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## LESSON TWO: DOCUMENTING THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

### A. LESSON OBJECTIVES

- To examine information about the migrant experience during the 1930s.
- To analyze and evaluate the validity of primary source materials and to identify the point of view from which it was constructed.
- To recognize and assess multiple narratives regarding the migrant experience.

### B. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1936, The *San Francisco News* hired John Steinbeck to write a series of articles on the Dust Bowl migration. The seven article series, *The Harvest Gypsies*, provided the factual basis for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck began his research with an escorted two week tour of California's Central Valley visiting farms, labor camps, "Hoovervilles", and shantytowns. One camp visited was the Arvin Sanitary Camp—Weedpatch, built in fall 1935 as part of the New Deal's Resettlement Administration.

On this tour Steinbeck met Tom Collins, manager of the Weedpatch Camp. According to Jackson Benson, a Steinbeck biographer, Collins became the most important single source for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Collins traveled with Steinbeck on three trips around California observing camp operations, talking to residents, going to meetings, and even attending a weekend dance.

Collins collected statistics on many aspects of camp life which Steinbeck used as primary material for his newspaper series and *The Grapes of Wrath*. After the publication of *The Harvest Gypsies* Steinbeck and his wife drove west on Route 66 through Oklahoma and on to California. In 1937, he and Collins worked in the fields harvesting hops. They stayed at ranches, camps for squatters, and visited such cities as Bakersfield, Barstow, Blythe, and Needles. Later Steinbeck went to Visalia to help in response to severe flooding.

These experiences provided Steinbeck with the background needed to accurately depict the migrants and specifically a family like the Joads. Historians have provided evidence of the complexity of the migration story. James Gregory contends that the Dust Bowl migration was a media event of the 1930s. He argues for a distinction between the Dust Bowl and drought area and points out that only about 16,000 people from the Dust Bowl migrated to California. "While Steinbeck's Joad family were indeed an important element of migration—there were also many other participants who defied the popular image of the rural Dust Bowl migrant."<sup>1</sup> Gregory demonstrates that more than fifty percent came from urban and small town areas. He contends the migrants had a chain of connections (relatives) al-

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<sup>1</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15.

ready in California and that the automobile trip posed few problems usually taking only four days.

Catherine McNicol Stock extends the drought affected area. Arguing that conditions in the Northern plains were the worst, she says that “by 1940, one third of all farmers who owned their land had lost it to foreclosure; tenancy had risen to nearly fifty percent; more than 150,000 people had left the region forever; and the Federal government had spent \$400 million to help those who stayed behind.”<sup>2</sup>

### C. LESSON ACTIVITIES (2 days)

The documents in this lesson include selections from John Steinbeck’s “The Harvest Gypsies” and two readings from business periodicals, *Business Week* (July 3, 1937) and *Fortune* (April 1939).

Have students read each of “The Harvest Gypsies” articles (Documents 2-5), the news article from *Business Week* (Document 8), and the feature story from *Fortune* (Document 7).

While Steinbeck wrote seven articles only four are used in this lesson. If possible provide each student with his or her own copy of all the articles and have them underline or highlight specific passages. Written answers to the questions are useful for well focused discussions. Be sure students link their answers to the specific passages they have highlighted in the documents. These activities may be done individually or as part of cooperative/grouping centered strategies in which findings are shared and jigsawed together. Conduct a discussion comparing and contrasting these readings. Use student responses to the questions as a guide for class discussion.

Refer students to textbook accounts of Dust Bowl migrations or oral histories recounting the experiences of migrants. Do these accounts support or refute those of Steinbeck, *Business Week*, and *Fortune*? How would you assess the credibility of these accounts? To what extent did different motives, beliefs, and interests color the perspective of the reports?

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 17–18.

## D. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

## Write “Letters to the Editor”

Students write letters to the *San Francisco News*, *Business Week*, or *Fortune* responding to the articles. Assign students different roles, such as:

- A social worker for the state of California working with migrants
- A Central Valley or Imperial Valley farmer who hires hundreds of migrant laborers
- A businessman--one of *Fortune's* or *Business Week's* typical readers at the upper management level of a major corporation
- A migrant/agricultural labor union organizer
- A mayor of a small California town close to migrant work camps (either shanty towns or government operated camps)
- A spokesman for the Associated Farmers Organization
- An unemployed laborer in San Francisco
- A business owner in a small town in the Central Valley or Imperial Valley

You may want to consider other roles to include political party members and people from Oklahoma, Arkansas, or the Dakotas, the origin of many of the migrants. Also more than one student may be assigned each role so that larger classes will still have all students write a letter.

As these student letters are shared and discussed have students consider the “voices” that are not likely to be heard in a “Letter to the Editor” section in either a newspaper or magazine. What are the implications of developing solutions to problems without hearing the voices of significant groups who are affected by the situation?

## Conduct a “public hearing”

Simulate a public hearing on migration. Select a panel composed of a member of the school board, a representative from a public health agency, the local sheriff, and an elected city official who will serve as chair of the committee. Assign other members of the class roles from the “Letter to the Editor” activity and present the views of their “character” at the local public hearing. Conclude the activity by having students write a reflective essay on the migrant problem in which they must state a thesis and support it with information provided through the testimony presented at the public hearing, other materials in this lesson, and information gleaned from extended research.

## E. RESOURCES

The following resources will assist in the development of this lesson:

Gregory, James N. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Shindo, Charles. *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*. Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1997.

Steinbeck, John. *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1988.

