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Representing the Truth in Black and White: American Dust Bowl Migrants in Fiction and Photography

by

Linda Affolder

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fufillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

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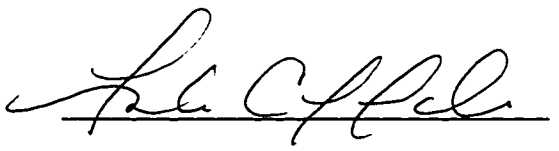

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Abstract

More than any other group of Americans, the families who migrated from the southcentral states into California during the Great Depression represent the hardship and adversity faced by people of the 1930s. This representative role was not created by the migrants, however, but largely by two contemporary documentary sources that focused on them: the Photography Project of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the writings of author John Steinbeck. Through the photographers' images and Steinbeck's words the migrants have come to symbolize the victimization yet perseverance of Americans in the decade. This representation was, and has remained, pervasive, influencing how people in the 1930s and since have understood the era. On one hand, these documentary sources provided a reasonably accurate description of the conditions of the migration. On the other hand, they constructed a symbolic identity for this group that was not simply the product of observation and description, but rather resulted from an array of motivations and intentions that were personally, philosophically, and politically driven, and far from the concerns of the migrants themselves.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

More than any other group of Americans, the families who migrated from the southcentral states into California during the Great Depression represent the hardship and adversity faced by people of the 1930s. They were the dust bowl migrants, the "Okies." The fascination with them caught my attention, as the migrants seemed extraordinarily pervasive in the popular understanding of the Great Depression. This representative role was not created by the migrants, however, but largely by two contemporary documentary sources that focused on them: the Photography Project of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the writings of author John Steinbeck. Through the photographers' images and Steinbeck's words the migrants have come to symbolize the victimization yet perseverance of Americans in the decade. This representation was, and has remained, pervasive, influencing how people in the 1930s and since have understood the era. The creation of this representation in photographs and fiction needs to be explored because the representation is so influential. On one hand, these documentary sources provided a reasonably accurate description of the conditions of the migration. On the other hand, they constructed a symbolic identity for this group that was not simply the product of observation and description, but rather resulted from an array of motivations and intentions that were personally, philosophically, and politically driven, and far from the concerns of the migrants themselves.

As a 1938 Works Progress Administration study surmised, "migration represents population movement in response to real or fancied differences in opportunity."[1] During the 1930s, however, the opportunities of an entire nation were curtailed by economic turmoil and constriction. Yet migration still occurred on a massive scale because *relative* opportunity remained the motivation for migration. The Okie migration was driven by two complementary forces: displacing forces of the current residence and attractive features of the future destination.[2] Viewed in this light, people in Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas, Kansas and Arkansas experienced a culmination of momentary and long-standing factors that created a situation that allowed for California to have, in the midst of a national depression, a greater relative opportunity for prosperity.

The dust bowl came to represent and be considered the cause of all Great Plains migration. Although fluctuations in the extremes of climate were not new occurrences on the Great Plains, the environmental destruction of the early years of the 1930s confounded and confronted the agriculturally based communities as never before. The much publicized dust storms that began in March 1933 monumentally devastated the stricken regions, raging on and off for years, doing millions of dollars worth of damage months at a time. The clouds of dust that darkened the sky and suffocated people and livestock did not cover the entire Great Plains tier, however, and the dust bowl accounted for only one stream of the larger Great Plains exodus. Although historians have reached no consensus on the exact perimeter of what was coined the dust bowl, the core of this environmental phenomenon

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[1]John N. Webb and Malcom Brown, Migrant Families Research Monograph XVIII (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1938), xv.

[2]Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), xv-xvi.

covered up to twenty counties in the five-state area of southeastern Colorado, southwestern Kansas, northeastern New Mexico, the northern Texas panhandle, and the Oklahoma panhandle.[3] Despite the ambiguity of these boundaries, the dust bowl has become synonymous with widespread wind erosion, drought and the environmental devastation of the Great Plains. However, as historian Carey McWilliams suggested, the generalization explaining the migration solely in terms of the dust bowl is "merely indicative of a general failure to understand the deep-seated causes of poverty and unrest" present in the region's farm population.[4]

As McWilliams implied, it was a combination of factors, not just environmental circumstances, that caused the outflow of up to 400,000 people from Texas, Kansas, Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.[5] An exploration of these factors can be made using Oklahoma as a case study, as that state accounted for a significant portion of the migration.[6] Approximately 100,000 people left Oklahoma during these years, supplying as much as 42 percent of California's migrant population during the decade, which explains the inclination of Californians to generalize and label the majority of migrants from the dust bowl to California as Okies.[7]

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[3]Ibid., 2-3.

