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Director, Liberal Studies Program

Date
HARD TIMES: TENANT FARMERS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in Liberal Studies

By

Tyrone Prather

School for Summer and Continuing Education
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HARD TIMES: TENANT FARMERS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

by Tyrone Prather

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the effects of the Great Depression on the farm community of the American Dust Bowl region and addresses the ways in which rural living were altered in light of the broad social and economic upheaval of the 1930s. A representative presentation of these subjects is achieved through a textual study of such works as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and commentaries by and about Depression-era farm families and by an examination of selected photographs taken by journalist Dorothea Lange of tenant and migrant farmers. Using these sources, this study provides an account of these individuals as they fought to remain on their land or were forced by circumstances of the Depression to migrate west to California. This research details how the farmers dealt with their particular adversities and shows that,
iii
despite the financial and agricultural catastrophes of the
Great Depression, the farmers of the Dust Bowl region
managed to survive and adapt their way of life to a
reordered society. The investigation of the lives of the
farm community during the 1930s in this paper reveals the
strength and determination of these Americans during the
Great Depression and presents the powerful familial and
traits that were part of the Dust Bowl farm community of
the era.
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INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression took hold of America in the 1930s, gripping the entire nation in a vise of fear. For many Americans, it was a fear of loss of material gains of the previous decade; for some, it was fear of loss of status; for others, it was fear of loss of family. The Depression affected Americans in distinct ways depending on their region, type of employment, class, race, and gender, and each group reacted to the Depression in their own distinct way. Yet the overriding factor felt by the individuals in these groups who struggled through the economic downturn of the 1930s was the fear that their way of living—the American way of living—would quite possibly be forever altered as a result of the Great Depression.

The American farmers of the Dust Bowl region of the country (see Figure 1, "The Heartland of the Dust Bowl") faced a distinct sense of urgency and a unique set of difficulties with the onset of the Great Depression. The life of land cultivation led by the farm community had long-represented America itself. Throughout the post-World War I production boom, this way of life had gradually come
under the attack of mechanization and city-oriented commercial activity. With the crash of 1929, the economic and agricultural failures of the Depression brought these issues into the open.

The question this thesis addresses is how did the "Okies" and the tenant farmers of the Plains and the Southwest cope with the hard times of the 1930s? Did these particular Americans succumb to their fears, or did they manage to survive and rebuild their shattered lives? To answer these questions, this text provides an intimate examination of the lives of the Dust Bowl farmers. The effects of the Great Depression on the farmers of the region are best detailed in historical documentation by and about the subjects themselves, in the stirring photographic record of Dorothea Lange, and, most prominently, in John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel, The Grapes of Wrath.

Using The Grapes of Wrath as a textual backdrop, this presentation examines the effects of the Great Depression on the farm community of the Dust Bowl region. Through a pictorial analysis of Dorothea Lange’s Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography and a textual analysis of
narratives and commentary from sources such as Studs Terkel's interviews in *Hard Times*, Lorena Hickok's Depression-era reporting in *One Third of a Nation*, and Paul Bonnifield's *The Dust Bowl*, this paper focuses both on the farm families who stayed in the region and those families who, like the Joads in Steinbeck's tale, migrated west in search of a new beginning.

Chapter 1, "Loss: Home, Land, and Employment," begins with a textual representation of the Dust Bowl farmers and their families as they confront an economic and agricultural ruin similar to that characterized in the opening chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*. References from *Hard Times*, *The Dust Bowl*, and other sources, and the Lange photographs, evoke the feeling of crisis faced by these families as the Depression deepens.

Chapter 2, "Migration: Hunger Along Route 66," continues the analysis, focusing on the fear of mobility, and the physical and mental hardship of life on the road faced by Steinbeck's characters and the real-life subjects of the Depression era. The personal narratives from *One
Third of A Nation, Hard Times, and Lange and Paul Taylor's An American Exodus will be used to highlight, in the migrant families of the Great Depression, the same feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and isolation observed in The Grapes of Wrath.

Chapter 3, "Settlement: A Renewal of Hope at the End of the Road," focuses on the final chapters of The Grapes of Wrath as a counterpoint to the Lange photographs and the selected narratives. The chapter addresses how the farm families' hope for the future, although shaken, was never fully broken despite the upheaval of the Great Depression. Chapter 3 concludes by characterizing this hope—as well as the continued belief in the way of life on the land—in Steinbeck's characters, Lange's photographic subjects, and the individuals of the farm community represented in the works of Hickok, Terkel, Bonnifield, and Robert S. McElvaine. Collectively, these texts offer a sense of reaffirmation for the displaced Dust Bowl farmers as they struggled to start anew in the West.
Figure 1. The Heartland of the Dust Bowl. Reprinted from Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt and the Depression (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), xii.
CHAPTER 1—LOSS: HOME, LAND, AND EMPLOYMENT

All of them were caught in something larger than themselves.