Stock, Catherine McNicol. *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

## The Harvest Gypsies

### ARTICLE 1

At this season of the year, when California's great crops are coming into harvest, the heavy grapes, the prunes, the apples, and lettuce and the rapidly maturing cotton, our highways swarm with the migrant workers, that shifting group of nomadic, poverty-stricken harvesters driven by hunger and the threat of hunger from crop to crop, from harvest to harvest, up and down the state and into Oregon so some extent, and into Washington a little. But it is California which has and needs the majority of these new gypsies. It is a short study of these wanderers that these articles will undertake. There are at least 150,000 homeless migrants wandering up and down the state, and that is an army large enough to make it important to every person in the state.

To the casual traveler on the great highways the movements of the migrants are mysterious if they are seen at all, for suddenly the roads will be filled with open rattletrap cars loaded with children and with dirty bedding, with fire-blackened cooking utensils. The boxcars and gondolas on the railroad lines will be filled with men. And then, just as suddenly, they will have disappeared from the main routes. On side roads and near rivers where there is little travel and squalid, filthy squatters' camp will have been set up, and the orchards will be filled with pickers and cutters and driers.

The unique nature of California agriculture requires that these migrants exist, and requires that they move about. Peaches and grapes, hops and cotton cannot be harvested by a resident population of laborers. For example, a large peach orchard which requires the work of 20 men the year round will need as many as 2000 for the brief time of picking and packing. And if the migration of the 2000 should not occur, if it should be delayed even a week, the crop will rot and be lost.

Thus, in California we find a curious attitude toward a group that makes our agriculture successful. The migrants are needed, and they are hated. Arriving in a district they find the dislike always meted out by the resident to the foreigner, the outlanders. This hatred of the stranger occurs in the whole range of human history, from the most primitive village farm to our own highly organized industrial farming. The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can, simply by refusing to work, wipe out the season's crops. They are never received into a community nor into the life of a community. Wanderers in fact, they are never allowed to feel at home in the communities that demand their services.

Let us see what kind of people they are, where they come from, and the routes of their wanderings. In the past they have been of several races, encouraged to come and often imported as cheap labor; Chinese in the early period, then Filipinos, Japanese and Mexicans. These were foreigners, and as such they were ostracized and segregated and herded about.

If they attempted to organize they were deported or arrested, and having no advocates they were never able to get a hearing for their problems. But in recent years the foreign migrants have begun to organize, and at this danger signal they have been deported in great numbers, for there was a new reservoir from which a

great quantity of cheap labor could be obtained.

The drought in the middle west has driven the agricultural population of Oklahoma, Nebraska and parts of Kansas and Texas westward. Their lands are destroyed and they can never go back to them.

Thousands of them are crossing the borders in ancient rattling automobiles, destitute and hungry and homeless, ready to accept any pay so that they may eat and feed their children and everything that remains of their old life with them.

They arrive in California usually having used up every resource to get here, even to the selling of the poor blankets and utensils and tools on the way to buy gasoline. They arrive bewildered and beaten and usually in a state of semi-starvation, with only one necessity to face immediately, and that is to find work at any wage in order that the family may eat.

And there is only one field in California that can receive them. Ineligible for relief, they must become migratory field workers.

Because the old kind of laborers, Mexicans and Filipinos, are being deported and repatriated very rapidly, while on the other hand the river of dust bowl refugees increases all the time, it is this new kind of migrant that we shall largely consider.

The earlier foreign migrants have invariably been drawn from a peon class. This is not the case with the new migrants.

They are small farmers who have lost their farms. Or farm hands who have lived with the family in the old American way. They are men who have worked hard on their own farms and have left the pride of possessing and living in close touch with the land.

They are resourceful and intelligent Americans who have gone through the hell of the drought, have seen their lands wither and die and the top soil blow away; and this, to a man who has owned his land, is a curious and terrible pain.

And then they have made the crossing and have seen often the death of their children on the way. Their cars have been broken down and been repaired with the ingenuity of the land man.

Often they patched the worn-out tires every few miles. They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong.

They are descendants of men who crossed into the middle west, who won their lands by fighting, who cultivated the prairies and stayed with them until they went back to desert.

And because of their tradition and their training, they are not migrants by nature. They are gypsies by force of circumstances.

In their heads, as they move wearily from harvest to harvest, there is one urge and one overwhelming need, to acquire a little land again, and to settle on it and stop their wandering. One has only to go into the squatters' camps where the families live on the ground and have no homes, no beds and no equipment; and one has only to look at the strong purposeful faces, often filled with pain and more often, when they see the corporation-held idle lands, filled with anger, to know that this new race is here to stay and that heed must be taken of it.

It should be understood that with this new race and old methods of repression, of starvation wages, of jailing, beating and intimidation are not going to work; these are American people. Consequently we must meet them with understanding and attempt to work out the problem to their benefit as well as ours.

It is difficult to believe what one large speculative farmer has said, that the success of California agriculture requires that we create and maintain a peon class. For if this is true, then California must depart from the semblance of democratic government that remains here.

The names of the new migrants indicate that they are of English, German, and Scandinavian descent. There are Munns, Holbrooks, Hansens, Schmidts.

And they are strangely anachronistic in one way: Having been brought up on the prairies where industrialization never penetrated, they have jumped with no transition from the old agrarian, self-containing farm where nearly everything used was raised or manufactured, to a system of agriculture so industrialized that the man who plants a crop does not often see, let alone harvest, the fruit of his planting, where the migrant has no contact with the growth cycle.

And there is another difference between their old life and the new. They have come from the little farm districts where democracy was not only possible but inevitable, where popular government, whether practiced in the Grange, in church organization or in local government, was the responsibility of every man. And they have come into the country where, because of the movement necessary to make a living, they are not allowed any vote whatever, but are rather considered a properly unprivileged class.