[4]Carey McWilliams, Ill Fares The Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), 187.

[5]James N. Gregory, American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9-10; McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 33.

[6]Walter J. Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973), x, 6-7. The motivations for leaving the Great Plains have been the subject of lengthy debate among historians such as Carey McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl, and Donald Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[7]Harry Schwartz, Seasonal Farm Labor in the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 62.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Oklahoma region itself had been a destination of interstate migration as boom periods brought on by railroad development, reasonable land prices and favourable environmental conditions drew settlers and land speculators.[8] In a cyclical fashion, the boom periods were followed by bust periods caused by environmental hazards such as drought, blizzards, hail and grasshoppers, as well as the fluctuation of the international agricultural market. During these adverse periods an exodus from the state would occur. The counter-migration of the bust period was never greater than the influx of the prosperous years, however, resulting in the eventual situation of too many farmers for too few, and increasingly smaller, farms. Additionally, overcapitalization in land and machinery during the boom years led to increased debt during the bust periods, and as average farm incomes declined, liens increased and independent farm ownership in Oklahoma was replaced to a large degree by a tenant labour system. Independent farms fell to tenancy and corporation ownership, and farm owners were transformed into farm labourers. By 1930, tenant workers operated 62 percent of the state's farms.[9] Within this system, soil depletion increased as Oklahoma's traditional reliance on cotton within a one-crop system was coupled with the effects of increasing automation.[10] Combined, these factors allowed for the devastating effects of the droughts and dust storms of the 1930s, themselves consequently considered by agronomists the man-made catastrophes of years of improper soil use.[11]

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[8]Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl, 20-23.

[9]Gregory R. Graves, "Exodus From Indian Territory. The Evolution of Cotton Culture in Eastern Oklahoma," The Chronicles of Oklahoma, vol. 60, no. 2 (1982): 193.

[10]Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 4-6, 24-26.

[11]McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 187; Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 13-14; Worster, Dust Bowl, 5.

Ultimately, the 1930s migration from Oklahoma was a result of a decline in farm income and an increase in rural poverty and unemployment. In 1940 Oklahoma Governor Leon C. Phillips appointed a committee to discover the causes behind the migration from the state. It concluded that the Depression and environmental factors simply accelerated trends already evident during the prosperity of the twenties. The committee contended that the essential causes underlying the migration were: (1) an overreliance on agriculture, allegedly boosted by excessive and inequitable freight rates upon Oklahoma manufactured goods, rates established previous to the Depression by the government and the railroads, (2) an increased reliance on farm mechanization, which made the tenant system extraneous as efficient machines replaced manual labour, (3) soil depletion resulting from both the adherence to a one-crop system and from intensified drought, (4) the crop-curtailment policy of the New Deal, as the acreage limitations of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) decreased cash-crop agriculture by one-third, and (5) the non-existent or inequitable distribution of AAA benefit payments to tenants, with landlords retaining payments to purchase more machinery. With the exception of the AAA policies of the New Deal, the Governor's report never noted the Great Depression as a causal factor. [12] While the report noticeably placed the majority of blame on the federal government, it was correct in its assessment that the migration was the result of a combination of factors that were simply accelerated by the environmental and economic devastation of the drought and dust storms.

Governor Phillips' report reflects another frequent stereotype about the migration--that all the migrants were farmers. Surprisingly, urban residents

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[12]U.S., Congress, House, Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, Hearings, 76th. Cong., 3d sess., 1938, Part 5:2028-2037; Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 7-8.

accounted for the majority of the migrants.[13] Only slightly more than 40 percent of migrant families reported direct participation in agriculture prior to migrating. A variety of individuals, from an array of occupations and backgrounds that revolved around the troubled agricultural system of the Great Plains, looked elsewhere for economic opportunity. While the roots of distress were in agriculture, ultimately unemployment became the most pervasive cause of economic distress. A 1938 survey of 4,247 migrant families cited economic distress as the predominant force motivating people to move, accounting for 69 percent of the reasons given for leaving. Personal distress was credited with a further 25 percent, while only 6 percent claimed distress was not a reason for leaving.[14]

People were not only pushed out of the Great Plains, they were also drawn to California. Although the 1930s migration was instigated by economic distress, the families that left did so in a thoughtful and deliberate way, with roughly 90 percent setting out with a specific destination in mind. Families tended to leave only when the probability of better opportunities was considered reasonably high.[15] It was the West in general and California in particular that offered, in the minds of a variety of migrants, better opportunities for prosperity. [16]

Just as a combination of factors shaped the reasons for leaving their home states, so too a parallel combination influenced the migrants' choice of California. The reputation of California as a golden, plentiful, prosperous state had been promoted by the nation's press for nearly a century and the

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[13]Gregory, American Exodus, 15.

