

The Dust Bowl Migration: Fear, Discrimination, Exclusion

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Shanh, Ben. 1938. Black and white photographic print. The Library of Congress. From: "1931-1938: Life in Hoovervilles,"

<https://mashable.com/2015/09/17/hoovervilles/#.834uZ.jOsq9> (accessed August 14, 2018).

After World War I, the US economy suffered a downsizing period that significantly altered the agricultural industry. For many farmers, economic depression along with other factors – natural disasters, lack of government assistance, corporate overtake – resulted in their national migration. People traveled from the cotton, wheat, and corn belts of the Southwestern region and Central Plains in search of employment. Migrants to California during the 1930s faced discrimination irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. In particular, the migrants from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri found opportunities for financial and social prosperity in California sharply and deliberately limited by locals who viewed newcomers as undesirable.

The decline of the farming occupation started in pre-WWI years as migration from rural to urban life increased due to the Second Industrial Revolution. In 1908, President Roosevelt appointed a Commission on Country Life to investigate the conditions of rural living, and the report found deficiencies that drove people to leave the country without addressing these problems.[1] As a result of the exodus from rural life, farmers' living standard and wage decreased. Fast forward six years to WWI, American farmers enjoyed prosperity as international demands increased prices on raw materials. To keep up with the growing demands of wartime production, farmers bought five times as many new tractors on credit.[2]

After the war, the 1920s peacetime economy devastated crop prices and forced farmers into foreclosure as payments for unpaid tractors and other equipment's piled up. Additionally, international markets in Europe stopped purchasing American exports. The federal government attempted to introduce legislation such as the McNary-Haugen Bill starting in 1920 – federal legislation created to subsidize agriculture to raise domestic prices.[3] As much as the government attempted to help the ongoing decline of the agricultural industry, nothing could have stopped one out of every ten farmers from losing their land.[4]

The Great Depression of the 1930s secured the inevitable flight from the Southwest. Jobs were scarce for all; everyone including farmers began their long stint of unemployment. In this declined state, public relief enrollment quadrupled in numbers. For example, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas relief agencies doled out half of the national average on relief payments in 1934 – 1935, forcing some families to survive off of milk.[5] As small farmers tried to endure on measly welfare relief and bided their time for a chance at a good harvest, many more packed their bags and headed west to California looking for work.

Migration into California generated two different experiences. Those who settled into metropolitan Los Angeles assimilated and garnered no lasting history. On the other hand, those who settled in the familiar rural environment that the Central Valley provided became known as the Okies. At that time, the name carried a negative connotation – implying inferiority and deficiency in education, biology, and culture – once reserved for people of color and immigrants. Several interviewees for the 1980 California Odyssey oral collection stated the term “Okie” indicated a person who was terrible, ignorant, dumb, and dirty.[6] California State University, Bakersfield housed the fifty-seven interviews of migrants to the San Joaquin Valley from 1924 – 1939, irrespective of age, gender, and economic status. The copious amount of

narratives provided glimpses of discrimination that occurred inside various facets of daily lives which included the education system, religious institutions, and local communities.

Many families arrived in the state with very little to no money and insecurities about housing, food, and employment. According to California welfare requirements, public relief laid a year away for most Okies. When they ran out of resources, they gratefully accepted low paying jobs. Some Okies accepted jobs at twenty cents per hour during a time when the usual wage was twenty-five cents per hour.[7] While employers benefitted by paying lower wages to Okies, the job market intensified due to lack of jobs within an uncertain economy. Locals and laborers – Mexicans and Filipinos – griped at the Okies for devaluing their labor as well as taking their jobs. As a result, anti-Okies sentiment revolved around three points: newcomers took away jobs, devalued wage, and abused locals' tax contributions by receiving public relief.

With over 300,000 migrants receiving relief, many of the counties felt the strain of accommodating such a large group of newcomers.[8] Okies targeted specific counties that let them be closer to farms for work; they pushed the limitations of the local governments' budgets. These counties were not prepared to handle the new population that was dissimilar to the customary migrant laborers who settled down temporarily for the harvest but followed the crop cycle. As such, counties' budgets swelled as more public schools received additional children, and hospitals received a surplus of patients. Rising financial burdens led many to view the new settlers as a group of people culturally different from natives.

Because the majority of Okies settled in the Valleys in the hope of continuing their farming occupation, San Joaquin Valley counties' populations increased 40 percent from 1935-1940, surpassing Los Angeles' record as the fastest growing county in the 1920s.[9] The concentration of Okies proved to be a threat for specific interest groups like the farm bloc who viewed the new group's voting power as being of differing interests from their own. Others viewed the Okie's voting clout as a tool to be honed with organized labor. Unfortunately, the attempt to organize a group of people rooted in conservatism and anti-radicalism did not bear fruit. Threats to the farmers' business interests, cultural differences, and the additional tax burden on current taxpayers generated adverse actions against Okies at the individual, community, and organizational levels.

Toni Alexander stated in "Citizenship Contested: The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience in California's San Joaquin Valley," that new settlers represented

the “unknown and socially unstable” because they did not own homes or pay taxes.[10] Work and living conditions were unstable factors as many resided in “Hooverville” – shack towns located near ditches. Some private growers or federal work camps accommodated certain Okies while others lived in these shack towns that contained no filtered water, showers, or outhouses. Due to unsanitary living conditions, children developed fevers, dysentery, and diseases such as typhoid. Madera County’s health director blamed unsanitary conditions on the Okie’s genetic disposition to live in “squalor for generations.”[11] Children missed school to work with their families, putting them academically behind their peers.[12] As such, children of the Okies became living proof that the new settlers were stupid by disposition.