Let us see the fields that require the impact of the labor and the districts to which they must travel. As one little boy in a squatters' camp said, "When they need us they call us migrants, and when we've picked their crop, we're bums and we got to get out."

There are the vegetable crops of the Imperial Valley, the lettuce, cauliflower, tomatoes, and cabbage to be picked and packed, to be hoed, and irrigated. There are several crops a year to be harvested, but there is not time distribution sufficient to give the migrants permanent work.

The orange orchards deliver two crops a year, but the picking season is short. Farther north, in Kern County and up the San Joaquin Valley, the migrants are needed for grapes, cotton, pears, melons, beans, and peaches.

In the outer valley, near Salinas, Watsonville, and Santa Clara there are lettuce, cauliflowers, artichokes, apples, prunes, apricots. North of San Francisco, the produce is grapes, deciduous fruits and hops. The Sacramento Valley needs masses of migrants for its asparagus, its walnuts, peaches, prunes, etc. These great valleys with their intensive farming make their seasonal demands on migrant labor.

A short time, then, before the actual picking begins, there is the scurrying on the highways, the families in open cars hurrying to be first at work. For it has been the habit of the growers associations of the state to provide by importation, twice as much labor as was necessary, so that wages might remain low.

Hence the hurry, for if the migrant is a little late the places may all be filled and he will have taken his trip for nothing. And there are many things that may happen even if he is in time. The crop may be late, or there may occur one of those situations like that at Nipomo last year when twelve hundred workers arrived to pick the pea crop only to find it spoiled by rain.

All resources having been used to get to the field, the migrants could not move on; they stayed and starved until government aid tardily was found for them.

And so they move, frantically, with starvation close behind them. And in this series of articles we shall try to see how they live and what kind of people they are,

what their living standard is, what is done for them and to them, and what their problems and needs are. For while California has been successful in its use of migrant labor, it is gradually building a human structure which will certainly change the State, and may, if handled with the inhumanity and stupidity that have characterized the past, destroy the present system of agricultural economics.

—Source: *San Francisco News*, 1936. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

### STUDENT QUESTIONS

#### Understanding the Meaning

1. How does Steinbeck describe the migrant workers? What terms does he use? What characteristics do they have?
2. How many migrants are there?
3. What is the unique nature of California agriculture which requires migrants?
4. What is the “curious attitude” toward migrants?
5. Why are migrants “hated?”
6. How do 1930s migrants differ from past migrant groups? Consider: race/ethnicity, marital/family status, gender.
7. How has industrialism impacted migrants in the Middle West and California?
8. What is the relationship of migrants to democracy?
9. How does the “growers association” apply the law of supply and demand?

#### Making Inferences

1. New Deal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) provided money to aid landowners. How might that affect tenants and sharecroppers?
2. How would reducing the amount of crops grown affect the mechanization of agriculture?



## The Harvest Gypsies

### ARTICLE 2

The squatters' camps are located all over California. Let us see what a typical one is like. It is located on the banks of a river, near an irrigation ditch or on a side road where a spring of water is available. From a distance it looks like a city dump, and well it may, for the city dumps are the sources for the materials of which it is built. You can see a litter of dirty rags and scrap iron, of houses built of weeds, of flattened cans or of paper. It is only on close approach that it can be seen that these are homes.

Here is a house built by a family who have tried to maintain a neatness. The house is about 10 feet by 10 feet, and it is built completely of corrugated paper. The roof is peaked, the walls are tacked to a wooden frame. The dirt floor is swept clean, and along the irrigation ditch or in the muddy river the wife of the family scrubs clothes without soap and tries to rinse out the mud in muddy water. The spirit of this family is not quiet broken, for the children, three of them, still have clothes, and the family possesses three old quilts and a soggy, lumpy mattress. But the money so needed for food cannot be used for soap nor for clothes.

With the first rain the carefully built house will slop down into a brown, pulpy mush; in a few months the clothes will fray off the children's bodies while the lack of nourishing food will subject the whole family to pneumonia when the first cold comes.

Five years ago this family had fifty acres of land and a thousand dollars in the bank. The wife belonged to a sewing circle and the man was a member of the grange. They raised chickens, pigs, pigeons, and vegetables and fruits for their own use; and their land produced the tall corn of the middle west. Now they have nothing.

If the husband hits every harvest without delay and works the maximum time, he may make four hundred dollars this year. But if anything happens, if his old car breaks down, if he is late and misses a harvest or two, he will have to feed his whole family on as little as one hundred and fifty.

But there is still pride in this family. Wherever they stop they try to put the children in school. It may be that the children will be in a school for as much as a month before they are moved to another locality.

Here, in the faces of the husband and his wife you begin to see an expression you will notice on every face; not worry, but absolute terror of the starvation that crowds in against the borders of the camp. This man has tried to make a toilet by digging a hole in the ground near his paper house and surrounding it with an old piece of burlap. But he will only do things like that this year.

He is a newcomer and his spirit and decency and his sense of his own dignity have not been quite wiped out. Next year he will be like his next door neighbor.

This is a family of six; a man, his wife and four children. They live in a tent the color of the ground. Rot has set in on the canvas so that the flaps and the sides hang in tatters and are held together with bits of rusty baling wire. There is one bed in the family and that is a big tick lying on the ground inside the tent.

They have one quilt and a piece of canvas for bedding. The sleeping arrangement is clever. Mother and father lie down together and two children lie between them. Then, heading the other way, the other two children lie, the little ones. If the

mother and father sleep with their legs spread wide, there is room for the legs of the children.

There is more filth here. The tent is full of flies clinging to the apple box that is the dinner table, buzzing about the foul clothes of the children, particularly the baby, who has not been bathed nor cleaned for several days.