_The Grapes of Wrath_

As a group, the farmers of the American Midwest and Southwest regions found themselves particularly trapped by the events of the 1930s. Married to the land as they were, they were vulnerable to economic, political, and agricultural winds of change that threatened not only their physical existence but their existence as part of the social fabric of American culture. The farmers, many of whom saw their fortunes already in decline despite the economic boom of the 1920s, were further devastated by the Depression, as farm incomes declined by an average of two-thirds between 1929 and 1932 (Hearn 1977, 64). As one Iowa farmer recounted, "In '28, '29, when it looked like we could see a little blue sky again . . . the Thirties Depression hit" (Terkel 1986, 217). For the Midwestern farmers, their blue sky clouded over with dust storms, droughts, pestilence, and loss of wages, a combination that turned many of them into a migratory people, struggling to hold on to family, property, and values. As this chapter
will show, the transformation for this group of Americans, from the relative security of farm life to the uncertainty of abandoning homestead and taking to the open road, was a struggle with loss: of home, of religion, and of identity.

We are introduced to the Joads in The Grapes of Wrath as one such struggling farm family. The Joads, as they are revealed in the beginning chapters of the novel, are confronting the upheaval of their lives in Oklahoma. As the Joad family makes the difficult decision to migrate to California, the religion of the land for the farmer of the Depression era is revealed as a central theme. For example, a tenant farmer represented in one of Steinbeck’s interchapters, speaking about the loss of his land and his employment, suggests that “if a man owns a little property, that property is him, it’s part of him, and it’s like him” (Steinbeck 1976, 48). For farmers, the loss of land was thus personally injurious, and the struggle during the Depression was not just over the loss of a patch of earth, but the loss of part of the self. Similarly, as a Des Moines farmer indicated in defense of picketing farmers, “The country was getting up in arms about taking a man’s
property away from him. It was his livelihood. . . . No, the nearer to the ground you get, the nearer you are to conservative. His land is his life" (Terkel 1986, 215). In the face of agricultural losses and mechanization during the Depression, the farmers of the region like the Joads were forced to confront the loss, as a displaced mother in California in 1936 commented, of "faith in the soil like so many of them back there in Oklahoma" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 139).

That it was an issue of faith suggests once again the religious context that secured the farmer to the land. In The Grapes of Wrath, for example, the farmers lose their property not to an individual, but rather to the Bank: a disembodied entity, a "monster," who "needs—wants—insists—must have" the land (Steinbeck 1976, 41). For those families who had spent generation upon generation harvesting the same land, the idea of such a "monster" coming along to push them off was tantamount to heresy. And when Ma Burnham, daughter of a Confederate soldier, speaking to FSA workers in 1938, likened the environmental catastrophes of the Depression to an ethereal ruin—"I don't
know whether that drought was the Devil’s work or the Lord’s work” (Lange and Taylor 1939, 150)—the tenuous nature of the religion of the land at that very moment becomes evident.

For the farmers and their families, the events of the Depression were not so much a battle with technology, nor were they simply a struggle to cling to an antiquated way of living. The farmers were not ducking reality, despite, for example, Steinbeck’s representative tractor driver’s repetition of how “times are changing” (1976, 48) as he sat in his tractor and munched on his store-bought pie while waiting to move on the squatting tenants. This was reality for the farmers, a reality steeped in America’s vision of itself as a land of plenty, and it was this reality that was under attack during the 1930s. This was the dilemma faced by the Joads and the farmers of the Midwest—how to deal with this loss of land and religion and reality. Should they stay and fight, like the aptly named Muley Graves in The Grapes of Wrath, or should they flee, as more than 200,000 farm people of the Great Plains would do during the decade (Hearn 1977, 64)? The decision to stay
or leave for the farm families, and their path of migration, was as much about identity—reclaiming or reinventing it—as it was about the economics of the era.

The sense of potential loss of identity for the farmers recurs throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as with the real subjects of the 1930s. As long as they had farms, and could work the land, the men were farmers. Without the land, and without employment, the men and their families surrendered this identity and were representatives of the farm community in name only. FSA photographs, such as Lange’s "Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardman County, Texas, 1937" (Figure 2 and Figure 3), capture this loss of identity. For example, Lange’s couplet of photographs of day laborers waiting for work, taken a half hour apart, detail a distinct change. The farmers in the photographs shift from "strong and hard-working" to a moment where the men are now "crouching or sitting—and each of them looks a little grimmer, a little more anxious and vulnerable" (Guimond 1991, 122). Perhaps in the span of thirty minutes, these men realized that they are the work they do, the land they till, the overalls they wear, or perhaps they
knew it all along. More than anything, perhaps it was the understanding that who they were was being taken from them—by drought, by the government, by the “monster”—and this understanding, in addition to straightforward survival, hastened their migratory plans.

