

I Ain't Got No Home In This World Anymore
Why the Joads Left Oklahoma and What They Found in California
by Jerry James

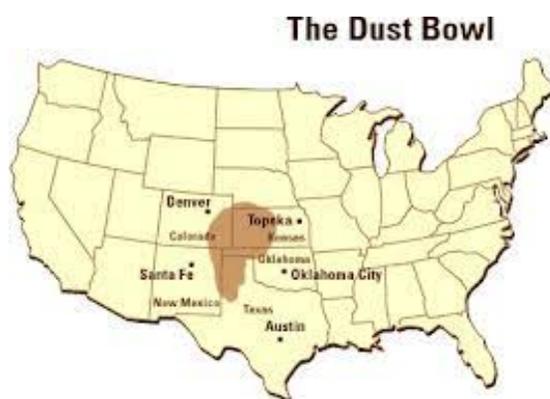
Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed.
— Herman Melville



The Dust Bowl. The Depression. We see them together, intermixed with grainy, black-and-white images from an old movie or a Ken Burns documentary, with a soundtrack of Woody Guthrie songs. They ride along with John Steinbeck's Joad family on its journey from Oklahoma to California. Yet despite these events being the worst manmade disasters in American history, they actually had little direct impact on the Joads' decision to immigrate.

THE DUST BOWL

In 1807, the leader of a US Army expedition called the Great Plains "uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for subsistence." But the short grass that grew on those plains sent its roots five feet into the



ground. The sod it formed withstood drought and weather extremes, ecologically perfect for herds of buffalo. Native Americans thrived there.

When the buffalo was gone, the cattlemen took over. They called it the Beef Bonanza, until a series of severe winters in the 1880s killed off their herds. Some saw an opportunity. “Real estate syndicates began buying big ranches for \$5 an acre and carving them up into smaller parcels for sale at three times the price,” Dayton Duncan wrote.

Thus came the small farmers, moving from a more humid climate to a place that averaged less than twenty inches of rain a year. Shortly after Indian Territory was legally eliminated with the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1890, there was a six-year drought.

The farmers of the Southern Plains paid little heed, believing that “rain follows the plow.” In what would become the Dust Bowl, they grew wheat. Further east, around the Joad farm near Sallisaw, the crop was cotton. But whatever the crop, most of these farms were sized to Eastern standards, and so were too small for long-term success. Rather, they desperately hung on, hoping that “next year” would be better.

And in 1914, “next year” came: the farmers were saved by World War I. With Russian wheat blockaded by the Germans, agriculture mobilized to feed the Allies at \$2 a bushel, twice the former price. And the rains came, and more land went under the plow, and everyone made money. Even when the price went back to \$1 after the war, a farmer could still do well, if he owned a tractor. During the last five years of the 1920s more than five million acres, an area the size of New Hampshire, was bought up and plowed under.

By 1930, the price of wheat had dropped to 70¢ a bushel. So the farmers plowed up another half-million acres in order to keep their incomes stable. Then came the drought, and after it the wind, and then the dust.

The Dust Bowl was named by an AP reporter in 1936. That same year, Pare Lorentz released his documentary, *The Plow That Broke The Plains*. The title was a bitter pun.

THE JOADS

All we know of the Joad family’s past is that Grampa’s grampa fought in the Revolution. We can infer that Grampa, scorning a dirt-poor

sharecropper’s life, migrated west, eventually owning a cotton farm. And that Pa Joad lost the farm, doubtless when cotton prices dropped from 17¢ a pound in 1925 to 9¢ in 1926 to 5¢ in 1930. The Joads then joined the 61% of Oklahoma cotton farmers who by 1930 had become tenants on the land they once owned.

The land companies had a clear vision, which is always easier when it doesn’t factor in people. Their tenants weren’t producing enough cotton, because cotton had depleted the soil. The only sound economic policy, therefore, was to plow up every square inch of the land in order to extract every last cent of its value. Not only would this return to cultivation the land on which tenants had made their homes, it would also “tractor off” the tenants, thereby eliminating any need to split the company’s income. In a bitter irony, this large-scale, mechanized farming would prove to be the only way agriculture was economically feasible in the area.

And because the region was over-reliant on agriculture, there were no other local jobs the evicted tenants might take from which they could bad-mouth the land companies. In order to live, they were going to have to self-deport.

These problems had all been present during the “prosperous” 1920s. A 1940 Oklahoma state commission’s report on the migration never mentions the Depression. For the Joads, the Depression was simply the final straw, the one that broke their backs.

Steinbeck was not conventionally religious, but it is interesting to note that as his Joads prepare for their exodus (which will feature a desert crossing), they take with them a man who says he isn’t a preacher, just somebody who’s been out wandering in the wilderness, whence he has returned with a doctrine akin to New England Transcendentalism and quoting William Blake. This man, whose initials are JC, will later sacrifice himself. And at the saga’s end, following a flood straight out of Genesis and in the midst of death, a Joad will perform an act of grace so amazing that it heralds a near-rebirth—in a barn, yet.

Joad is an English name, but the family’s behavior marks them as Scots-Irish, the cheap-

labor backbone of this country since Jamestown. They are quick to anger, resistant to authority and devoted to family. White Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent, the Joads actually live Rabbi Hillel's great commandment, as reiterated by Jesus of Nazareth: Love thy neighbor as thyself. (Ma Joad's first action is to invite two supposed strangers to share the family's meal.) In California, they will meet several self-professed Christians who observe this rule only in its breach.