Migrant mother —Dorothea Lange, 1937  
Library of Congress

The family has been on the road longer than the builder of the paper house. There is no toilet here, but there is a clump of willows nearby where human feces lie exposed to flies- the same flies that are in the tent.

Two weeks ago there was another child, a four year old boy. For a few weeks they had noticed that he was kind of lackadaisical, that his eyes were feverish.

They had given him the best place in the bed, between father and mother. But one night he went into convulsions and died, and the next morning the coroner's wagon took him away. It was one step down.

They know pretty well that it was a diet of fresh fruit, beans and little else that

caused his death. He had no milk for months. With this death came a change of mind in his family. The father and mother now feel that paralyzed dullness with which the mind protects itself against too much sorrow and too much pain.

And this father will not be able to make a maximum of four hundred dollars a year any more because he is no longer alert; he isn't quick at piece-work, and he is not able to fight clear of the dullness that has settled on him. His spirit is losing caste rapidly.

The dullness shows in the faces of this family, and in addition there is a sullenest that makes them taciturn. Sometimes they still start the older children off to school, but the ragged little things will not go; they hide in ditches or wander off by themselves until it is time to go back to the tent, because they are scorned in the school.

The better-dressed children shout and jeer, the teachers are quite often impatient with these additions to their duties, and the parents of the “nice” children do not want to have disease carriers in the schools.

The father of this family once had a little grocery store and his family lived in back of it so that even the children could wait on the counter. When the drought set in there was no trade for the store any more.

This is the middle class of the squatters’ camp. In a few months this family will slip down to the lower class.

Dignity is all gone, and spirit has turned to sullen anger before it dies.

The next door neighbor family of man, wife and three children of from three to nine years of age, have built a house by driving willow branches into the ground and wattling weeds, tin, old paper and strips of carpet against them.

A few branches are placed over the top to keep out the noonday sun. It would not turn water at all. There is no bed. Somewhere the family has found a big piece of old carpet. It is on the ground. To go to bed the members of the family lie on the ground and fold the carpet up over them.

The three year old child has a gunny sack tied about his middle for clothing. He has the swollen belly caused by malnutrition.

He sits on the ground in the sun in front of the house, and the little black flies buzz in circles and land on his closed eyes and crawl up his nose until he weakly brushes them away.

They try to get at the mucous in the eye-corners. This child seems to have the reactions of a baby much younger. The first year he had a little milk, but he has had none since.

He will die in a very short time. The older children may survive. Four nights ago the mother had a baby in the tent, on the dirty carpet. It was born dead, which was just as well because she could not have fed it at the breast; her own diet will not produce milk.

After it was born and she had seen that it was dead, the mother rolled over and lay still for two days. She is up today, tottering around. The last baby, born less than a year ago, lived a week. This woman’s eyes have the glazed, far-away look of a sleep walker’s eyes.

She does not wash clothes anymore. The drive that makes for cleanliness has been drained out of her and she hasn’t the energy. The husband was a share-cropper once, but he couldn’t make it go. Now he has lost even the desire to talk.

He will not look directly at you for that requires will, and will needs strength. He is a bad field worker for the same reason. It takes him a long time to make up his mind, so he is always late in moving and late in arriving in the fields. His top wage, when he can find work now, which isn’t often, is a dollar a day.

The children do not even go to the willow clump any more. They squat where they are and kick a little dirt. The father is vaguely aware that there is a culture of hookworm in the mud along the river bank. He knows the children will get it on their bare feet.

But he hasn’t the will nor the energy to resist. Too many things have happened to him. This is the lower class of the camp.

This is what the man in the tent will be in six months; what the man in the paper house with its peaked roof will be in a year, after his house washed down and his children have sickened or died, after the loss of dignity and spirit have cut him down to a kind of sub-humanity.

Helpful strangers are not well-received in this camp. The local sheriff makes a raid now and then for a wanted man, and if there is labor trouble the vigilantes may burn the poor houses. Social workers, survey workers have taken case histories.

They are filed and open for inspection. These families have been questioned over and over about their origins, number of children living and dead.

The information is taken down and filed. That is that. It has been done so often and so little has come of it.

And there is another way for them to get attention. Let an epidemic break out, say typhoid or scarlet fever and the country doctor will come to the camp and hurry the infected cases to the pest house. But malnutrition is not infectious, nor dysentery, which is almost the rule among the children.

The county hospital has no room for measles, mumps, whooping cough; and yet these are often deadly to hunger-weakened children. And although we hear much about the free clinics for the poor, these people do not know how to get the aid and they do not get it. Also, since most of their dealings with authority are painful to them, they prefer not to take the chance.

This is the squatters' camp. Some are a little better, some much worse. I have described three typical families. In some of the camps there are as many as three hundred families like these. Some are so far from water that it must be bought at five cents a bucket.

And if these men steal, if there is developing among them a suspicion and hatred of well-dressed, satisfied people, the reason is not to be sought in their origin nor in any tendency to weakness in their character.

## STUDENT QUESTIONS

### Understanding the Meaning

1. What are some of the characteristics of squatters' camps?
2. Compare and contrast the "three typical families" described by Steinbeck: focus on physical descriptions and the migrant's "spirit".

### Making Inferences

1. Read the last paragraph. Why does Steinbeck suggest the migrant's situation is not based upon a "weakness in their character"?

—Source: *San Francisco News*, 1936. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

## The Harvest Gypsies

### ARTICLE 4

The federal government, realizing that the miserable conditions of the California migrant agricultural worker constitutes an immediate and vital problem, has set up two camps for the moving workers and contemplates eight more in the immediate future. The development of the camps at Arvin and at Marysville makes a social and economic study of vast interest.