Alongside this questioning of self in the face of loss of employment, was the hesitant farmer, anxious to stay and give the soil one more try. For example, as one of Lange’s subjects questioned, “Every dime I’ve got is tied up right here, and if I don’t get it out, I’ve got to drive off and leave it. Where would I go and what would I do?” (Levin and Northrup 1981, 198). This is a sentiment echoed by Grandpa Joad in his last minute refusal to accompany the family to California: the land is his, he is the land, it is his country. The Oklahoma farm is where he belongs, as it is what gives him his identity. When the tractor driver in The Grapes of Wrath notes, “Crop land isn’t for little guys like us anymore” (1976, 48), he may be cruelly accurate, but his pronouncement fails to answer the question on the minds of the Joads and other farmers of the Depression: if not, then what is? Where would they go and
what would they do? The solution for some, as exemplified by Grandpa Joad, was to remain with the land, at any cost. As Casy said, “He was that place, an' he knowed it. . . . He’s jus’ stayin' with the lan’. He couldn’t leave it” (Steinbeck 1976, 187). For Grandpa Joad, his death was perhaps the alternative to spiritual death and the emptiness of not belonging anywhere that he believed he would face as a migrant farmer.

Lange’s FSA photographs also capture the sense of loss and emptiness that permeates the opening chapters of The Grapes of Wrath. This sense of loss is shown, for example, in her photographs of farmhouses, particularly “Abandoned Tenant Cabin in the Mississippi Delta, 1937” (Figure 4) and “Ex-Slave with a Long Memory, Alabama, 1937” (Figure 5). With their rotting wood, caved-in roofs, tattered shingles, and overgrown plots, these farmhouses suggest an emptiness and destruction similar to that which confronts Tom Joad as he arrives home from prison to the empty, abandoned Joad farm. Tom even keeps repeating to Casy that his family must be dead in light of such a ghostly emptiness on the farm. Muley later repeats Tom’s sentiments, as well as the
mood of the scenes of bent and broken homesteads in Lange’s photographs, as he rails against the ruinous arm of the Depression as it “chopped folks in two for their margin a profit. . . . They ain’t alive no more” (Steinbeck 1976, 67).

Tied to the loss of land for the farmers during the Depression was also the loss of property. Just as self-worth was tied to farming the land, so too were feelings of completeness tied to the implements of work and personal belongings so many of the farm families were forced to leave behind. The dilemma for the families facing eviction from their land was centered on how much they could keep. The dilemma for the Joad family and other California-bound families was centered on how much they could carry. On the surface, it was all about property; in truth, it was a matter of how much of themselves they could afford to cast away. A Steinbeck interchapter ends with a plaintive, “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?” Then the decision is made: “No. Leave it. Burn it” (Steinbeck 1976, 114). Similarly, a South Dakota farmer recounted a tale of a destitute neighbor
woman who watched as her items were auctioned off: "She served lunch, and she stood weeping in the windows. 'There goes our last cow...' And the horses. She called 'em by names. It just pretty near broke our hearts" (Terkel 1986, 230). These losses were particularly personal, leaving no tangible past for the farm families. As the Depression worsened for them, a certain madness set in because of these losses, a hardening of the mind and spirit of the type exhibited by Ma Joad. When Tom shows surprise at the change in his mother—from a "high calm and a superhuman understanding" (Steinbeck 1976, 95) to now dreaming and wondering passionately about an open revolt of the "hun’erd thousand of us shoved out" of the farms—she replies, "I never had my house pushed over. I never had my fambly stuck out on the road. I never had to sell—ever‘thing" (Steinbeck 1976, 99). For the tenant farmers and their families, having to sell everything meant starting over, losing the past, and looking, however furtively, toward the future.

Unsettling as it appeared, the decision by the farm families to migrate west meant possibilities for a new
religion with the land, a chance for new identities, and an opportunity to recover what the farmers had lost as they were undone by the events of the 1930s. The new religion was, at least temporarily, migratory in nature, yet it still contained the uncommon belief in the land for the farmer, as well as the sense of pride in his way of living. For example, in chapter six of The Grapes of Wrath, Muley explains to Tom that the Joad family is planning to “buy a car and shove on west where it’s easy livin’” (Steinbeck 1976, 59). As indicated by this language, the Joad family no longer seeks to transfer their stable farm life across the country to California. They are hoping instead to fulfill a dream of “easy livin’.” The dream they wish for is as unreal as the land they have lived on for years is genuine, and offers just as much contrast. It is as if the Joads are deliberately setting themselves up for disappointment to ensure that nothing can compare to the religion of the land from which they may have to depart.

