Name: ____________________

Teacher: ____________________

Class: ____________________

Date: ____________________

The Migrant Experience

Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops. This caused Great Plains farmers to increase their productivity by using machines and cultivating more land on their farm. This increase in farming activity required an increase in spending on machines and employees that caused many farmers to become financially overextended. The stock market crash in 1929 only served to worsen this already unstable economic situation. Many independent farmers lost their farms when banks came to collect on their notes, while tenant farmers (who worked on farms in exchange for rent or pay) were turned out when economic pressure was applied on large landholders. The attempts of these displaced agricultural workers to find other work were met with frustration due to a 30 percent unemployment rate.

A giant dust storm blacks out the sky of Goodwell, Oklahoma

At the same time, the increase in farming activity placed greater strain on the land. As the natural grasslands of the southern Great Plains were replaced with cultivated fields, the rich soil lost its ability to retain moisture and nutrients and began to erode. Soil conservation practices were not widely employed by farmers during this era, so when a seven-year drought began in 1931, followed by the coming of dust storms in 1932, many of the farms literally dried up and blew away creating what became known as the "Dust Bowl." Driven by the Great Depression, drought, and dust storms, thousands of farmers packed up their families and made the difficult journey to California where they hoped to find work.

Why did so many of the refugees pin their hopes for a better life on California? One reason was that the state's mild climate allowed for a long growing season and a diversity of crops with staggered planting and harvesting cycles. For people whose lives had revolved around farming, this seemed like an ideal place to look for work. Popular songs and stories, circulating in oral tradition for decades, exaggerated these attributes, depicting California as an authentic promised land. In addition, flyers advertising a need for farm workers in the Southwest were distributed in areas hard hit by unemployment. Finally, the country's major east-west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 -- also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," "The Main Street of America," and "Will Rogers Highway" -- encouraged the westward flight of the migrants. A trip of such length was not undertaken lightly in this pre-interstate era, and Highway 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to an area just south of the Central Valley of California.

Homeless Family Walking Along a Road During the Great Depression

Oklahoma dust bowl refugees in San Fernando, California

Although the Dust Bowl included many Great Plains states, the migrants were generically known as "Okies," referring to the approximately 20 percent who were from Oklahoma. Many migrants came from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri, and were of Anglo-American descent with family and cultural roots in the poor rural South. In the homes they left, few had been accustomed to living with modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing. Many migrants shared conservative religious and political beliefs and were ethnocentric in their attitude toward other ethnic/cultural groups, with whom they had had little contact prior to their arrival in California. The experience of migrant workers illustrates certain universals of human experience: the trauma of dislocation from one's roots and homeplace; the persistence of a community's shared culture; and the solidarity within and friction among folk groups.

In addition, there were many Mexican migrants living in the El Rio Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp, which illustrates that Mexican immigrants have long been an integral part of agricultural production in the United States and were not newcomers on the scene even in 1940. In fact, when the Dust Bowl families arrived in California looking for work, the majority of migrant farm laborers were either Latino or Asian, particularly of Mexican and Filipino descent. The living and working conditions of agricultural migrant laborers have changed little in the intervening half century.

Children of Mexican migrant workers at FSA Camp, El Rio, California, 1941

Migrant Family Living in a Tent and Looking for Work in the Pea Fields of California During the Great Depression.

California was emphatically not the promised land of the migrants' dreams. Although the weather was comparatively balmy and farmers' fields were bountiful with produce, Californians also felt the effects of the Depression. Local and state infrastructures were already overburdened, and the steady stream of newly arriving migrants was more than the system could bear. After struggling to make it to California, many found themselves turned away at its borders. Those who did cross over into California found that the available labor pool was vastly disproportionate to the number of job openings that could be filled. Migrants who found employment soon learned that this oversupply of workers caused a significant reduction in the going pay rate. Even with an entire family working, migrants could not support themselves on these low wages. Many set up camps along irrigation ditches in the farmers' fields. These "ditchbank" camps fostered poor sanitary conditions and created a public health problem.

Family Walking 30 Miles to Santa Fe.