[14]Webb and Brown, Migrant Families, 5, 7, 9.

[15]Ibid,10.

[16]James N. Gregory, American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

choice of California as a destination was, for the dust bowl migrants, in part a legacy of that publicity.[17] The accounts of fortunes made possible through a tenable and inviting climate made California a long-standing choice of the westward movement. While advertisements placed in southcentral state newspapers during the 1930s promised high wages and relief payments in the thriving fields of California, they were only minimally effective in enticing the families westward.[18] Choosing California in response to advertisements ranked as low as two percent among migrants. Instead, most of the positive propaganda the migrants received was from other migrants through word of mouth.[19] The grapevine system of information provided optimistic reports of familiar work that lured the agriculturally based families westward. Although the west and California had been the principle destination of migration during the previous decade, the westward movement of the 1930s displayed a marked increase in the movement of families from the southcentral states, particularly Oklahoma and Kansas.[20] In California, migrants hoped to join in the prosperity reported by friends.

The migration to California was an arduous journey made by families. The composition of the migrating families greatly reflected the make-up of the family before migration. That is, the majority of the families journeyed intact with the main economic provider present. Although a small percentage of migrating families consisted of only one parent, the overwhelming majority consisted of a husband and wife that were 35 years or younger, with one or more children. Rarely would a migrating party contain

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[17]Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 22.

[18]Walter Goldschmidt, As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun and Co., 1978), 151.

[19]Webb and Brown, Migrant Families, 10.

[20]Ibid., xxiii.

unrelated members. Even rarer were cases of children remaining behind.[21] Life on the highway for these families brought a series of hardships: no plumbing or electricity, the rationing of water (itself often collected from irrigation ditches), mice and wood tick infestations, camp stoves, flat tires, empty gas tanks, breakdowns, and only occasionally the luxury of a tent.[22] Death was not uncommon, as the hardship was unrelenting. The journey provided no solace and the families were tired and dirty when they arrived on the doorstep of California.

The influx of almost one million interstate migrants into California during the thirties was not unprecedented. Since its 1850 entry into the Union, California had been a state heavily dependent on interstate migration for its population growth. By 1900, the population had increased 14 times, with a relatively modest percentage of the resulting 1.5 million residents born in the state.[23] California's growth from interstate migration continued throughout the initial decades of the twentieth century, as the population of the state increased to 5.6 million. During the decade of the 1920s alone, the interstate migratory contribution to California's population was 1.4 million, a total percentage gain of 64 percent. Further, the decade of the 1940s witnessed 2.5 million interstate migrants enter California.[24]

The 1930s influx of 400,000 Okies nevertheless appeared to be overwhelming. The main reason lay in the fact that these migrants did not distribute themselves evenly across time or space. The families that came

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[21]Ibid., 93-95, 97-98; Schwartz, Seasonal Farm Labor in the United States, 62.

[22]Shirley Sargent, "A Moving Life in the Great Depression," Californians, vol. 6, no. 1 (1988): 31-32.

[23]Warren S. Thompson, Growth and Changes in California's Population (Los Angeles: The John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, 1955), 12; Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, viii.

[24]Thompson, Growth and Changes in California's Population, 25.

during the Great Depression focused their sights on the three major agricultural valleys of California--the Great Central, the Sacramento, and the San Joaquin--rather than the large urban centers. With the migration into California specifically focused on the three main valleys, specific regions faced the absorption of large numbers of unemployed people. From 1935 to 1940 the San Joaquin Valley alone witnessed a population growth of 192,115, a figure double that of the previous decade.[25] Although farm production had steadily increased throughout the 1920s, the actual area of cultivation itself had only slightly increased. Consequently, the rural region of California had, by 1942, never accounted for more than 10 percent of the total state population, despite the significant role of agriculture as a chief industry within the state.[26] Additionally, much of the influx occurred from 1935 through 1937; those three years contained nearly half of the migration for the entire decade.[27] Thus, the uneven distribution in both time and space of the migration made the 1930s influx appear larger than it actually was relative to previous decades.

