



Colorado, in the 1930s

The Dust Bowl Myth

*Americans today know the Dust Bowl migrants of the 1930s from Dorothea Lange's moving photographs and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The reality was a little different.*

by Charles J. Shindo

Of all the grim spectacles created by the Great Depression, none has won a stronger hold on the American imagination than the travails of the Dust Bowl migrants. Driven westward to California by drought, dust storms, and economic disaster, they entered the national mythology as symbols of American grit and determination in the face of adversity, and as symbolic victims, often invoked when modern social ills are addressed.

In the title song of his 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Bruce Springsteen enlisted the protagonist of John Steinbeck's classic 1939 Dust Bowl novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, in the contemporary struggles against homelessness

and unemployment. Tom Joad and family also served the cause of social criticism in a 1990 stage production by the Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theater Company. "This story," said director Frank Galati, who adapted the novel for the stage, "comes back to us from a dark time to invite us to reflect on what we really value."

But determining what the Dust Bowl experience tells us about the deepest values of Americans turns out to be more complicated than such statements suggest. In the images Steinbeck gave us, the migrants are oppressed and more-or-less helpless victims of economic, political, and natural forces beyond their con-

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tol and even their comprehension. Their experience required the solidarity and generosity of the public and collective action by the migrants themselves. Other artists—such as Dorothea Lange, whose haunting *Migrant Mother* photograph of 1936 may be even better known today than *The Grapes of Wrath*, and folksinger Woody Guthrie, whose life and works, including “Tom Joad” and other Dust Bowl songs, have lately inspired a museum exhibition and a flurry of scholarly activity—held similar views about what was needed.

In all the artistic representations of the Dust Bowl migration, however, including the more traditionalist rendition of Steinbeck’s novel presented in director John Ford’s 1940 film, the very different values and views of the migrants themselves are strangely missing. Yet it is a testimony to the power of art that the surviving myth is not precisely what the artists intended either. It is a myth that has come to encompass more than the Dust Bowl migration, more even than the Great Depression and the New Deal. Lange’s famous portrait of one migrant mother with her children, their faces hidden, hers showing strain and worry and fear for the future, has come to stand not just for the anxiety Americans felt during the depression but for the end of the Jeffersonian dream of the yeoman farmer, for Americans’ inevitable movement from the farms to the cities, and for something indomitable in the American spirit.

Even by broad definition, the so-called Dust Bowl migrants were only about a third of the more than one million migrants from around the nation who journeyed to California during the 1930s. They came mainly from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas—and, for the most part, from *outside* the region (primarily, Kansas, Colorado, and the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas) that was hardest hit by the vast and frightening dust storms of the early and mid-1930s. Indeed, the rate of migration to California from this Dust Bowl region was lower during the depression than it had been in earlier decades or would be in later ones, when mild weather and the promise of economic opportunities drew hundreds of thousands to the Golden State. In the popular imagination of the period, however, the dust storms came to

symbolize all the overwhelming forces that were uprooting farmers and others and propelling them westward, against their will, in search of work. The dust storms were so dramatic, and the image of them so compelling, that they obscured the fact that many of the families who arrived in California during the depression were “pushed” there by other calamities—such as crop failures, foreclosures, or the loss of blue-collar jobs—or by competition from agribusiness, in a southern agricultural economy that had begun to be transformed even before the depression.

Whatever they were fleeing, the migrants came. “They come along in wheezy old cars with the father or one of the older boys driving,” reported a *Fortune* magazine writer in 1939. “The mother and the younger children sit in back; and around them, crammed inside and overflowing to the running boards, the front and rear bumpers, the top and sides, they carry along everything they own. . . . You notice the faces of the people in these cars. There is worry, but also something more: They are the faces of people afraid of hunger; completely dispossessed, certain only of being harried along when their immediate usefulness is over.”

Overwhelmingly white and young, the more than 300,000 migrants from the Southwest came mostly in family groups and settled near other family members or friends in California. Most were not dispossessed small farmers but city and town folk who had been employed in small businesses and the oil industry and who settled in and around California’s cities, particularly Los Angeles and San Diego. Only about 130,000 were farm folk. It was these “Okies” (as they came to be called, at first with derogatory intent) who ended up, for the most part, in the farming communities of the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys—and before long, thanks to Steinbeck, Lange, and others, in the American imagination as “the Dust Bowl migrants.”