For the Joads and the regional farmers of the 1930s, the Depression ultimately meant the loss of the farm and the loss of security that came with it. The fear of this
loss of security manifested itself, for many farm families, as a fear of mobility. Countering this fear of mobility was the pride that had been instilled in the farm families through their years of working the land and supplying themselves with their life's necessities. It was pride that made Grandpa Joad and Muley Graves fight to stay on their land. It was pride that led a tractored-out Texas farmer in 1938 to conclude, "I can stay off the relief until the first of the year. After that I don't know. I've got to make a move, but I don't know where to" (Lange and Taylor 1939, 82). And it was pride that left many of the farm victims of the Depression to fight to choose between the options: California or Work Progress Administration (WPA). For the tenant farmers who became migrant farmers and headed west along Route 66, as well as the farmers who wished to remain on their land, they faced a dilemma that overwhelmed them. Whether driven by pride, fear, or economics, both those who stayed and those who migrated did so because they realized, much as Muley Graves surmised, "I ain't got no choice in the matter" (Steinbeck 1976, 62).
Figure 2. Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardman County, Texas, 1937. Reprinted from Dorothea Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime* (Millerton: Aperture, 1982), 120.
Figure 3. Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardman County, Texas, 1937. Reprinted from Dorothea Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime* (Millerton: Aperture, 1982), 121.
Figure 5. Ex-Slave with a Long Memory, Alabama, 1937. Reprinted from Dorothea Lange, Photographs of a Lifetime (Millerton: Aperture, 1982), 92.
CHAPTER 2—MIGRATION: HUNGER ALONG ROUTE 66

And now they were weary and frightened because they had gone against a system they did not understand and it had beaten them.

_The Grapes of Wrath_

In the wake of the agricultural and economic damage suffered by the Dust Bowl farm families during the Depression, an estimated population of 300,000 migrated from the Midwest and Southwest to seek fertile California soil, with the majority trekking west between the years 1935 and 1939 (Lange and Taylor 1939, 144). Approximately 70,000 of these migrants came from the worn land of Oklahoma (Levin and Northrup 1981, 23), seeking new farm work, new farm land, and new farm roots. The transplanted farmers made their journeys along several roads; for weeks at a time their residences were simply a number: 80, 34, 40, representing the major routes and interstates that carried the farm families and their few belongings westward to their destinations. The most important conduit for the exodus of the tenant—now migrant—farmer from the Midwest was U.S. Route 66, which snaked down from the Mississippi River and concluded its run at the Pacific coast (Figure 6). According to a study of the period between 1935 and 1940, "farms were vanishing in Oklahoma at the rate of 21
eighteen per day" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 23), and Route 66 was the main road traveled by the dispossessed farm community of the Dust Bowl region.

During the depths of the Depression, Route 66 received a steady parade of vehicles, weighed down by farm families who were themselves weighed down by their fears. Dust Bowl families, much like the Joads, were forced to abandon their homes, hitch their lives to whatever transportation they could afford, and traverse the harsh southwest region, from the eroded landscape of Oklahoma, across the arid emptiness of Texas, and through the mountains of New Mexico and deserts of Arizona, to reach their dream of California. Whether stranded on the road, forced to turn back, or returning home disillusioned after journeying to California, Route 66 became home for many of the dislocated farmers of the Depression. For them, this nomadic existence was fueled by the growing fear that the farm community was no longer, as they had always believed, the backbone of American society. In the face of dwindling funds, resources, and hopes, the combination of fading memories of farm life in Oklahoma and surrounding areas with the precipitous promise of California tormented these
individuals as they stared down the long expanse of dirt and asphalt that paved their new home, Route 66. As the selections in this chapter will emphasize, the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the farmers of the Depression were forced to confront a new set of issues on their migratory path that again brought into question their way of living. They faced indecision regarding giving up their lands, the realization that their vehicles had become their homes, and a physical and mental hunger that gnawed away at the essence of their well-being. As the texts and photographs will show, this hunger along Route 66 ate away at the moral fiber of families like the Joads, and it ate away at ties to family and community, and it ate away at the very spirit of the migrant farmers.

Like the Joad family, the farmers of the Dust Bowl region experienced migration as a movement of "regretful departure" (Ditsky 1989, 142). The migration to parts west was undertaken begrudgingly by the farmers, who, despite minimal chances for survival, hesitated to leave their homes because of the psychological burdens of relocation and their emotional attachment to their land. Within this hesitation were the last vestiges of fight for the tenant
farmers, a fight based on their shared sense of honor and the aforementioned faith in the land. For example, in Paul Bonnifield's The Dust Bowl, a history of the region during the Depression, an Oklahoma survivor of the dust storms opined that the fight was "bound up with the little corner to which we have given our continued and united efforts. To leave voluntarily—to break all these closely knit ties for the sake of a possible greater comfort elsewhere—seems like defaulting on our task" (1979, 187).