The customary agricultural workers in California were markedly different from the dust bowl migrants in both appearance and goals. The former were generally members of minority groups who were consistently on the move following the harvest. As early as the 1870s, two types of seasonal workers had followed the crops in California. First, there were the single white men. This was a numerically small group, however, and the more abundant labour source was made up of minority racial and nationality groups. Chinese and Japanese workers provided a large proportion of the agricultural labour force during the later half of the nineteenth century,

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[25]Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 45-46.

[26]McWilliams, Ill Fares the Land, 32.

[27]Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 45-46.

followed by Mexican and Filipino labourers in the 1920s. Mexican and Mexican-Americans became the bulwark of agricultural workers in California in the years shortly preceding the Depression.[28]

Before the arrival of the dust bowl migrants, the Depression had already changed the cycle of Mexican agricultural labour. Traditionally, following the harvest, these workers returned to their Mexican-American communities and towns situated on the outlying areas of major California cities and went on relief. With the stress on relief budgets during the thirties, this labour group was targeted by relief authorities, who launched a series of measures aimed at the repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Roughly 150,000 Mexicans were consequently repatriated by 1937, and the inward flow of Mexican immigration to the United States was reduced to one-fifteenth of what it had been earlier.[29]

The influx of the dust bowl migrants changed this earlier portrait of California agricultural labour. The 1930s migrants were white families, newly broke and unemployed, possessing different social customs and wanting to relocate permanently. They were no longer members of minority groups who were considered not to be Americans and therefore not unjustifiably impoverished. Because of their ethnicity, the poverty of the Mexican labourers had not been overly disturbing to Californians. Many Californians felt the Mexicans were racial inferiors who had always been, and would continue to be, impoverished. However, the Great Plains migrants were white American families seeking a better life. The poverty of this group was made even more troubling to Californians by the fact that these families resisted the customary practice of California's agricultural workers to drift

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[28]Ibid., 35.
[29]Ibid., 35-37.

continuously. Instead, the families remained after the harvest, setting up shack-towns and ditch-bank settlements on the outskirts of small towns. In 1939, 60 percent of the families that had arrived in California throughout the thirties still resided in the county to which they had first arrived.[30] Thus, as the number of displaced families continued to increase, they became a serious concern for counties, agricultural valleys and a state trying to absorb the new and growing population. This group possessed different social customs and religious beliefs from many Californians, and was an expanding population that was not going to leave. This was the migrant population that presented itself to California during the Great Depression.

The federal government response to the causes and circumstances of the migration during the height of the ordeal--from 1933 to 1938--came in the form of broad, nationally directed action. From the initial days of the New Deal administration, rural distress received government attention and ministration. Passed during the Hundred Days, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) tackled the problems of agriculture and established a system of government price supports for agriculture linked to crop curtailment and acreage reduction. The limitations of the Act were quickly evident, however, as its failure to take into account the landlord-tenant system led to the inequitable distribution of benefit payments. Landlords withheld payments from tenants and instead used the funds to purchase more machinery. With more machinery in use and less acreage to farm, many tenants were forced to leave. The Resettlement Administration (RA) was created by executive order in April of 1935 to aid these displaced families and combat chronic rural poverty.

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[30]Ibid., 33.

Funded under the Emergency Relief Act, the RA inherited rural relief and land use administration from the AAA, the Department of Interior, and the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), and quickly set in motion a series of measures designed to deal with the problems facing agriculture. A Land Use program designated approximately 10,000,000 acres of substandard land to be removed from cultivation. A resettlement program was created to provide adequate housing and land for those who were living on the inferior land. Rehabilitation programs addressed the emergency aspects of rural poverty with small loans to farmers, grants for emergency and subsistence needs and voluntary arbitration of farm-debt disputes. A fourth task focused on suburban resettlement, creating Greenbelt towns to absorb the inevitable rural population influx.[31] Twenty months later when Franklin Roosevelt's executive order was declared unconstitutional, the Resettlement Administration and its programs were transferred to the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA continued and refined the programs set in motion by the RA.