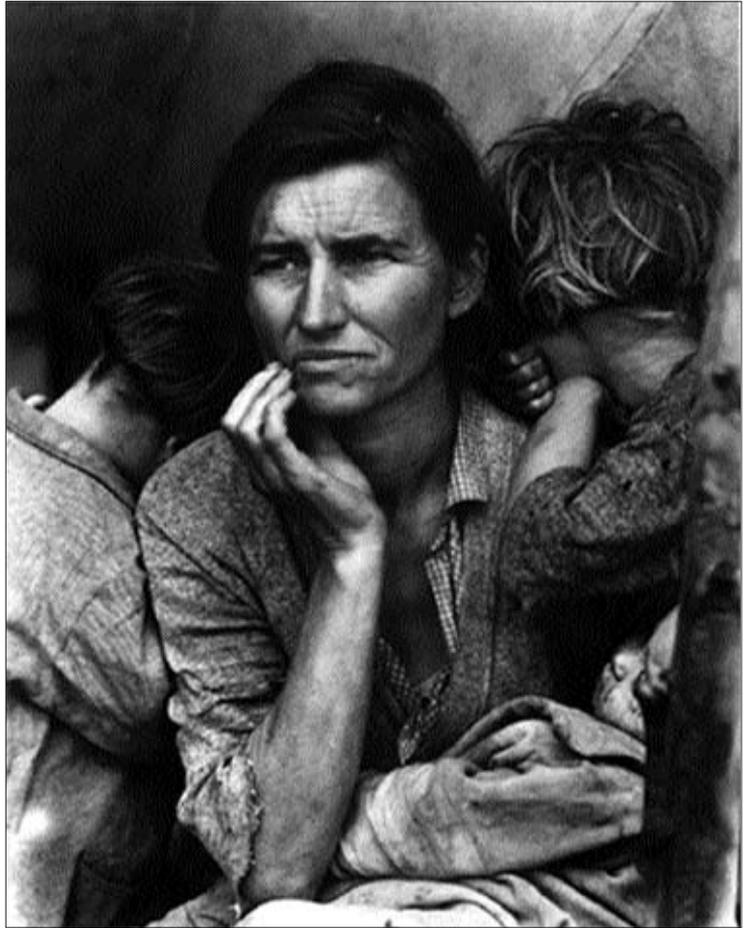
Fleeing natural disaster (or circumstances so overwhelming that they seemed like forces of nature), the Okies found that farming in California was very different from what they

> CHARLES J. SHINDO, a professor of history at Louisiana State University, is the author of *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (1997). Copyright © 2000 Charles J. Shindo.

had known at home. The family farm scarcely existed in their new state. Large landowners and growers dominated agriculture, and they needed seasonal armies of cheap migrant labor to work their orchards of fruits and nuts and vast fields of vegetables and cotton. Wages were low and working conditions abysmal.

This is the harsh reality that Tom Joad and his family confront after they arrive in California. Forced to live in one of the wretched roadside settlements known as “Hooverilles,” they soon learn about the unsparing practices of large owners and growers. Realizing the futility of fighting the system by themselves, the Joads seek refuge in one of the migrant camps run by the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). There, they are provided with showers, toilets, and washtubs, and treated with respect. “Why ain’t they more places like this?” Tom asks.

Nobody had paid much attention to the Golden State’s migrant workers in earlier years, when most were foreign born, recruited by the growers from China, Japan, India, the Philippines, and Mexico. But the new Okie farm workers, who were white, Christian, and native born, aroused public sympathy—and the attention of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. The first of 12 main government camps for migrant workers opened in Marysville, in Yuba County, in October 1935. The camps were a great improvement over the miserable Hooverilles in which many migrants had been living. The Resettlement Administration



“Migrant Mother,” Dorothea Lange’s affecting portrait of Florence Thompson, seemed to epitomize the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants.

also worked to document and publicize the migrants’ plight.