CALIFORNIA

Since the days of the Gold Rush, California had depended on “westerling”— migration from the rest of the country. Its rank among the states jumped from 21st in 1900 to 8th in 1920. And in the 1920s, almost two million more people moved there, increasing the population by an astonishing 66%.

These immigrants were the Right Kind, exemplified by retired accountants who settled in Los Angeles. Many of the million immigrants who arrived in the following decade were not the Right Kind. And despite the fact that only a third of these were from Oklahoma, Texas and neighboring states, with just 16,000 from the Dust Bowl itself, they were all called “Okies,” a term first given wide distribution by a news story of the mid-1930s. The writer saw the OK on the license plates and used the term as a descriptive. Soon, it would become a pejorative.

The Okies didn't go to Los Angeles, nor to any other urban area. They were farm people, not city folk, so they turned north off Route 66 and found a kind of agriculture vastly different from any they had known.

Through various forms of chicanery dating from California statehood (1850), land ownership in the Great Central and Imperial Valleys had long been concentrated in a very few hands. In collaboration with the legislature, millions of dollars for irrigation had magically appeared, and the Farm Bureau Federation and its successor, the Associated Farmers of California (AFC), ruled unchallenged over the state's major agricultural regions. Years before the land company that evicted the Joads existed, the AFC had perfected the Factory Farm.

The Factory Farm needed labor, of course, but the labor had to be concentrated in the short period of time it took to harvest each crop. After trying and discarding Chinese, Hindus and Japanese workers, the AFC had settled on Mexicans (including Mexican-Americans). The Mexicans would mysteriously show up just as the crop was ready for picking, pick it and— best of all—disappear until the next year. In reality, this meant that the workers would migrate from crop to crop as each ripened, then return to Los Angeles or other “Mexican Towns” around larger cities and spend the rest of the year on relief.

When the Okies arrived, the AFC's first question was, Would they work for Mexican wages? They would—and for less—because unlike the Mexicans, they had nowhere else to go. Also, until one had lived in California for a year, one could not apply for relief. The AFC was delighted.

The Okies were not. They were White Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent, like their employers. Surely the privilege of their skin would afford them some respect. The AFC laughed. If you worked for Mexican wages, you would be treated like a Mexican. Or worse, because any white man who would work for Mexican wages was obviously not really white, but a member of a subspecies—the Okie.

In contemporary accounts, Walter J. Stein observed in 1973, “The Okie was

simultaneously accused of ‘shiftlessness’ and lack of ambition and of ‘stealing jobs’ from Native Californians.” And now, the AFC fumed, the Farm Security Administration was building camps for them, as if they were human beings. Unfortunately for the Okies, the FSA camps had to stay put, while the crops moved on.

And yet, the Okies persisted. They disdained the label “migrant,” settling down in decrepit “Little Oklahomas” on the edges of towns large and small. Adults would follow the crops; children would go to school. And the Okies would vote. For Democrats. In a state that had been Republican since 1850, this was the thing most feared.

The Okies began arriving in the early 1930s, and their immigration reached a peak in 1935. “By 1937,” wrote Stein, “the Okies had become a local embarrassment, by 1938 a state concern, and by 1939, with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a national scandal.”



THE GRAPES OF WRATH

In 1936, the San Francisco *News* hired John Steinbeck to write a series of seven articles about the conditions in which the Okies lived. Guided by Tom Collins, an FSA camp manager, Steinbeck spent several weeks researching the articles that would appear that October.

Afterwards, Steinbeck couldn’t shake his experiences, realizing he had the makings of a “big book.” But how to write it? Sustained by his wife Carol through several false starts, he finally wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in 100 working days, finishing on October 31, 1938. It was published

on March 14, 1939 with the dedication, “To Carol, who willed this book; To Tom, who lived it.”

The novel landed in California with the delicacy of a Molotov cocktail. Banned, burned, favorably viewed by both Eleanor Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover, it was a contemporary *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. A year later, John Ford’s iconic film version was released. But the Saga of the Okies was already winding down, driven once again by economics.

In 1938, the AFC and its allies in Sacramento had been working hard to stigmatize the Okies as a migrant menace, undercutting wages and bankrupting the state. Deportation was the only solution. This unconstitutional nonsense was first stymied by the unwanted attention drawn by Steinbeck’s novel, then finally solved—as were so many of the problems of the Depression—by the approach of war. The Okies left the fields and got better jobs in the California defense industry

By the spring of 1941, farm labor was scarce. So scarce, in fact, that in 1942 and 1943, the FSA had to *import* Okies from Missouri and Arkansas to work the fields. “Growers met the arrivals with fanfare and jubilation,” Steinbeck deadpanned.

By the time the war ended, the newly-prosperous Okies had become true Californians, by which is meant they loudly protested any newer immigrants. The Factory Farms went back to using Mexicans, and no more would be heard of the migrant worker until the rise of Dolores Huerta.

And in the former Dust Bowl, modern well diggers discovered the Oglalla aquifer. Half of it has since been depleted in order to grow hog feed. In perhaps twenty years, it will be gone. Environmental historian Donald Worster warns, “We know that it’s possible to turn from savannah to a stark desert [the Sahara], and there’s no reason to think it can’t happen in the middle of North America.”

When the next Dust Bowl comes, who will be the New Joads?

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.