Similar feelings of anti-Okie sentiments led to discriminatory practices within local establishments. Many Okies looked for additional work but were denied employment to non-agrarian work; one local said, “Sorry, but we cannot do a thing for you now.”[13] According to a Modesto grocery store owner, he believed Okies were financially irresponsible, so he did not extend store credit to them.[14] Ethel Belezzuoli witnessed her father’s mistreatment when a woman with two empty homes forbid him from renting a home.[15] More discriminatory acts occurred at religious and educational institutions. Okies sought to join churches, but ministers banned them. For example, one Modesto minister excluded members that “can’t stick to the principles.”[16] In this case, Okies who did not dress in their Sunday’s church clothes prompting their dismissal from church service. At school, Okie children experienced watered down prejudice from their peers and even backlash from individual teachers. Locals discouraged their children from building relationships with Okie children and taught them the stigma that associated the word Okie. Byrd Morgan, a participant in the California Odyssey, believed that children learned the hate from their parents.[17] Even teachers resented teaching Okie children in their classrooms. Because of the Okie’s tumultuous work schedule, children never stayed long in school. Many fell behind their peers, leaving teachers to spend additional time on children they knew were only visiting the classrooms.

From 1936-1938, state-sanctioned exclusionary practices aimed at Okies were prevalent in various counties and at elections. Santa Barbara County’s Police Chief Davis in 1936 ordered one hundred sheriffs to block incoming migrants at sixteen points of entry.[18] In February 1938, the State Relief Administration Director Harold Pomeroy ordered the riverbank encampments wash out – exasperating the horrendous living conditions of the Okies. News outlets forced the state relief program to expand their services to provide more work camps and relief assistance, but Pomeroy only offered limited assistance

if the Okies agreed to use state relief to fund their trip back home.[19] Other instances of systemic discrimination occurred at the voting booth during the 1938 gubernatorial election and the 1939 special election campaign. Locals and government workers sought to reinforce their political agenda by disenfranchising Okies. Some county clerks refused to register Okies who lived in work camps on account of their semi-permanent residences. People also acted as “volunteer challengers” who scanned Okies’ records for mistakes on their voter’s registration.[20] This measure could not compare to the California Citizens Association.

In June 1938, the committee, formerly known as the Committee of Sixty from Kern County, reorganized and appealed to the federal government to stop aiding Okies or any other out-of-state migrant. Their plan of action included a petition addressed to Congress that had over 100,000 signatures. The association’s secretary McManus went on a smearing campaign including a speaking tour, making public speeches, and going on the radio.[21] As officials attempted to limit movement and activities, they revived an old law that specifically targeted the unemployed. In December 1939, Tulare and Kings counties invoked the 1933 Indigent Act that made it illegal to transport indigents across state lines. In the case of Fred Edwards, he was arrested and penalized with a six-month suspended sentence for driving his brother-in-law (a single unemployed man) to California.[22]

The myth regarding the Dust Bowl continued to explain the Okie’s migration from Southwest US. For these same farmers, their daily surroundings worsened as the disparity between urban and rural living conditions increased due to the Second Industrial Revolution before WWI. Due to wartime overproduction, farmland suffered from over farming, and natural disasters exacerbated the condition. The main factors for migration involved the changing agricultural industry during the Great Depression era – the small farms turned into an unprofitable entity, subjecting itself to lowered crop prices and competition from large agricultural corporations. For many, the ideal location was California where the lure of work called their names; they arrived in droves to the Central Valleys (and Sacramento Valley) in the 1930s. The overwhelming numbers of newcomers settling into ditch bank camps disturbed the locals and state authorities.

Consequently, some newcomers welcomed state relief and additional public assistance such as relief payments and school for their children. The burgeoning relief roll took a toll on the state’s budget and on the patience of many locals who spewed hatred and disgust at the newcomers. For the newcomers, exclusion and discrimination were unheard of in their rural hometowns, but they bided their time and worked any job to survive. The start

of WWII swept away any remnants of the Depression – opening jobs and creating economic prosperity – including the Okies’ tarnished reputation.

Endnotes

1. David Kennedy, *Freedom from fear: The American people in Depression and war, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.
2. David Kennedy, *Freedom from fear*, 17.
3. Kennedy, 17.
4. Niall A. Palmer, *The Twenties in America: Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 51)
5. James N. Gregory and UPSO, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 14-15.
6. Ethel Belezzuoli, interview by Stacey Jagels, *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley* (CSU Bakersfield, April 10, 1981).; Martha Jackson, interview by Stacey Jagels, *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley* (CSU Bakersfield, March 10, 1981).
7. Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, 42.
8. J. A. Fisher, *Historical Study of the Migrant in California*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (1945): 75.; Stein, 84.
9. Stein, 46.
10. Toni Alexander, “Citizenship Contested: The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience in California’s San Joaquin Valley,” *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 1 (2011): 200.
11. Stein, 49.
12. Kennedy, 5-6.
13. Stein, 63.

14. Lillian Creisler, *Little Oklahoma: A Study of the Social and Economic Adjustment of Refugees in the Beard Tract, Modesto, Stanislaus County, California* (1940), 71-72.
15. Belezuoli, *California Odyssey*, 10.
16. Lillian Creisler, *Little Oklahoma*, 60.
17. Byrd Morgan, interview by Stacey Jagels, *California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley* (CSU Bakersfield, May 2, 1981), 23.
18. James N. Gregory and UPSO, *American Exodus*, 96.
19. Stein, 86.
20. Stein, 96.
21. Stein, 97-99.
22. Stein, 130.

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