

READING 3: THE GREAT MIGRATION WEST

The Great Depression was a period in American history that saw the collapse of the U.S. economy, a rapid closure of factories, and a lack of goods and food production, all resulting in widespread hardships for virtually all Americans. Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929, which wiped out millions of dollars in investments, the United States entered an era marked by extreme poverty, joblessness, and homelessness.

One segment of the American economy that was badly affected by the Great Depression was farming. Farmers commonly borrowed money from banks for seed and equipment to bring in crops. Farmers used the profits from their crops once they were sold at market to repay these loans. With so many people out of work nationwide, people spent less money, crop and food prices fell, and farmers could not repay their loans. Many farmers lost their farms when banks asked that these loans be repaid.

Soil conservation and crop rotation were not well-known practices for the 1930s farmer. Land that was once suitable for crops “played out” or lost its nutrients and was no longer able to yield a good harvest. To make matters worse, the farms in the Great Plains experienced a seven-year drought beginning in 1931, followed by turbulent, dust-filled winds in 1932. Witnesses of these dust storms said that the dust was so thick that day turned to night. This event and the region collectively became known as the “Dust Bowl.” The events of the Dust Bowl forced farming families to leave their worn-out or bankrupted farms and find new agricultural work elsewhere. “Okies” and “Arkies” were derogatory terms used to describe the families who headed west from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California and Arizona to find work.

It is estimated that by 1937, there were 250,000 to 300,000 migrant laborers traveling throughout the United States and working temporarily on farms. California became an ideal location for migrant workers because of the state’s mild climate, long growing season, and diversity of crops. Workers were plenty, but crop production was not. Competition for jobs made wages low, because farm owners or overseers could decide who worked and who did not. An example of a migrant wage in California in 1933 was twelve cents per hour. Migrants worked for these low wages, and in order to survive, entire families often worked in the fields from sunup to sundown.

To maintain steady work, migrant workers traveled the state as different crops were harvested. When work could be found on a farm, migrants would set up tent cities nearby—often without running water, sanitation facilities, or electricity. In 1937, President Roosevelt created the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to aid farmers and migrant workers. The FSA created migrant camps that had running water and sturdier living quarters. Some children of migrant workers even received temporary schooling in these FSA camps. FSA administrators kept the camps open, but migrant workers themselves determined the rules for living in the camps through camp councils.

Source:

Fanslow, R. A. (1998, April 6). *The migrant experience. Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin migrant worker collection, 1940 to 1941.* Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/todd-and-sonkin-migrant-workers-from-1940-to-1941/articles-and-essays/the-migrant-experience/>