The farmers of the region, in the struggle to come to terms with migration, still clung to their belief that their position in American society was as caretaker of the land, even as they were pushed off of it during the Depression. For some, "the Lord had put them there for a reason, and it was their obligation to remain" (Bonnifield 1979, 189). That some of the tenant farmers were made to feel this obligation to the land, despite forces of man and nature, suggests the difficulties that enveloped their ultimate decision to seek their survival elsewhere. Families like the Joads had to weigh the survival and new way of life they believed was palpable in the "han'bill [that] says they need men" (Steinbeck 1976, 243) against
the security of home, where there were "friends, church, community, entertainment, opportunity, and tradition—a friendly culture" (Bonnifield 1979, 189).

Everything that was at stake with the decision to migrate for the tenant farmers was rationalized by the fervently maintained vision of California as Eden. The vision was clung to by the farmers as they set out on Route 66, much like the colorful mantra spoken by Pa Joad: "plenty work, an' ever'thing nice an' green, an' little white houses, an' oranges growin' aroun'" (Steinbeck 1976, 141). When he mentions, almost in passing, that the farmers have faced hard times here, then counters with the confidence that "it'll be all different out there" (Steinbeck 1976, 141), Pa Joad is seeking a salve for the knowledge that the decision to migrate amounts to a quiet acquiescence to a new order in the region. A great deal of the reticence in the Joad family and the farmers of the Depression was the knowledge that "at home was a sense of history" (Bonnifield 1979, 189).

As migrants traveling across the country via Route 66 during the Depression, the Dust Bowl farmers faced a new
and potentially damaging problem: profound changes in the structure of the family. One primary way this occurred was in the evolution of the role of the family vehicle. What had been considered a luxury for the farm community before the Depression became a necessity. The family car—like the "ancient" Hudson owned by the Joads, described as "half-passenger car and half truck, high-sided and clumsy" Steinbeck 1976, 128)—now served in the multiple capacity of transport, shelter, and family member. Like a needy member of an extended family, the family vehicle had to be "fed gasoline and oil to make the next harvest, or to get to and from the fields, and its wheels [had to] be kept shod before the feet of the children" (Lange and Taylor 1939, 145). Repairs had to be made, which cut into the already scarce family funds, and as migrants commented to Lange, "the way the world's on wheels now, you've got to have gas and eats, and we don't get no more" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 52). For the migrant farmers, the shifting emphasis away from the tools of the land that represented solid earth, toward a tool of the open road that represented displacement, further added to the conflict they faced within themselves during the Depression.
The feelings of regretful departure eventually became a grim resignation for the farm families as they ventured west on Route 66. Steinbeck describes this mood, resulting as it did from the gradual understanding that the road west was "the path of a people in flight" from dust, shrinking lands, shrinking ownership, and floods (1976, 151). No longer able to be one with the farmland, the migrant families, like the Joads, became one with the road as it stretched out before them. Communication among family members withered on the road, as "the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression" (Steinbeck 1976, 211). The farm families of the Depression were presented with a new dilemma, as all the energies previously directed toward cultivating the land had to be channeled into the tenuous relationships between occupant and car, and car and road, they now had on Route 66.

In Lange's photographs of the migrant camps and travelers along the southwest U.S. routes, clear evidence can be seen that, quoting Steinbeck, the Dust Bowl residents were "not farm men any more, but migrant men" (1976, 252). The open farmland, the simple, tidy houses, and the neat, orderly fields the farmers once maintained
sharply contrast with the creaky, ramshackle carriers they now inhabit. For example, in "Muskogee, Oklahoma. June 27, 1938" (Figure 7), every available space in and on the car is taken, with people, with gas cans, jugs, spare parts, the family goat, and still more belongings trail in the covered wagon hitched to the back of the car. Similarly, Lange's "Oklahomans on US 99 in the San Joaquin Valley of California. April 16, 1938" (Figure 8), which shows a migrant family's furnishings strapped to the back and roof of their vehicle, captures the resonating uncertainty of migration for these people who now have all their worldly possessions, basically their entire history, within arm's length. Further, Lange's "Family with 7 children. June 27, 1938" (Figure 9) shows the hazards of life on the road during the Depression, as a family works by the side of a dusty road to make an emergency repair to a flat tire, as a wagon full of kids silently watch in relative shade from the hot sun. Still, they pushed on, and in these photographs of migrant farmers can be seen the "wills thrust westward . . . and fears that had once apprehended drought or flood now linger[ing] with anything that might stop the westward crawling" (Steinbeck 1976, 253).
The cost of travel also took its toll on the food budget, as already meager savings had to be divided between maintenance for the car and sustenance for the family. As one migrant farmer noted, "We make just enough for beans, and when we have to buy gas it comes out of the beans" (Lange and Taylor 1939, 141). The families on the road, already worn down by the effects of traveling in cramped vehicles and without access to proper sanitary conditions, saw their health and strength decline as they were forced to live on little or no food. Lange commented on a migrant mother in California: "She said they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that her children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 136). Like the Joads as they made there way west, many families lived on boiled potatoes while dreaming of "side meat," milk, or other dietary staples.