The present camps are set up on leased ground. Future camps are to be constructed on land purchased by the Government. The Government provides places for tents. Permanent structures are simple, including washrooms, toilets and showers, an administration building, and a place where the people can entertain themselves. The equipment at the Arvin camp, exclusive of rent for the lank, costs approximately \$18,000.

At this camp, water, toilet paper, and some medical supplies are provided. A resident manager is on the ground. Campers are received on the following simple conditions: (1) That the men are bona fide farm people and intend to work, (2) that they will help to maintain the cleanliness of the camp and (3) that in lieu of rent they will devote two hours a week towards the maintenance and improvement of the camp.

The result has been more than could be expected. From the first, the intent of the management has been to restore the dignity and decency that had been kicked out of the migrants by their intolerable mode of life.

In this series the word "dignity" has been used several times. It has been used not as some attitude of self-importance, but simply as a register of a man's responsibility to the community.

A man herded about, surrounded by armed guards, starved and forced to live in filth loses his dignity; that is, he loses his valid position in regard to society and consequently his whole ethics towards society. Nothing is a better example of this than the prison, where the men are reduced to no dignity and where crimes and infractions of the rule are constant.

We regard this destruction of dignity, then, as one of the most regrettable results of the migrant's life, since it does reduce his responsibility and does make him a sullen outcast who will strike at our Government in any way that occurs to him.

The example at Arvin adds weight to such a conviction. The people in the camp are encouraged to govern themselves, and they have responded with simple and workable democracy.

The camp is divided into four units. Each unit, by direct election, is represented in a central governing committee, an entertainment committee, a maintenance committee, and a Good Neighbor committee. Each of these members is elected by the vote of his unit, and is recallable by the same vote.

The manager, of course, has the right of veto, but he practically never finds it necessary to act contrary to the recommendations of the committee.

The result of this responsible self-government has been remarkable. The inhabitants of the camp came there beaten, sullen, and destitute. But as their social sense was revived they have settled down. The camp takes care of its own desti-

tute, feeding and sheltering those who have nothing with their own poor stores. The central committee makes the laws that govern the conduct of the inhabitants.

In the year that the Arvin camp has been in operation there has not been any need for outside police. Punishments are the restrictions of certain privileges such as admission to the community dances, or for continued anti-social conduct, a recommendation to the manager that the culprit be ejected from the camp.

A works committee assigns the labor to be done in the camp, improvements, garbage disposal, maintenance and repairs. The entertainment committee arranges for the weekly dances, the music for which is furnished by an orchestra made up of the inhabitants.

So well do they play that one orchestra has been lost to the radio already. This committee also takes care of the many self-made games and courts that have been built.

The Good Neighbors, a woman's organization, takes part in quilting and sewing projects, sees that destitution does not exist, governs, and watches the nursery, where children can be left while the mothers are working in the fields and in the packing sheds. And all of this is done with the outside aid of one manager and one part-time nurse. As experiments in natural and democratic self-government, these camps are unique in the United States.

In visiting these camps one is impressed with several things in particular. The sullen and frightened expression that is the rule among the migrants has disappeared from the faces of the Federal camps inhabitants. Instead there is a steadiness of gaze and a self-confidence that only come of restored dignity.

The difference seems to lie in the new position of the migrant in the community. Before he came to the camp he had been policed, hated and moved about. It had been made clear that he was not wanted.

In the Federal camps every effort of the management is expended to give him his place in society. There are no persons on relief in these camps.

In the Arvin camp the central committee recommended the expulsion of a family which applied for relief. Employment is more common than in any similar group for, having something of their own, these men are better workers. The farmers in the vicinity seem to prefer the camp men to others.

The inhabitants of the Federal camps are no picked group. They are typical of the new migrants. They come from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas and the other drought states. Eight-five per cent of them are former farm owners, farm renters or farm laborers. The remaining 15 per cent include painters, mechanics, electricians, and even professional men.

When a new family enters one of these camps it is usually dirty, tired, and broken. A group from the Good Neighbors meets it, tells it the rules, helps it to get settled, instructs it in the use of the sanitary facilities; and if there are insufficient blankets or shelters, furnishes them from its own stores.

The children are bathed and cleanly dressed and the needs of the future canvassed. If the children have not enough clothes the community sewing circle will get busy immediately. In case any of the family are sick the camp manager or the part-time nurse is called and treatment is carried out.

These Good Neighbors are not trained social workers, but they have what is perhaps more important, an understanding which grows from a likeness of expe-

rience. Nothing has happened to the newcomer that has not happened to the committee.

A typical manager's report is as follows:

"New arrivals. Low in foodstuffs. Most of the personal belongings were tied up in sacks and were in a filthy condition. The Good Neighbors at once took the family in hand, and by 10 o'clock they were fed, washed, camped, settled and asleep."

These two camps each accommodate about 200 families. They were started as experiments, and the experiments have proven successful. Between the rows of tents the families have started little gardens for raising of vegetables, and the plots, which must be cared for after a 10 or 12 hours day of work, produce beets, cabbages, corn, carrots, onions, and turnips. The passion to produce is very great. One man, who has yet been assigned his little garden plot, is hopefully watering a jimson weed simply to have something of his own growing.

The Federal Government, through the Resettlement Administration, plans to extend these camps and to include with them small maintenance farms. These are intended to solve several problems.

They will allow the women and children to stay in one place, permitting the children to go to school, and the women to maintain the farms during the work times of the men. They will reduce the degenerating effect of the migrants' life, they will reconstitute the sense of government and possession that have been lost by the migrants.