In *An American Exodus: A Record in Human Erosion* (1939), Resettlement Administration photographer Dorothea Lange and her husband, Paul S. Taylor, regional labor adviser for the agency, combined her photographs and his text to portray the Dust Bowl migration as a consequence of the increasing use of tractors and heavy machinery in the corn and wheat fields of the Southwest. The farm folk were being driven off the land by manmade forces, not just natural ones such as drought. Mechanization had made tenant farming and sharecropping in the South even more economically marginal than they had been. The soil—depleted by overproduction—was turning to dust. Hardworking tenant farmers and sharecroppers resisted the tractor and the power of large landowners, but their efforts

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were futile, Lange and Taylor believed. Mechanization was inevitable. Just as industrialization had long before stripped the urban artisan of his independence, now it was dispossessing the small farmer. Like other reformers, Lange and Taylor saw the solution to the migrants' problems in the creation of a self-conscious agricultural working class strong enough to win decent wages and working conditions. In the meantime, the New Deal would help the migrants adjust.

Lange's photographs added a "human" element to Taylor's analysis of statistics and trends, and *An American Exodus*, with its striking images of dust-covered farms and abandoned houses surrounded by machine-cultivated rows of crops, won high critical praise. But far more influential than the book was a Lange photograph that was left out because it did not fit the book's theme of mechanization and change. The photo was "Migrant Mother," taken by Lange in Nipomo, California, on a rainy March day in 1936, in an episode Lange would later call "the assignment I'll never forget."

Driving home after a month in the field, Lange passed a sign for a pea pickers' camp just off the highway. Having already shot a boxful of film documenting the conditions of California agriculture, she kept driving. But 20 miles later, she turned around and went back. "I was following instinct, not reason," she remembered. "I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon. I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet." Skipping the questions she usually asked about family history and local conditions, Lange began right away to photograph the mother and her children. The woman, Lange later recalled, mentioned that her husband was a native Californian, that she was 32 years old, that they had been living on frozen vegetables they found in the fields and on birds caught by the children, and that they had just sold the tires from their car for money to buy food.

Lange did not get the woman's name (it was Florence Thompson), and took only six shots. Confident that she "had recorded the essence of my assignment," Lange approached no others in the camp. As it turned out, her sixth exposure became her most famous photograph. Soon published in the national magazines *Survey Graphic* and *Midweek Pictorial*,

the image of worried motherhood confronting adversity stirred more sympathy for the migrants and their plight than any government report or news article could.

Lost to sight in Lange's photograph, and in most other Dust Bowl representations, were the actual concerns of Florence Thompson and those like her. Though many migrants were glad for the refuge provided by federal camps like the one in Marysville, the formation of a rural proletariat was far from their minds. Washington, one migrant worker told an interviewer, ought to give each family a farm of its own: "There ought to be 40 to 60 acres to the man accordin' to the size of his family. . . . Let the people farm with teams rather than with machinery. That would mean more work fer more people and so do away with a lot of relief."

The Okie migrants came to California in the belief that after working in the fields as wage laborers for a season or two, they would be able to afford a down payment on a piece of land. The migrants, writes James Gregory in *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (1989), were populists who believed in "the dignity of hard work and plain living and promised deliverance from the forces of power, privilege, and moral pollution, near and far." They "wanted fiercely to resettle on property of their own," sociologist Lillian Criesler wrote in 1940.

Like most white Southerners of their day, the migrants were Democrats, who supported FDR but preferred that problems be solved at the local level. They disliked the idea of a large federal government and, for the most part, were opposed to large-scale government relief efforts—even for themselves. "If people stay on relief too long it takes somethin' out of them," said Jesse Jacobs, a farm worker in California. His daughter agreed: "I think that relief has ruined about the majority of workin' men." Other migrants complained that relief destroyed a man's "pride," as one Henry Rollin put it, and "takes that independent American citizen feelin' away from a man," in the words of I. G. Spurling.

But the Okies' dream of becoming self-sufficient family farmers was completely unrealistic, Lange and Taylor and their fellow artists and reformers believed. Not only was property



Dorothea Lange's 1935 photo of these potato harvesters in Kern County, California, showed another side of the Dust Bowl migrants' life.

beyond their reach, but they could not deal with “the mysteries and hazards of fluctuating markets for highly commercialized crops” in California’s advanced farm economy.