Most important of all, the effects of the migration west led to a struggle to maintain their system of values for the farm families of the Depression. For migrants who had no choice at times but to camp in squalid surroundings,
such as those in Lange's "1937-Squatters Camp on Outskirts of Holtville, Imperial Valley" (Figure 10), the contemptible conditions they lived with had a direct effect on their belief in order. As one camp inspector wrote, "It is horrible that children are reared in an environment as pitiable as that" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 54-55). Evidence of the Joad family feeling the effects of the migratory environment can be seen in several instances. For example, when Grandpa Joad dies, the family must weigh the cost of reporting his death to the authorities against preserving Grandpa's honor: "You got to report a death, an' when you do that, they either take forty dollars for the undertaker or they take him for a pauper" (Steinbeck 1976, 178). The family decides to bury the body themselves, despite what it means for Grandpa's final honor. In this instance, the family has sacrificed both ceremony and legal procedures because of their precarious economic status on the road. Compare this with the sense of law and order evident in the Joad family when Tom returns home from prison earlier in the story. The first question on everyone's lips when he or she greets Tom is a pensive query as to whether he has escaped. The sense of order in the farm community was borne in the land, but without the
land, that sense of order was beginning to erode. It was a
lesson confronted daily in the world of the migrant
farmers, and they either fought or surrendered part of
themselves as time went on. Faced with growing troubles on
their journeys, the farmers grew weary and learned to adapt
their values; as Tom said, "Maybe we got to learn. We
never got booted off no land before, neither" (Steinbeck
1976, 178). The effects of migration, of life on Route 66,
left the farmers of the Depression with, in Casy's words, a
"hurt that makes folks mad to fightin'" (Steinbeck 1976,
163).

As the wagons, cars, trucks, and clad feet filled the
roads west to California in the Depression, the unattached
lives of the migrant farmers would beget a slackening of
the bonds of family, morality, and custom for these people.
Their identities and hopes had no choice but to fluctuate
with the changing landscape, and only the strongest of
families and individuals could hope to hold everything
together on Route 66. The desire, even in the face of the
harshest of realities, was to put down roots like those the
farm families had let go of in the Midwest and Southwest
regions; the reality was the dawning realization that
"folks can't make a livin' farmin'" (Steinbeck 1976, 162). This worry brought about the question, asked in The Grapes of Wrath and by many a Depression era farmer, of What's the country coming to? The effects of the trek along Route 66 west, for a people in flight, would force this question again and again, yet it would also lead, as Steinbeck imparts in an interchapter, to some things "so beautiful that the faith is refined forever" (1976, 156).
Figure 6. US Route 66. Reprinted from John Ditsky, Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (Boston: Hall and Company, 1989), 49.
Figure 10. 1937—Squatters Camp on Outskirts of Holtville, Imperial Valley. Reprinted from Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor, *An American Exodus* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), 117.
CHAPTER 3—SETTLEMENT: A RENEWAL OF HOPE AT THE END OF THE ROAD

We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on-changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on.

_The Grapes of Wrath_

At the conclusion of _The Grapes of Wrath_, the rains have come. The Joad family have reached California, but they have not reached it intact: Grandma and Grandpa have died, Casy has been murdered, Noah and Connie have disappeared, Rose of Sharon has lost her child, and Tom has been forced into hiding. The Joads have come to California and found not the promised land; rather, like so many of the transplanted Dust Bowl farm families of the 1930s, they found animosity, distrust, heartbreak, and despair. Without work, homes, and land, the farmers of the Depression found that many of their problems simply followed them in their migration west. Early in _The Grapes of Wrath_, spectators compared the passing caravan of "Okies," covered with the dirt and grime and dust of Route 66, to "gorillas" and senseless human beings; now, Ma Joad as well fears that migrant living has taken its toll, even on the children, turning Winfield "wild, an' Ruthie too-like animals" (Steinbeck 1976, 503). Having traveled so
far away from home, the lives of the farmers were growing
devoid of community and continuity—exactly as Ma Joad
feared in her intimation to Tom when he decides to go away:
"They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a
boundary to us then. . . . There ain't no fambly now"
(Steinbeck 1976, 503).