Arrival in California did not put an end to the migrants' travels. Their lives were characterized by transience. In an attempt to maintain a steady income, workers had to follow the harvest around the state. When potatoes were ready to be picked, the migrants needed to be where the potatoes were. The same principle applied to harvesting cotton, lemons, oranges, peas, and other crops. For this reason, migrant populations were most dense in agricultural centers.

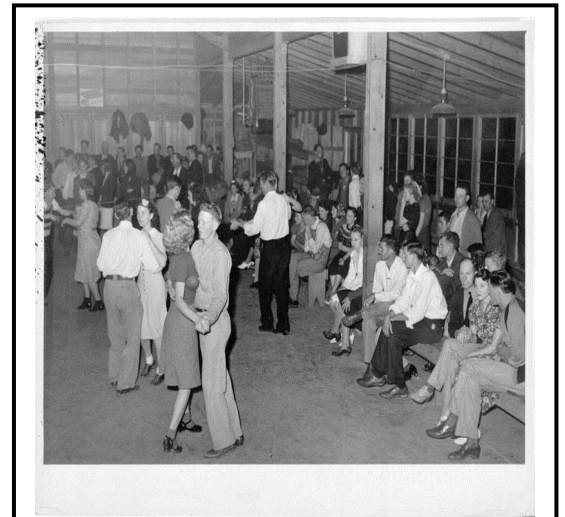
The Arvin Migratory Labor Camp was the first federally operated camp opened by the FSA in 1937. The camps were intended to resolve poor sanitation and public health problems, as well as to lessen the burden placed on state and local infrastructures. The FSA camps also furnished the migrants with a safe space in which to retire from the discrimination that plagued them and in which to practice their culture and rekindle a sense of community. Although each camp had a small staff of administrators, much of the responsibility for daily operations and governance was assigned to the campers themselves. Civil activities were carried out through camp councils and camp courts.

Men in recreation hall
Tulare FSA Camp, California, 1940.

Will Neal playing fiddle at Arvin Camp
Ventura, California, 1940

When they were not working or looking for work, or tending to the civil and domestic operations of the camp, the migrants found time to engage in recreational activities. Singing and making music took place both in private living quarters and in public spaces. The music performed by the migrants came from a number of different sources. The majority of pieces belong to the Anglo-Celtic ballad tradition. Songs such as "Barbara Allen", "The Brown Girl", "Nine Little Devils", "Father Rumble", "Lloyd Bateman", "Pretty Molly ", and "Little Mohee" all reflect this tradition. Gospel and popular music are other sources from which migrants took their inspiration. The minstrel stage, Tin Pan Alley, early country, and cowboy music were all popular music sources that fed the performers' repertoires. The works of the Carter Family, Jimmy Rodgers, and Gene Autry were particular favorites of the migrants. Although all the music in this collection gives us a sense of the informants' cultural milieu, those pieces that document the migrant experience are especially poignant. Songs like Jack Bryant's "Sunny Cal" and Mary Sullivan's ballads "A Traveler's Line" and "Sunny California" all speak of hardship, disappointment, and a deeply cherished wish to return home.

In addition to songs and instrumental music, the migrants enjoyed dancing and play-party activities (singing games accompanied by dance-like movements). Included in this online presentation are square dance calls, such as "Soldier's Joy" and "Sally Goodin", and play-party rhymes like "Skip to My Lou" and "Old Joe Clark." Newsletters produced by camp residents provided additional details about camp social life and recreational activities.



Saturday Night Dance at FSA Tulare Migrant Camp
Visalia, California, 1940

Two Children at Rehabilitation Clinic in Arkansas.

As World War II wore on, the state of the economy, both in California and across the nation, improved dramatically as the defense industry geared up to meet the needs of the war effort. Many of the migrants went off to fight in the war. Those who were left behind took advantage of the job opportunities that had become available in West Coast shipyards and defense plants. As a result of this more stable lifestyle, numerous Dust Bowl refugees put down new roots in California soil, where their descendants reside to this day.

Text adapted from:

Fanslow, Robin A. *The Migrant Experience*. American Folklife Center. Library of Congerss. 6 Apr 1998. Web. 3 Feb. 2011. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshtml/tsme.html