The FSA continued the RA's focus on rural poverty. A Tenant Purchase program was designed to help selected tenant farm families and homeless low-income farm people purchase their own family-sized farms. Rural rehabilitation was tackled through emergency relief grants; promotion of group and cooperative farm enterprises and associations; encouragement of neighborhood action groups to deal with mutual concerns; medical care programs; debt adjustment and tenure improvement; and loans given in conjunction with farm and home management planning, technical support and supervision. The process of retiring substandard land and resettling

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[31] Maren Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life. Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 105-106.

families to suitable farmland also continued under the FSA but to a lesser degree. Ministrative priorities had shifted toward the escalating migratory farm labour problem.[32]

The migratory labour situation had been addressed by the FERA and the RA. To some degree, emergency housing in labour camps, free medical care and subsistence provisions were provided to families in distress. Several government agencies proposed a variety of measures to deal with, and remedy, the economic, political, and social aspects of the problem. However, the rapid growth of the migratory labour population following 1935 prompted the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy in 1937 to recommend that the Resettlement Administration expand its efforts.[33]

When the Farm Security Administration was established later that year, the migratory labour problem received increased attention. A Migratory Farm Labor Section of the organization was commissioned to establish and oversee a labour camp program. Temporary and permanent camps and shelters were immediately constructed in the areas where migrants congregated, both along migrant routes and at the destinations. The camps and shelters provided sanitary facilities, medical services and recreational programs for the migrant families. By 1942, ninety-five FSA camps had been constructed and approximately 75,000 people accommodated.[34] The first camps were built in California, and then a chain of camps was extended from the Pacific Northwest to Florida.[35]

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[32]Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics. The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 193-221.

[33]Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 221-222.

[34]Ibid., 221-222.

[35]William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 226.

The ease of transfer and continuity of purpose between the RA and the FSA was due to the presence of an ideological devotion and evangelistic zeal that guided the administrators and structured virtually all programs of the two agencies.[36] The directors of the RA and FSA revered the agrarian ideal embedded in the Jeffersonian agrarian myth. However, these leaders combined this esteem of the past with an appreciation of the contemporary climate. They approached Jeffersonian agrarianism from a social rather than individualistic perspective, seeking to balance individual freedom with collective security.[37] Their doctrine had an optimistic, reformist enthusiasm and enlisted nostalgic and evocative language in its writings. The leaders of the RA and FSA strongly believed that rural poverty had occurred through no fault of the working poor on the land, that only through intervention and centrally directed action could rural reform and rehabilitation be achieved, and that every staff member hired was to apply this ideology to every project undertaken.[38]

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[36]Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 267.

[37]Ibid., 267-268.

[38]Gaer, Toward Farm Security (Washington, D.C.,: Government Printing Office, 1941), 66-67 as found in Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 267-271.

Chapter 2

The Face of the Depression: The FSA Photography Project

The most vivid depiction of the interstate migrants was created by New Deal sponsored photography. From 1935 to 1943 the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration was commissioned to photograph and publicize the conditions of rural distress. Consequently, a substantial portion of the 270,000 prints and negatives at the agency documented how the migrating families were affected by dislocation and economic depression. The dominant image created through the photographic documentation of the displaced migrants was of families who were victims of circumstances that had left them in desperate and extremely impoverished situations. The impact of the images was solidified by the mass consumption of the photographs by Americans which made the migrants icons for the decade. For the government administrators involved, the scale of poverty depicted by the photographs established the need for widespread government intervention and helped to justify New Deal programs. For those directly involved in the photography project, the effectiveness of this medium affirmed their belief in the power of documentary photography to foster social change. This project was prompted by the conditions of the migration and sought to record the plight of the migrants. It also, however, reflected motivations that did not primarily have to do with the migrants. An exploration of the creation of these images consequently reveals more about the goals of the photographers and government administrators than of the lives of the migrants themselves.

The Photography Section of the FSA flourished during its eight-year existence. The agency headquarters was located in Washington, D.C., and housed a small bureaucratic staff responsible for tasks such as printing, filing and distribution. The Section also employed a core staff of thirteen photographers who travelled throughout the continental United States and to Puerto Rico on assignment. Most of the 270,000 photographs taken during this period were of the rural South and Midwest. The initial 1935 distribution of photographs for media reproduction was 965 images. By 1940 the photograph distribution had escalated tremendously to an average 1,406 images per month. The Photographs were released to all forms of the media and were also used in RA and FSA annual reports, publications and exhibits.[1] By the end of 1938, Historical Section images had appeared in a multitude of publications ranging from Life magazine, the New York Times, and the Literary Digest to Birth Control Review. By 1942 a dozen books devoted to just the photographs had been published.[2]

The motivations of those involved in the Historical Section deeply influenced the results of the project, beginning with the instigator of the project, RA director Rexford G. Tugwell. Tugwell championed and developed the ideology of the RA more than any other member of the organization. Typical of other New Dealers, Tugwell strongly believed that rural poverty had occurred through no fault of the poor working on the land, and that only through centrally directed action could rural reform and rehabilitation be achieved. Originally a member of Roosevelt's brain trust and then Assistant

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[1]Werner J. Severin, "Cameras with a Purpose: The Photojournalists of F.S.A.," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 41, no. 2 (1964): 194.