The journey undertaken by the characters in
Steinbeck’s tale and the experiences of the Dust Bowl
farmers—both those who migrated and those who chose to stay
behind—have presented themselves as a litany of nearly
insurmountable circumstances. Given these circumstances,
the farm community should have been entirely decimated by
the environmental, economic, and even governmental failures
of the Great Depression. The enormous losses faced by the
majority of the Dust Bowl farmers should have sapped the
desire of even the strongest individuals, much like the
soil of the region had been sapped by drought of its water
and nutrients and value. If mainstream America, the
citizens living in the towns and cities who were less
accustomed to the cyclical nature of the agrarian world,
had trouble surviving through the Great Depression, how
could the farmers be expected to persevere in the face of
such extreme difficulties? Much like the splintering Joad family at the conclusion of The Grapes of Wrath, the farm community appeared to be on a downward spiral toward refugee status in America. As a California squatter commented to FSA workers during the depths of the Depression, “Livin’ a bum’s life soon makes a bum out of you. You get started and you can’t stop” (Levin and Northrup 1981, 55).

However, as Robert Coles suggests in Photographs of a Lifetime, what carried the farmers of the Dust Bowl region through everything they suffered, just as it carried the Joads from Oklahoma to California, was a continuing sense of hope, even as they lost everything and everyone around them. Coles’ essay compares Lange’s subjects and Steinbeck’s novel:

Even the Dust Bowl of the middle 1930s comes off as a powerful giant, wounded, but by no means fatally so. Just as Steinbeck’s characters in The Grapes of Wrath seemed too wise and too good for us to despair completely when contemplating their fate, Lange’s displaced farmers or underpaid and vulnerable fieldhands win our confidence in not only their virtue but their future. (Lange 1982, 42-43)

In The Grapes of Wrath, this confidence in the future Coles writes of would seem hollow without the recurring
instances, throughout the narrative, of the sense of hope maintained by the Joads and similarly displaced families as they migrated west. This hope, clearly, is different from the passive, dreamy reflections of the green, fertile lands of California by Grandpa Joad. That hope was a mere salve, a comfort to ease the family’s fear of migration at the beginning of their journey. Rather, the hope at the end of Steinbeck’s story, and in the words of the survivors of the Dust Bowl, and on the faces of Lange’s displaced farmers, is a true belief that the farm community will overcome their hardships by virtue of their ability to endure said hardships. For example, when Ma Joad suggests to Pa that “ever’thing we do—seems to me is aimed right at goin’ on. Seems that way to me. Even gettin’ hungry—even bein’ sick; some die, but the rest is tougher” (Steinbeck 1976, 542), she believes and understands that the perseverance of the farm families through the Depression has somehow made them stronger.

The stories told in The Grapes of Wrath and in the narratives of the Depression-era farmers are imbued with a spirit of resolution, of holding on, and, according to Hearn in The American Dream in the Great Depression, of
"not getting ahead but the much more modest hope of getting along" [Hearn’s emphasis] (1977, 159). Similar to Coles' view, Hearn suggests that Steinbeck’s fiction is built upon the characters “surviving under difficult circumstances and finding some foundation for continuing the struggle” (1977, 159). The hope for the future suggested by these authors is a hope that is based on self-respect and personal strength. Thus Depression-era survivors, such as the Arkansas legislator who reminded Terkel that “A man can endure a lot if he has hope” (Terkel 1986, 230), shared a similar view with Oscar Heline, an Iowa farmer: “People could now see daylight and hope. It was a whole transformation of attitude” (Terkel 1986, 219). The farmers saw this hope as a renewed belief that now, after having survived everything the Depression had to offer, they might once again take an active role in their future. This particular hope is a dynamic hope, in keeping with the spirit of the land of the Dust Bowl farmers who, according to Paul Bonnifield, “were not defeated, poverty-ridden people without hope. They were builders of tomorrow” (1979, 202). The people Bonnifield writes of are perhaps individuals such as those in Lange’s photograph, “Family Farmstead, Nebraska, 1940” (Figure 11). The farmstead in
Lange’s photograph, instead of getting razed under by a bulldozer, appears to be in the process of a restoration to its past glory as the center of the family, a graphic example of the tangible effect of hope for the future for these individuals.

The hope and strength of the farm community was seen in those who had migrated west, as well. An unflagging hope served to sustain the farm families as they struggled to adapt to a new land that had promised everything yet had delivered virtually nothing. This hope kept them alive, as an 80-year-old woman living in a squatters camp outside Bakersfield noted: “If you lose your pluck, you lose the most there is in you—all you’ve got to live with” (Levin and Northrup 1981, 138). In light of the losses suffered, the migrant farmers in California displayed a great deal of character, “when they arrive in our fertile valleys . . . with a surprising morale in the midst of misery, and a will to work,” as noted in a 1935 Congressional Migratory Commission report (Levin and Northrup 1981, 49). This morale, will, and spirit surprises even the stalwart Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath, as she successfully barters for food on the Hooper ranch: “I’m learnin’ one thing good.
Learnin' it all a time, ever' day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones” (Steinbeck 1976, 483).