For folksinger Woody Guthrie, an Okie migrant himself, the solution was clear. He cast the migrants as proud workers in a class struggle, whose fulfillment would come with radical political change. “I might not know what it’s all about, / I’ll join with the Union and soon find out,” he sang. Though Guthrie spoke in the language of Okie cultural tradition, he ignored the migrants’ political and economic conservatism. In the same vein, folklorists such as Charles Todd, Robert Sonkin, and John and Alan Lomax, tried to

place the migrants in an American folk tradition. Collecting folksongs in the California migrant camps, Todd and Sonkin used their recordings to publicize the migrants’ plight—and gave a liberal and progressive interpretation of the migrants’ aspirations.

Some migrants did turn, as reformers hoped, from erstwhile independent family farmers (or at least tenant farmers and sharecroppers) into class-conscious workers bent upon securing their rights through organized action. But most—fiercely independent, religious, and conservative—clung to their rural values and resisted that transformation. Indeed, in the struggles that took place between striking workers and employers in California, migrants more

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often sided with employers and served as strike-breakers.

Even Steinbeck's Joads, after failing to find work near Weedpatch, the government camp, and moving north to a peach ranch, are hired as strikebreakers. Tom Joad thus learns firsthand about the deceitful tactics of the growers and owners. After defending himself from vigilantes, he is forced into hiding, then leaves his family, going off in the hope of somehow bringing about change in favor of his people. "I been thinkin' a hell of a lot," he says, "thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled, like them fellas yelled, only a few of 'em at the Hooper ranch—"

Though the future of the Joads is unclear at the novel's end, Steinbeck's point is not. Collective action by the migrants is the key to regaining their dignity, their proper place in society. The migrants, in Steinbeck's view, were backward, and their cultural affinities for religion and tradition irrational. Their failure to understand the new industrialized corporate state was a more fundamental cause of their plight than transitory natural forces such as drought.

For Steinbeck, as for Lange and Taylor and other liberal reformers, what the migrants needed most was education in democratic self-government and the necessity of political action. "The new migrants to California are here to stay," the novelist wrote in a series of articles for the *San Francisco News*. "They are of the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful; and, if given a chance, socially responsible. They can be citizens of the highest type, or they can be an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need." Contemporary readers of *The Grapes of Wrath* were encouraged to believe that, by supporting FDR's New Deal, especially the programs of the Resettlement Administration and, later, the Farm Security Administration, they could help the dispossessed farmers regain their dignity.

Steinbeck's educational and even philosophical ambitions for his work largely disappeared in the screen version that appeared in 1940. John Ford had his own notions of democratic America, and the film industry had its

marketplace imperatives. Ford's faith in traditional values, evident in his other films, led him to favor the familial and spiritual aspects of Steinbeck's narrative, and he also supplied the usual Hollywood happy ending. In his *Grapes of Wrath*, Ford sought simply to tell an uplifting story. The film shows the Joads' lot progressively improving, from Hooverville to the peach ranch to the government camp. Ford's Joad family became symbolic not just of the hard-pressed migrants, but of a troubled America whose strong character would see it through the depression. The movie, as one recent critic has complained, provides "a hollow celebration of that emptiest abstraction, The People, along with a cop-out analysis which avoids blaming any individual or interest for the plight of the Okies." Though reformers preferred the novel, the masses, migrants included, flocked to the movie.

The Dust Bowl migrants never did become a rural proletariat. The government migrant camps helped ease their suffering but did not radically change their status. Only with the coming of World War II and the boom in California's war production industries did the Okies escape their plight as migratory farm workers. Yet their essentially populist conservative values survived. In later years, as Dan Morgan shows in *Rising in the West* (1992), a history of a single Okie family, the migrants and their descendants—whom Morgan sees as a link between the Old South and the New West—became part of the coalition that elected Ronald Reagan governor of California in 1966 and 1970.

The outcome, of course, was hardly what Steinbeck, Lange, and their fellow reformers had in mind in the 1930s. But neither was it what the Okie migrants themselves imagined. There was no return to the proud independence of living on the land. As the artists and reformers of the 1930s correctly perceived, the migrants' Jeffersonian vision of America could no longer be sustained. The exodus of Americans off the land, from country to city, from farm to factory, could not be stopped. Nor could the myth that others created out of their ordeal. That myth has become, in a way, the migrants' legacy to America. In the face of Florence Thompson, a nation has come to see its many selves. □