[2]Penelope Dixon, Photographers of The Farm Security Administration. An Annotated Bibliography, 1930-1980 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), xix; Marion Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life. Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 108-111.

Secretary of Agriculture, Tugwell was appointed to the RA in 1935 and his legacy heavily influenced the goals and programs of the FSA. Trained as an economist, Tugwell used his government appointments to experiment with practical applications of reformist theories he had developed earlier in his career. The economics textbook American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement that he co-authored with Thomas Munro in 1924 revealed his reformist attitude toward contemporary economic conditions.[3] It was agriculture and its reform, however, that captured Tugwell's attention. He realized early on that agriculture, although "the most individualistic of all industries," remained the most promising area in which to experiment with government intervention, planning and management.[4] Tugwell believed that collective security was necessary to combat the self-perpetuating poverty that had insinuated itself into American agriculture. However, this collective security could not be achieved through voluntary participation. Since the farmer was at the mercy of forces--both natural and human--beyond his control, agricultural reform established at a higher, centralized level was necessary to achieve collective security. It was, therefore, the responsibility of federal agricultural policy-makers to act.[5]

Central to Tugwell's ideology was the importance he placed on communication. People needed to understand an economic system before they could change it. Often difficult to obtain from words alone, an understanding of complex economic situations required new forms of communication. For Tugwell, this new form was photography. Tugwell's

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[3]Rexford Guy Tugwell, Thomas Munro and Roy E. Stryker, American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924).

[4]Rexford Guy Tugwell, To the Lesser Heights of Morningside: A Memoir (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 184.

[5]Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 37; Stange Symbols of Ideal Life, 93-94.

interest in visual communication developed early in his teaching career at Columbia University and was evident in the extensive use of photography in American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement. Tugwell believed successful mass communication could be achieved through photography, which he saw as an indispensable means of legitimizing the written message.[6] Further, Tugwell realized that to accomplish reform-oriented goals, a government agency needed to rally public support for its programs. By effectively communicating the situation of rural poverty, Tugwell believed he would foster the support necessary to achieve his goals.[7]

FSA programs and their larger aspirations were often criticized by Congress, and at times the very people the agency intended to help resisted the program. The interventionist nature of the FSA challenged traditional convictions regarding the role of the government in agriculture. A defiance of the status quo was implicit in the organization's programs. Yet, despite the extremely depressed economic climate, many people found moral and material security in tradition.[8] For example, some members of Congress did not respond positively to the concept of federally owned farm land and federally sponsored cooperative associations.[9] Some agricultural elite needed convincing that New Deal measures were necessary and not a direct challenge to their social status, profits and powerful positions. Furthermore, the taint of charity and personal failure that accompanied rehabilitation programs facilitated resistance by the rural poor. Although the programs were never

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[6]Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life, 91-92, 107.

[7]F. Jack Hurley, Portrait of a Decade. Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 10.

[8]Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, 274-276.

[9]Ibid., 276.

considered revolutionary, the actions consistently elicited anxiety from both the poor and the wealthy and were often considered subversive.[10]

Tugwell's convictions on rural reform, mass communication and the need to foster support for the agency manifested themselves in the creation of the Information Division of the RA, subsequently renamed the Historical Section of the FSA. The renaming of the Information Division as the Historical Section was, and remains, interesting for two reasons: the new emphasis on the historical significance of the photographs as documentary sources; and the appropriation of a word that inherently involves interpretation, as the photography project interpreted and subsequently used the migrant situation to achieve its goals. The goals of the Historical Section of the RA and FSA were twofold: the agency was created to publicize long-standing rural distress and foster support for the unprecedented federal intervention undertaken by the RA and FSA; and the photographs were intended to display the ameliorative results and broader, long-range goals of agency programs.[11] Essentially a propaganda agency, the Historical Section was to accomplish its goals through a centrally controlled solicitation and publication of specific images.

Although created to photograph and publicize the conditions of rural poverty and tenant farming, the Historical Section reflected a collaboration that had begun prior to the 1930s and the concerns of the RA and FSA. The staff members shared a belief in the power of photography for communication. In his position as professor of economics at Columbia University, Tugwell had become acquainted with student Roy Emerson Stryker. Stryker, a graduate assistant, had enlisted extensive visual aids and

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[10]Ibid., 262.