Located near to the areas which demand seasonal labor, these communities will permit these subsistence farmers to work in the harvest, while at the same time they stop the wanderings over the whole state. The success of these Federal camps in making potential criminals into citizens make the usual practice of expending money on tear gas seem a little silly.

The greater part of the new migrants from the dust bowl will become permanent California citizens. They have shown in these camps an ability to produce and to cooperate. They are passionately determined to make their living on the land. One of them said, "If it's work you got to do, mister, we'll do it. Our folks never did take charity and this family ain't takin' it now."

The plan of the Resettlement Administration to extend these Federal camps is being fought by certain interests in California. The arguments against the camps are as follows:

That they will increase the need for locally paid police. But the two camps already carried on for over a year have proved to need no locally paid police whatever, while the squatters' camps are a constant charge of the sheriff's offices.

The second argument is that the cost of schools to the district will be increased. School allotments are from the state and governed by the number of pupils. And even if it did cost more, the communities need the work of these families and must assume some responsibility for them. The alternative is a generation of illiterates.

The third is that they will lower the land values because of the type of people inhabiting the camps. Those camps already established have in no way affected the value of the land and the people are of good American stock who have proved that they can maintain an American standard of living. The cleanliness and lack of disease in the two experimental camps are proof of this.

The fourth argument, as made by the editor of *The Yuba City Herald*, a self-admitted sadist who wrote a series of incendiary and subversive editorials concerning the Marysville camp, is that these are the breeding places for strikes.

Under pressure of evidence the Yuba City patriot withdrew his contention that the camp was full of radicals. This will be the argument used by the speculative growers' associations. These associations have said in so many words that they require a peon class to succeed. Any action to better the condition of the migrants will be considered radical to them.

—Source: *San Francisco News*, 1936. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

### STUDENT QUESTIONS

#### Understanding the Meaning

This article focuses on the camps provided by the Federal government's Resettlement Administration. Steinbeck notes that "from the first, the intent of the management has been to restore the dignity and decency that had been kicked out of the migrants by their intolerable mode of life."

1. Why is this "intent" important?
2. What means are used to achieve this restoration?
3. What are the results of such efforts?
4. Why do "certain interests" oppose these camps?
5. What reply does Steinbeck make to these arguments?



## The Harvest Gypsies

### ARTICLE 5

Migrant families in California find that unemployment relief, which is available to settled unemployed, has little to offer them. In the first place there has grown up a regular technique for getting relief; one who knows the ropes can find aid from the various states and Federal disbursement agencies, while a man ignorant of the methods will be turned away.

The migrant is always partially unemployed. The nature of his occupation makes his work seasonal. At the same time the nature of his work makes him ineligible for relief. The basis for receiving most of the relief is residence.

But it is important for the migrant to accomplish the residence. He must move about the country. He could not stop long enough to establish residence or he would starve to death. He finds, then, on application, that he cannot be put on the relief rolls. And being ignorant, he gives up at that point.

For the same reason he finds that he cannot receive any of the local benefits reserved for residents of a county. The county hospital was built not for the transient, but for residents of the county.

It will be interesting to trace the history of one family in relation to medicine, work relief and direct relief. The family consisted of five persons, a man of 50, his wife of 45, two boys, 15 and 12, and a girl of six. They came from Oklahoma, where the father operated a little ranch of 50 acres of prairie.

When the ranch dried up and blew away the family put its moveable possessions in an old Dodge truck and came to California. They arrived in time for the orange picking in Southern California and put in a good average season.

The older boy and the father together made \$60. At that time the automobile broke out some teeth of the differential and the repairs, together with three second-hand tires, took \$22. The family moved into Kern County to chop grapes and camped in the squatters' camp on the edge of Bakersfield.

At this time the father sprained his ankle and the little girl developed measles. Doctors' bills amounted to \$10 of the remaining store, and food and transportation took most of the rest.

The 15-year-old boy was now the only earner for the family. The 12-year-old boy picked up a brass gear in a yard and took it to sell.

He was arrested and taken before the juvenile court, but was released to his father's custody. The father walked in to Bakersfield from the squatters' camp on a sprained ankle because the gasoline was gone from the automobile and he didn't dare invest any of the remaining money in more gasoline.

This walk caused complications in the sprain which laid him up again. The little girl had recovered from measles by this time, but her eyes had not been protected and she had lost part of her eyesight.

The father now applied for relief and found that he was ineligible because he had not established the necessary residence. All resources were gone. A little food was given to the family by neighbors in the squatters' camp.

A neighbor who had a goat brought in a cup of milk every day for the little girl.

At this time the 15-year-old boy came home from the fields with a pain in his side. He was feverish and in great pain. The mother put hot cloths on his stomach

while a neighbor took the crippled father to the county hospital to apply for aid. The hospital was full, all its time taken by bona fide local residents. The trouble described as a pain in the stomach by the father was not taken seriously.

The father was given a big dose of salts to take home to the boy. That night the pain grew so great that the boy became unconscious. The father telephoned the hospital and found that there was no one on duty who could attend to his case. The boy died of a burst appendix the next day.

There was no money. The county buried him free. The father sold the Dodge for \$30 and bought a \$2 wreath for the funeral. With the remaining money he laid in a store of cheap, filling food--beans, oatmeal, lard. He tried to go back to work in the fields. Some of the neighbors gave him rides to work and charged him a small amount for transportation.

He was on the weak ankle too soon and could not make over \$.75 a day at piece-work, chopping. Again he applied for relief and was refused because he was not a resident and because he was employed. The little girl, because of insufficient food and weakness from measles, relapsed into influenza.