In *The Great Depression*, historian Robert McElvaine succinctly reveals a key outcome of the hard times of the 1930s that agrees with Ma Joad's view: “During the Depression America moved toward community-oriented values simply because so many were in need. People became much less willing to 'go it alone' with no thought of the consequences for others. They became less selfish and more compassionate” (1984, 338). For McElvaine and Steinbeck, community and family are at the heart of the survival during the Depression, with the specific emphasis, for Steinbeck, on the migrant farmers from the Dust Bowl region represented in his narrative. Each fragmentation of the family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a cruel and painful blow, especially to Ma Joad, who knows “it ain't good for folks to break up” (Steinbeck 1976, 213). After the selling off of all their possessions, she asks her family, “What we got lef' in the worl'? Nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks” (Steinbeck 1976, 218). In answering her own question, Ma
Joad reinforces the value and importance of the family over everything else. Similarly, one of Lange’s subjects, Ma Burnham of Conroy, Arkansas, was less upset that the family land had been sold and divided because "it raised a family. I’ve done my duty—I feel like I have" (Lange 1982, 101).

The value of the land and other possessions cannot compare to the importance and wholeness of family, as observed in another of Lange’s photographs, "Three Generations of Texans, 1935" (Figure 12). Standing outside what appears to be a migrant’s tent, Lange captures the three rugged men who seem to represent quintessential rural folk. They may seem transitory in their surroundings, but the men nonetheless emphasize what Hearn called the “new sense of communalism and the traditional American belief in personal freedom, equality, and the dignity of the individual” (1977, 197).

Demographics alone cannot tell the whole story of the Dust Bowl farmers during the Great Depression. Life on the land in the region had always been a cycle of highs and lows, of rains and dry spells, of bumper crops and blighted harvests, of mini-depressions that caused a decrease in productive farmland and manpower. As a result of the Great
Depression, through both forced migration and federal policy making, the number of small, family-maintained farms in the Midwest and Southwest regions would decrease, never again to reach the totals realized prior to the 1930s. The end results of the damages of the Great Depression for the Dust Bowl farmers were more than just federal subsidies, displacement, and the reduction, by mechanization, of the family farm to the status of a quaint, old-world relic. These effects are indicative of a failure on the part of the farm community to adapt to a changing world. The farmers did not fail; as the Migratory Commission claimed, "these people are not hand-picked failures. They are the human materials cruelly dislocated by the processes of social erosion. They have been scattered like the dust of their farms, literally blown out" (Levin and Northrup 1981, 49). Out of this extraordinary scattering, however, grew, in the remnants of the Dust Bowl farmers, the renewed and reshaped belief in their own strength as individuals, together with a heightened awareness of the need for family and community in order for every individual to survive.

As an Iowa farmer commented to Terkel: "The hard times put farmers' families closer together. . . . So some good
things came out of this" (1986, 220). The good things that were exhibited within the farm community, the help for the fellow man, the sharing, were couched in the spiritual and actual conversions from the individual and toward the common goals of survival and rebirth. The hard times re-revealed the timeless need for faith in and aid for the fellow man, as emphasized in Rose of Sharon's gesture at the end of The Grapes of Wrath. Her offer of sustenance to the sick stranger symbolized the spirit of giving still present in a farm community decimated by its losses. Rose of Sharon's gesture is Steinbeck's clearest indicator that the farmers will go on, that the cycle of life will not end with the Great Depression. Dorothea Lange's photograph of "Hands, Maynard and Dan Dixon, c. 1930" (Figure 13) captures this cycle eloquently, with a close up of the wrinkled, leathery hands of a farmer resting beneath the small, smooth young hands of his progeny. Further, they both appear in the uniform of the farmer, and Lange's photograph gathers in the newness and crispness of the boy's overalls as they lie against the ribbed fabric of the older man's pants—a continuum of old, young, worn, smooth. Lange's photograph suggests a past, a present, and a future for the Dixons, and by extension, the farm community.
Similar to Steinbeck's conclusion, Lange's photograph hints at survival and strength for these people. Lange's FSA photography, and Steinbeck's epic, combine to tell the story of the Dust Bowl farmers that demographics cannot. They tell the story of triumph over adversity, of those Americans who, in Bonnifield's words, "had the courage and fortitude to endure the stress and strain of the dirty thirties, and to emerge scarred but victorious" (1979, 185).
Figure 11. Family Farmstead, Nebraska, 1940. Reprinted from Dorothea Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime* (Millerton: Aperture, 1982), 95.
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