[11]Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, 54; Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life, 106-107.

field trips to teach entry-level economics courses. Reinforcing his own belief in the importance of visual communication, Tugwell recruited Stryker in 1924 to select and edit all illustrative material for American Economic Life. The project resulted in Stryker's contact with thousands of images. It was during this year-long commission that Stryker's awareness of the communicative power of photography developed. When Tugwell established the Information Division he wanted someone who understood how to use photography to document the agency's activities and elicit support for its programs.[12] Tugwell recruited Stryker to head the section.

The most significant contribution Stryker made to the Historical Section was the promotion and implementation of his own philosophy regarding the power and responsibility of photography. Although never a photographer himself, Stryker had learned from his experiences working on American Economic Life that photographic images were not just snapshots of landscapes and family portraits, but forms of historical documentation and communication.[13] Further, this documentation could communicate social situations and social stratification, not just events. Consequently, photographs could raise awareness, make statements and produce a social consciousness. Ultimately, Stryker wanted to produce "as well-rounded a picture of American life during that period as anyone could get."[14] He aspired to provide a pictorial encyclopedia of American agriculture and the "common man" that would move the photography project well beyond its original role as a propaganda agency.

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[12]Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, 28.

[13]Roy Emerson Stryker, "The FSA Collection of Photographs" in Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, In This Proud Land. America 1935-1943 As Seen in the FSA Photographs (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 7; Stange, Symbols of and Ideal Life, 105.

[14]Roy Emerson Stryker quoted in Nancy Wood, "Portrait of Stryker" in In This Proud Land, 14; Stryker, "The FSA Collection of Photographs," 7.

Throughout the thirties there was a growing awareness of the potential of photography to communicate to a mass audience and Stryker's concept of effective photography was shared by others. Many photographers, journalists and government officials believed that photographs could competently communicate to and mobilize an audience. Further, during the thirties the economic breakdown brought on efforts to discover the essence of America, and for many, photographs were an appropriate way of capturing that essence.[15] As historian Alan Trachtenberg says, there was "an obsession with the surface drama of the times."[16] Stryker's beliefs regarding the power of photographs to communicate fit comfortably into that obsession.

Stryker believed that to achieve his goals, effective documentary photographs would have to secure much of their meaning and impact from their context.[17] Stryker demanded that his photographers learn the context of their assignments, and he provided an array of political, economic and social information to each photographer before he or she began photographing a region. Stryker encouraged his photographers to contact and work with local government workers, health officials, social workers, journalists and farmers to further their understanding of the area. A photographer armed with an understanding of the forces at work in a region could better reflect that understanding in his or her photographs, which purportedly would truthfully convey the subject matter.[18]

To communicate "everyday America" to the viewer, Stryker believed that the photographer must depict subjects directly, clearly and honestly. The

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[15]Alan Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 248.

[16]Ibid., 249.

[17]Bill Ganzel, Dust Bowl Descent (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 7.

[18]Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, 56.

stereotype and the phony were to be avoided and the truth effectively communicated not only through the photographer's grasp of context, but also by focusing on common men and women, and treating them with dignity. In Stryker's opinion, there was

> no picture in [the FSA file] that in any way whatsoever represents an attempt by a photographer to ridicule his subject, to be cute with him, to violate his privacy, or do something cliché. However they might have differed in skill and insight, our photographers had one thing in common, and that was a deep respect for human beings. . . . There's honesty there, and compassion, and a natural regard for individual dignity.[19]

Stryker dictated to his staff that validity and meaning came from documenting the common and ordinary, not the spectacular or the bizarre. He therefore advised his photographers to capture "not the America of the unique, odd or unusual happening, but the America of how to mine a piece of coal, grow a wheat field or make an apple pie."[20] It was the everyday that Stryker felt would evoke emotion, sympathy and a point of view from the audience.[21]

Stryker incorporated his beliefs into the Historical Section by maintaining strict control over all aspects of the project. All photographers were hired by Stryker. All assignments were determined and allotted by Stryker. Further, each assignment was accompanied by an extensive "shooting script" that was created by Stryker. As this excerpt substantiates, these instructional texts provided detailed directions for subject matter, questions to be answered and the essence to be captured:

> The group activities of various income levels
> The organized and unorganized activities of the various income groups

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[19]Stryker, "The FSA Collection of Photographs," 7.

