have ceased to be migrants. FSA has another answer, a portable motorized camp—platforms, Diesel-powered electric plant, laundry tubs and showers—so designed that it may be loaded on trucks and shifted

with the crops and the demand for harvest hands. First tried out this summer, it may be the migrant camp of the future.

The farmers, who have added ten thousand cabins to the shelters provided for migrant workers in the last three years, look askance at the FSA camps. Because of the perishable nature of their crops, California farmers live in terror of strikes. The federal camps are feared as hotbeds of radical activities, a fear that dates back to 1931, when communists undertook to organize the fruit workers and dispatched squads of agitators to drag workers from their ladders and intimidate their families. I found no evidence to justify this alarm. The Okies I talked with were oblivious to class struggle; all they asked was more work.

On many of the larger farms, such as the Tagus, the Hoover, the DiGorgio ranches, the owners provide housing as good as FSA demonstration communities and for less.

On the Tagus Ranch, H. C. Merritt offers two hundred permanent families neat little cottages for \$3.00 to \$5.00 per month, including a plot of ground for a garden. Some of the first white migrants chopped up the partitions between the rooms and used them for firewood, although free wood was provided for the chopping. When he protested, the Okies explained they preferred to live in one-room houses. Now Tagus families are graduated from one-room to three-room houses as they qualify for them.

Mr. Merritt's attitude toward federal camps is typical. "If my workmen live on the ranch and I tell them to be on hand at eight in the morning to pick peaches, they're on hand," he said. "If they're in a federal camp, I don't know whether they'll be here or not. While I'm looking for other pickers, the peaches drop on the ground, and a year's work is gone."

STUBBORN INDIVIDUALISTS

AN INFERENCE of *The Grapes of Wrath* is that most of the California farmlands are in great holdings, operated by corporations or land "barons." The State has 6,732,390 acres devoted to crops, and the 1935 census shows that 1,738,906 are in farms less than 100 acres in extent, 3,068,742 are in farms of 100 to 1,000 acres, and 1,924,742 are in farms of over 1,000.

An insinuation of *The Grapes of Wrath* is that wages are forced down by the Associated Farmers and the Bank of America, acting in conspiracy. Actually, neither the Association nor the Bank concerns itself with wages. Rates of pay are worked out through the farmer co-operatives in each crop or through local groups, such as the San Joaquin Regional Council, which

agrees each spring on a base wage. California farmers pay higher wages than those of any State but Connecticut, according to the U. S. Farm Placement Bureau.

This same federal organization conducted an inquiry into the charge, aired in *The Grapes of Wrath*, that California farmers had distributed handbills through the dust-bowl area, offering jobs to lure a surplus of migrant labor to the State. Only two cases were unearthed, one by a labor contractor in Santa Barbara County, another by an Imperial Valley contractor. The licenses of both have since been revoked. At the Associated Farmers head office in San Francisco, I saw hundreds of clippings from Midwest newspapers—publicity inspired by the Association—advising migrants **not** to come to California.

The problem of connecting migrant workers who want jobs with farmers who need help is serious. A rumor will sweep like wildfire through migrant camps, of jobs in some valley hundreds of miles distant. Two days later that valley is swamped with so many workers that the harvest which ordinarily would last a month is finished in a week. The U. S. Department of Labor, working with the State Employment Office, now maintains job-information services in eighty-one towns and cities. At any of these offices, migrant workers may check on job prospects in any other area. But most workers still prefer to take a chance.

California's big question—what is going to happen to these people—is still unanswered.

East of Visalia, the FSA is attempting an experiment in co-operative farming. On the 530-acre Mineral King ranch, purchased with federal funds, twenty above-average migrant families were set to work raising cotton, alfalfa, and poultry and running a dairy. At the end of the first year, the farm showed a profit of \$900 per family, more than twice the average family's earning from following the crops.

At Casa Grande, Arizona, the FSA has another co-operative farm, of 4,000 acres, with sixty families working it.

Co-operative farms, directed by trained men from universities, produce good crops and good livings; but the Okies are rugged individualists. "I'm not going to have any damn government telling me what I'm going to plant," exploded one of the Mineral King farmers, as he packed his family in the car and took to the road again. And so, in spite of the good intentions of the Farm Security Administration, the Governor's Committee on Unemployment, the Simon J. Lubin Society, the John Stein-

beck Committee, and other organizations, the highly individualistic newcomers probably will work out their own destiny in their own way.

For a glimpse of how they may do it, visit Salinas, in the lettuce island, which saw its first invasion eight years ago. The first Okies in the area squatted in squalor outside the town until an enterprising wheat farmer divided his ranch into half-acre lots, which he offered at \$250 apiece, \$5.00 down, \$5.00 a month. The Okies snapped them up and strutted around, proud of their property ownership. Today, in Little Oklahoma City, as the community is called, one can envisage the whole process of assimilation—the ancient trailer resting on its axles—a lean-to or tent alongside it, in the front a wooden shack and, sometimes, a vine-covered cottage. Off to the south, some of the Okies are living in neat little three-to five-room cottages. The Okies of Little Oklahoma City are fortunate. They muscled into the lettuce-packing game and now have virtually a monopoly around Salinas, earning from 50 to 60 cents an hour for eight or nine months of the year. In that one community, three thousand migrants have achieved a respectable standard of living. Their children are intermarrying with the natives. Outwardly, they are Californians.

What they have done can be done by others. Their accomplishment is a challenge to shiftless Okies and an answer to the broad accusations hurled so heedlessly in *The Grapes of Wrath*.