The father did not try the county hospital again. He went to a private doctor who refused to come to the squatters' camp unless he were paid in advance. The father took two days' pay and gave it to the doctor who came to the family shelter, took the girl's temperature, gave the mother seven pills, told the mother to keep the child warm and went away. The father lost his job because he was too slow.

He applied again for help and was given one week's supply of groceries.

This can go on indefinitely. The case histories like it can be found in their thousands. It may be argued that there were ways for this man to get aid, but how did he know where to get it? There was no way for him to find out.

California communities have used the old, old methods of dealing with such problems. The first method is to disbelieve it and vigorously deny that there is a problem. The second method is to deny local responsibility since the people are not permanent residents. And the third and silliest of all is to run the trouble over the county borders into another county. The floater method of swapping what the counties consider undesirables from hand to hand is like a game of medicine ball.

A fine example of this insular stupidity concerns the hookworm situation in Stanislaus County. The mud along watercourses where there are squatters living is infected. Several business men of Modesto and Ceres offered as a solution that the squatters be cleared out. There was no thought of isolating the victims and stopping the hookworm.

The affected people were, according to these men, to be run out of the county to spread the disease in other fields. It is this refusal of the counties to consider anything but the immediate economy and profit of the locality that is the cause of a great deal of the unsolvable quality of migrants' problem. The counties seem terrified that they may be required to give some aid to the labor they require for their harvests.

According to several Government and state surveys and studies of large numbers of migrants, the maximum a worker can make is \$400 a year, while the average is around \$300, and the large minimum is \$150 a year. This amount must feed, clothe and transport whole families.

Sometimes whole families are able to work in the fields, thus making an additional wage. In other observed cases a whole family, weakened by sickness and

malnutrition, has worked in the fields, making less than the wage of one healthy man. It does not take long at the migrants' work to reduce the health of any family. Food is scarce always, and luxuries of any kind are unknown.

Observed diets run something like this when the family is making money:

—Family of eight--Boiled cabbage, baked sweet potatoes, creamed carrots, beans, fried dough, jelly, tea.

—Family of seven--Beans, baking-powder biscuits, jam, coffee.

—Family of six--Canned salmon, cornbread, raw onions.

—Family of five--Biscuits, fried potatoes, dandelion greens, pears.

These are dinners. It is to be noticed that even in these flush times there is no milk, no butter. The major part of the diet is starch. In slack times the diet becomes all starch, this being the cheapest way to fill up. Dinners during lay-offs are as follows:

—Family of seven--Beans, fried dough.

—Family of six--Fried cornmeal.

—Family of five--Oatmeal mush.

—Family of eight (there were six children)-- Dandelion greens and boiled potatoes.

It will be seen that even in flush times the possibility of remaining healthy is very slight. The complete absence of milk for the children is responsible for many of the diseases of malnutrition. Even pellagra is far from unknown.

The preparation of food is the most primitive. Cooking equipment usually consists of a hole dug in the ground or a kerosene can with a smoke vent and open front.

If the adults have been working 10 hours in the fields or in the packing sheds they do not want to cook. They will buy canned goods as long as they have money, and when they are low in funds they will subsist on half-cooked starches.

The problem of childbirth among the migrants is among the most terrible. There is no prenatal care of the mothers whatever, and no possibility of such care. They must work in the fields until they are physically unable or, if they do not work, the care of the other children and of the camp will not allow the prospective mothers any rest.

In actual birth the presence of a doctor is a rare exception. Sometimes in the squatters' camps a neighbor woman will help at the birth. There will be no sanitary precautions nor hygienic arrangements. The child will be born on newspapers in the dirty bed. In case of a bad presentation requiring surgery or forceps, the mother is practically condemned to death. Once born, the eyes of the baby are not treated, the endless medical attention lavished on middle class babies is completely absent.

The mother, usually suffering from malnutrition, is not able to produce breast milk. Sometimes the baby is nourished on canned milk until it can eat fried dough and cornmeal. This being the case, the infant mortality rate is very great.

The following is an example: Wife of family with three children. She is 38; her face is lined and thin and there is a hard glaze on her eyes. The three children who survive were born prior to 1929, when the family rented a farm in Utah. In 1930 this woman bore a child which lived four months and dies of "colic."

In 1931 her child was born dead because "a han' truck fulla boxes run inta me two days before the baby come." In 1932 there was a miscarriage. "I couldn't carry

the baby 'cause I was sick." She is ashamed of this. In 1933 her baby lived a week. "Jus' died. I don't know what of." In 1934 she had no pregnancy. She is also a little ashamed of this. In 1935 her baby lived a long time, nine months.

"Seemed for a long time like he was gonna live. Big strong fella it seemed like." She is pregnant again now. "If we could get milk for um I guess it'd be better." This is an extreme case, but by no means an unusual one.

—Source: *San Francisco News*, 1936. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

## STUDENT QUESTIONS

### Understanding the Meaning

1. Why is relief not provided to migrants?
2. What is the response of California communities to migrant problems?
3. What reasons does Steinbeck give for the responses of California communities to migrant problems?
4. "The counties seem terrified that they may be required to give some aid to the labor they require for their harvest." What does Steinbeck mean by this?

