

"The Dust Bowl Migration" Poverty Stories, Race Stories

By James N. Gregory

The Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s plays an important and complicated role in the way Americans talk about the history of poverty and public policy in their country. For almost seventy years the story of white families from Oklahoma and neighboring states making their way to California in the midst of the Great Depression has been kept alive by journalists and filmmakers, college teachers and museum curators, songwriters and novelists, and of course historians. Although it was but one episode out of many struggles with poverty during the 1930s, the Dust Bowl migration became something of synecdoche, the single most common image that later generations would use to memorialize the hardships of that decade. The continuing fascination with the Dust Bowl saga also has something to do with the way race and poverty have interacted over the generations since the 1930s. Here is one of the last great stories depicting white Americans as victims of severe poverty and social prejudice. It is a story that many Americans have needed to tell, for many different reasons.

The story begins in the summer of 1935. That is when the economist Paul Taylor realized that something new was happening in California's agricultural areas, particularly the wondrously productive San Joaquin Valley which supplied two dozen different kinds of fruits and vegetables to the nation's grocery stores and the highest quality cotton fiber to its textile mills. The workers who picked those crops had been mostly Mexicans, Filipinos, and single white males before the Depression. Now Taylor, an expert on farm labor issues, noticed more and more whites looking for harvest labor jobs, many of them traveling as families, a lot of them with license plates from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas.

Those states had suffered greatly in the early 1930s, both from escalating joblessness and a severe drought that for several years denied much of the Great Plains sufficient rain to produce its usual complement of wheat and cotton. The drought had also produced a spectacular ecological disaster. Wind driven dust storms had arisen in a broad swath of counties in western Kansas and the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles on several occasions between 1933 and 1935, each time filling the air with millions of tons of finely plowed top soil and blackening skies for a thousand miles as the clouds moved east. The dust storms brought press attention and later government intervention to the affected area, soon known as the "Dust Bowl."

Paul Taylor was thinking about drought and dust as he pounded out an article for *Survey Graphic* magazine. The article profiled the families from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas showing up in large numbers in the fields of California. They came with great hope, like the westward moving pioneers of old, he wrote, but they were heading into disappointment. A shortage of work awaited them and low wages for what was available. Housing would be a tent camp or a shack thrown together of scraps. Taylor worried about their future even as he attached to them a label that he knew would bring sympathy. He called them "refugees", refugees from "dust, drought, and protracted depression." The journalists who read his article and rushed into the San Joaquin Valley to see and write more about the newcomers substituted the more evocative label "Dust Bowl refugees," assuming that the terms and locations were equivalent. In fact they were not. The actual Dust Bowl counties were sparsely populated and contributed few refugees to the migration stream that was pouring into California. Most of those who did migrate came from eastern sections of Oklahoma, Texas, and nearby Arkansas and Missouri which knew drought and depression but little dust.

Historians have since clarified some of the dimensions of the misnamed migration. Numbers are elusive but it is safe to say that 300-400,000 Oklahomans, Texans, Arkansans, and Missourians moved to California and settled there during the 1930s. This would have been a significant population transfer in any

era but was particularly momentous in the context of the depression when internal migration rates for other parts of the country were low and when high unemployment made any kind of relocation risky.

Distinctive too were certain demographic features of the migrant population. Whites comprised roughly 95 percent of those moving. African Americans were well represented in the populations of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas and some left during the 1930s, but usually for the cities of the North. It was not until World War II that large numbers of African Americans would move to the West Coast. Among the migrating whites gender was pretty evenly balanced and the number of families quite large. A small family headed by young adults was the most common profile.

Many of the people moving west were not farm folk. At least half had been living in a town or city and doing some kind of blue-collar or less frequently white-collar work before unemployment or stories of California opportunities encouraged them to pack the car and hit the road. Most of these migrants headed for the cities of California where they usually found jobs and a decent standard of living in fairly short order. They were the overlooked half of the illnamed Dust Bowl migration; their urban stories lost in the concern and fascination that centered on the relocating farm families who had chosen to look for work in the agricultural valleys of California.

John Steinbeck and Dorothea Lange created the most memorable portraits of what some families faced in those areas. Lange toured farm labor camps in the spring of 1936, snapping photographs of ragged children and worried parents living in tents and waiting for work. Some were completely out of funds and food. Her most famous picture, "migrant mother," showed a gaunt young widow holding her three daughters, her careworn face suggesting that hope was running out. John Steinbeck wrote a set of newspaper articles that year depicting in similar terms the desperate plight of thousands. Then he sat down to write the book that became, three years later, *The Grapes of Wrath*. His 1939 fictional account of the Joad family, who lose their Oklahoma farm to dust and avaricious bankers and then set out for the California promised land only to find there even greater challenges and hardships, became an instant classic, the publishing phenomena of the decade. When Hollywood followed up with an equally brilliant movie directed by John Ford, the memory of the Dust Bowl migration was secure. These works of art--by Steinbeck , Ford, Lange, and others--gave the Joads and their kind a place in American history that would last indefinitely.

Fortunately the poverty that drew the artists was much less permanent. Even as *The Grapes of Wrath* was flying off bookshelves in 1939, conditions were beginning to improve in rural California thanks first to federal aid programs and then to the World War II defense boom that pulled many of the migrants out of the fields and raised wages for those remaining. Still, incomes for many former Oklahomans, Arkansans, and Texans would remain low for some time. As late as the 1970s poverty experts in the San Joaquin Valley talked about "Okies" as a disadvantaged population and could point to poverty and welfare use rates that exceeded norms for other whites. But the bigger story was the climb up from poverty that most families experienced in the decades after the Depression. Taking advantage of the wide open job markets for white male workers that characterized the war and post war eras, the Dust Bowl migrants and their children made steady, if unspectacular, progress up the economic ladder.