## “Flee Dust Bowl for California”

California business men are watching with mixed emotions the current influx of families from the Dust Bowl which, since Jan. 1, has brought more than 30,000 persons into the state. . . . The influx is now averaging one immigrant outfit every ten minutes, and the trek has only begun. . . . Many of the newcomers are competent farmers who have lost out in the drought and are seeking greener fields in California. They're eager to work for wages on the farms, to save what they can, and eventually buy land of their own. They're decidedly in the minority. The rank and file are out to seek their fortunes in a land where, so they have been told, living is easier. The relief office is the objective of many of these, and relief costs, especially in the San Joaquin counties, are rising. . . . [W]hen the Dust Bowl people show up at the San Joaquin farmer's door asking for work, they're usually welcome, especially as heretofore employers have had to transport most of their laborers to the fields. Experience has shown, too, that most of the newcomers won't have anything to do with farm labor organizers for a time, at least, and this condition may tend to relieve the pressure of the agricultural unions on California farmers during this harvest season. . . . The addition of so great an army of immigrants to the farm areas is stimulating certain lines of retail business. . . . The newcomers must eat. They must buy a certain amount of clothing (shelter, water, and wood are furnished by employers to those who work on the farms). The wages these people receive are providing many of them with the first real cash they've had in months, and they're eager to buy. Observers point out that much of this buying is not "healthy," that wages are going for down payments on radios, automobiles, cheap jewelry, rather than for necessities. On the other side of the picture, Mr. John Citizen, of the San Joaquin Valley, when questioned on the unprecedented immigration throws up his hands. For every worker that presents himself at the farmer's door asking for a job, another goes on relief with his entire family. . . . County hospitals are crowded with free patients, many of them maternity cases, neatly timed for arrival in California at the crucial moment. Schools are overwhelmed with new pupils. . . . A social worker asked one man why he had come to California. He pulled two newspaper clippings from his pocket, one from an Oklahoma paper and another from Texas. In them were unsigned advertisements painting in glowing terms the wonderful opportunities to be found in California. Are certain interests exploiting these people as ruthlessly as the steamship companies did during the days of the great immigrations from southern Europe two or three decades ago? Is there any doubt of it?"

Source: "Flee Dust Bowl for California," *Business Week*, Vol. 33, No. 409 (July 3, 1937), 36-37. Reprinted by permission of McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

## STUDENT QUESTIONS

## Understanding the Meaning

1. How does the *Business Week* article characterize Dust Bowl migrants?
2. What services are provided for migrants in California communities?
3. What are the problems associated with the influx of large number of migrant farm workers?
4. What impact does this migration have on California communities?
5. What is the impact of large numbers of migrant laborers on union organization in the state?

## Making Inferences

1. What is the general impression given of most Dust Bowl migrants?
2. Contrast Steinbeck's views expressed in "The Harvest Gypsies" to those presented in the *Business Week* report. What accounts for the different perspectives?



John Steinbeck  
Photographer unknown  
Library of Congress

## “Along the Road”

In April 1939, *Fortune* reported on its findings about the migrant problem in a lengthy article entitled “I Wonder Where We Can Go Now.” The magazine sent a reporter to California to live among migrants in order to gather information for the article. The April issue of *Fortune* included excerpts from the reporter’s notebook with the feature article. The following are from the reporter’s notes.

In an effort to get located I went to the county camp near Shafter but when they found I did not have a tent but was living in my car they refused me admission on the grounds that it would be embarrassing to the people around me. I was just as glad as this camp was one of the dirtiest that I had seen. I decided to stay on the desert but I found that the health authorities were driving them off the desert and trying to get them into the county camp. I tried to get space in a pay camp. There I was told . . . I’d like to rent you a space but I’m full up. I charge \$2 a month. I’ve had to turn away seventy-five people in the last few days.” . . . So I decided to see if I could “make it on the desert.” The idea was to drive out about a mile or two from town sometime around dusk and then set up camp. There would generally be a dozen or more others coming on right up until dark and soon their campfires could be seen.

One night I talked to a group of family people. There were three in the family, husband and wife, nineteen and eighteen respectively, and the boy’s seventeen-year-old sister. . . . They gave the following as their yearly routine: spuds at Shafter, ‘cots other side of Merced, Marysville for prunes and hops, then to the Big Valley (couldn’t remember the name of it) for tomatoes. This took about six months of the year, which was their full working period. . . .

The costume of the men is almost uniform. The trousers are invariably blue jeans. These, like the rest of their clothes, are many times patched and mended, usually very neatly. The clothes of the young boys are replicas of their fathers’ except that they may go barefooted occasionally.

. . . Several cases of typhoid have appeared in the area [Imperial Valley] since I have been here. This is due to their habit of drinking “ditchwater,” or that water which flows through the irrigation ditches. An epidemic was avoided only because a great many were vaccinated. There are at least eight, and possibly more, cases of pellagra in the camp. The cure for this disease, which may be fatal, is green vegetables or red meat. However, they have eaten starchy foods for so long that they no longer have a taste for meats and vegetables. When the doctor told one woman to feed meat to her family, she replied that they didn’t like meat and wouldn’t eat it.

. . . These people aren’t relief-minded. I’ve seen them around where relief was being given out. They’d ask what the line-up was about, then say, “I’ve got two bucks left, I expect to get work next week, I don’t want no relief.”

Source: “Along the Road: Extracts from a Reporter’s Notebook,” *Fortune*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (April 1939), 97-100.

## STUDENT QUESTIONS

## Understanding the Meaning

1. *Fortune* was and still is one of capitalism's most prestigious voices. Does its account of the migrants in general agree or disagree with Steinbeck's newspaper articles?
2. How does *Fortune* characterize migrants? Select statements you consider good examples of *Fortune's* characterization of the migrants. Focus on aspects of living conditions and their effect on people.
3. What does "Extracts from a Reporter's Notebook" tell you about the importance of sanitation and diet?

## Making Inferences

1. What is the reporter's general impression of conditions among the migrants?
2. Compare and contrast the overall views of Steinbeck and *Fortune* about migrants. What is the point of view of Steinbeck? The *Fortune* author? Cite examples to support generalizations.