If the poverty associated with the Dust Bowl migration was transitory, the impact on public policy and on popular understandings of poverty was more lasting. This high-profile episode with its sympathetic white victims and its powerful storytellers helped reshape the terrain of poverty-related policymaking in various ways, especially around the issues of interstate migration and farm labor. Poor people crossing state lines would have a clear set of rights in the aftermath of the Dust Bowl migration, and the plight of farm workers would be more visible even as the Joads left the fields to families with darker skins and different accents.

Until 1941 states felt free to restrict interstate mobility, focusing that power, when they used it, on the poor. To discourage indigents from crossing state lines, many states maintained tough vagrancy laws and required many years of residence of those applying for public assistance. California had been

especially hostile to poor newcomers. In 1936, the Los Angeles police department established a border patrol, dubbed the "Bum Blockade," at major road and rail crossings for the purpose of turning back would-be visitors who lacked obvious means of support. Withdrawn in the face of threatened law suits, this border control effort was followed by a less dramatic but more serious assault on the right of interstate mobility. California's Indigent Act, passed in 1933, made it a crime to bring indigent persons into the state. In 1939 the district attorneys of several of the counties most affected by the Dust Bowl influx began using the law in a very public manner. More than two dozen people were indicted, tried, and convicted. Their crime: helping their relatives move to California from Oklahoma and nearby states. The prosecutions were challenged by the ACLU which pushed the issue all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1941 the court issued a landmark decision (*Edwards v. California*) ruling that states had no right to restrict interstate migration by poor people or any other Americans.

Farm labor systems were not as easily changed, but there too the Dust Bowl migration left a lasting legacy, helping to bring to public attention and into the policy arena the unique vulnerabilities of a sector of the labor force that most Americans had previously ignored. Publicity was the major contribution. The plight of white families in the fields and labor camps of California in the late 1930s aroused media attention on an unprecedented scale and forced public officials and urban consumers to contemplate, often for the first time, the systems of labor operating in rural areas. Farm employers had long enjoyed exemption from many of the customs, laws, and labor unions that protected most urban workers, and farm laborers as a result suffered forms of exploitation and at times degrees of poverty that exceeded urban experience.

The attention did facilitate some policy development. The federal government created some modest services for farm workers during the 1930s: a camp program in California and Arizona run by the Farm Security Administration, a health service, and an emergency relief program. These were dismantled in the 1940s at the insistence of growers but some of these services did not entirely disappear. County authorities took over the camps and began to provide certain health and education services to the farm labor families. These were insufficient but not completely insignificant. Moreover states not affected by the Dust Bowl migration also paid more attention to farm workers in the decades following *The Grapes of Wrath*. However modest the programs, the plight of rural workers could no longer be completely ignored.

In part that was because the news media had been retrained by the dramatic stories that came out of California in the 1930s. In the decades to come print journalists and television journalists would return again and again to the subject of farm worker poverty, finding in it a repeated source of compassion and outrage that pretty much followed the media formulas of the Dust Bowl era. That was certainly true of the CBS documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, which shocked television viewers in 1960. Narrated by Edward R. Murrow and focusing on migratory farm workers who were by then mostly Mexican American in the West and African American in the East, the program worked with images and sympathies that Dorothea Lange and John Steinbeck had helped to create.

Race has always been central to the story of the Dust Bowl migration. Paul Taylor knew in 1935 when he wrote his first article about the "drought refugees" that their white skins and Anglo-Saxon names could win attention and sympathy that would not so readily attach to the Mexican and Asian farm workers who normally struggled in the valleys of California. Steinbeck too used the paradox, emphasizing in a dozen ways that Americans of their pedigree were not supposed to experience what the Joads experienced.

As the Dust Bowl saga worked its way into history, race has become still more important. The continuing fascination with this subject over the decades has had as much to do with racial politics as with the events themselves. As poverty became more and more racialized, and as struggles over social welfare programs increasingly contentious, the Dust Bowl migration took on new meanings and new functions. By the 1970s an aging generation of former migrants and their upwardly mobile offspring were ready to memorialize the experiences of the 1930s and another set of storytellers were ready to help. A new round of journalism, novels, history books, TV documentaries, and country music songs has been the result, much of it fed by a late 20th century need for stories of poverty, hardship, and eventual triumph where the victims are white. These latter-day Dust Bowl accounts have sometimes promoted conservative agendas, as in the collection of songs that Merle Haggard produced in the late 1960s and 1970s celebrating the struggles of

his parents and implying that the poverty of their generation was more noble than the poverty of contemporary America. Unwilling to acknowledge kinship with the Mexican-Americans who replaced them in the fields or admit the importance of government assistance in Dust Bowl survival strategies, some former migrants constructed self histories that added to racial distances. But others among the new storytellers see the meanings differently. In keeping alive the Dust Bowl migration saga, they remind America that poverty has had many faces, that disparaging the victims is senseless and cruel, and that the poor and helpless of one era will hopefully escape that fate in the next.

Source:

<http://faculty.washington.edu/gregoryj/dust%20bowl%20migration.htm>