[20]Roy Stryker as quoted in William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 50.

[21]Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, vii.

"Where can people meet?"
Well-to-do
Country clubs
Homes
Lodges
Poor
Beer halls
Pool halls
Saloons
Street corners
Garages
Cigar stores

The baseball diamond as an important part of our general landscape.
This is particularly noticeable when one views small towns from the air.

Relationship between the density of population and income of such things as
Pressed clothes
Polished shoes and so on
It is likely in large industrial areas that even the poor groups will make a greater effort to have polished shoes, pressed clothes, than the same or even a higher-income group might in the smaller populated areas. What effect does wealth have on this?

The wall decorations in homes as an index to the different income groups and their reactions.[22]

Once the photographs were taken, all undeveloped negatives and field notes were sent directly to Stryker. He then supervised the development of the film, selected the images for reproduction and distribution, and destroyed the negatives he deemed incompatible with his personal and FSA goals. Stryker's control of editing, cropping and sequencing made the photographs consistent in their point of view.

While Stryker controlled the running of the Photography Section and infused it with his own ideas, the individual photographers he hired contributed their own motivations and methods of effective documentary photography. The two photographers that predominantly contributed to the representation of the migrants--Dorothea Lange and her photographs of

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[22]FSA Shooting Script, 1936, memo from R. E. Stryker to all photographers entitled "For things which should be photographed as American background," reproduced in Stryker and Wood, In This Proud Land, 187.

migrant camps in California, and Arthur Rothstein and his images of the dust bowl--shared Stryker's convictions. Both photographers believed in the ability of photography to depict social conditions, evoke emotions and sympathy from an audience and communicate a message. The two photographers understood that the message had to be communicated directly and accurately. Both photographers believed that photographs were documentary instruments and the photographer was, or could be, an agent of social change.[23]

Although Lange and Rothstein subscribed to the same philosophy of documentary photography, their methods were different. In photographing rural poverty and the dust bowl, Arthur Rothstein felt only candid photographs would truthfully depict the situation. But the natural response of people who were unaccustomed to being photographed was to pose and give their forlorn attitudes over to "Sunday-snapshot smiles."[24] To overcome this tendency, Rothstein distracted the attention of the subjects. Rothstein defended the validity of this method, using as an example his 1935 photograph of an Arkansas sharecropper mother and daughter (See Figure 1). The photograph captures the young pregnant mother in tattered clothing, bracing her back against her swollen abdomen, her young child standing beside her. The two figures look off in different directions, their expressions worried and upset. Rothstein's initial attempts to photograph the scene produced self-conscious smiles. Consequently, he enlisted a bystander to talk to the woman and distract her. When the mother had forgotten Rothstein's presence and was answering a question with apprehension and worry, the

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[23]Dixon, Photographers of the Farm Security Administration, 53, 120; Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 226, 231.

[24]Arthur Rothstein, as quoted in Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 61.

Figure 1. Arthur Rothstein, "Sharecropper Mother and Child, Arkansas, 1935." Source: William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

photographer captured his image.[25] Ironically, candid photographs had to be carefully planned.

Rothstein's method did not escape criticism. The most notorious instance involved Rothstein's photographs of a bleached cow-skull in South Dakota (See Figure 2). Attempting to communicate the emaciation of the dust storms and drought, Rothstein first photographed the cow-skull from five angles, lengthening the shadows that fell on the dry riverbed. He then moved the skull to a cactus patch to change the context and background. The publication of these images, at the height of the summer's drought, resulted in calls of distortion and deception. An article entitled "It's a Fake" in Forum in late August 1936 noted a variety of deceptive aspects: the photograph had been taken in spring, before the summer drought conditions had occurred; and the skull had been drying for years and was not a result of the recent drought. The article implied Rothstein simply carried the skull around as a moveable, provoking prop.[26] The violation of the spirit of documentary--capturing things in an unmanipulated, unexaggerated, actual state--was at the heart of the uproar. Politically loaded and exaggerated, the debate lasted for weeks, challenged the integrity and continuation of the photography project, and even became an issue in Roosevelt's re-election campaign as critics accused the administration of using the faked photograph to arouse attention and thus elicit funds.[27]

Compared to Rothstein, Dorothea Lange more closely followed the doctrine of documentary photography because she believed the reality of a situation could best be conveyed through the deliberate selection of content

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[25]Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 60-61.

[26]Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, 88.

[27]Ibid., 86-91; Dixon, Photographers of the Farm Security Administration, 119-120; Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 61.

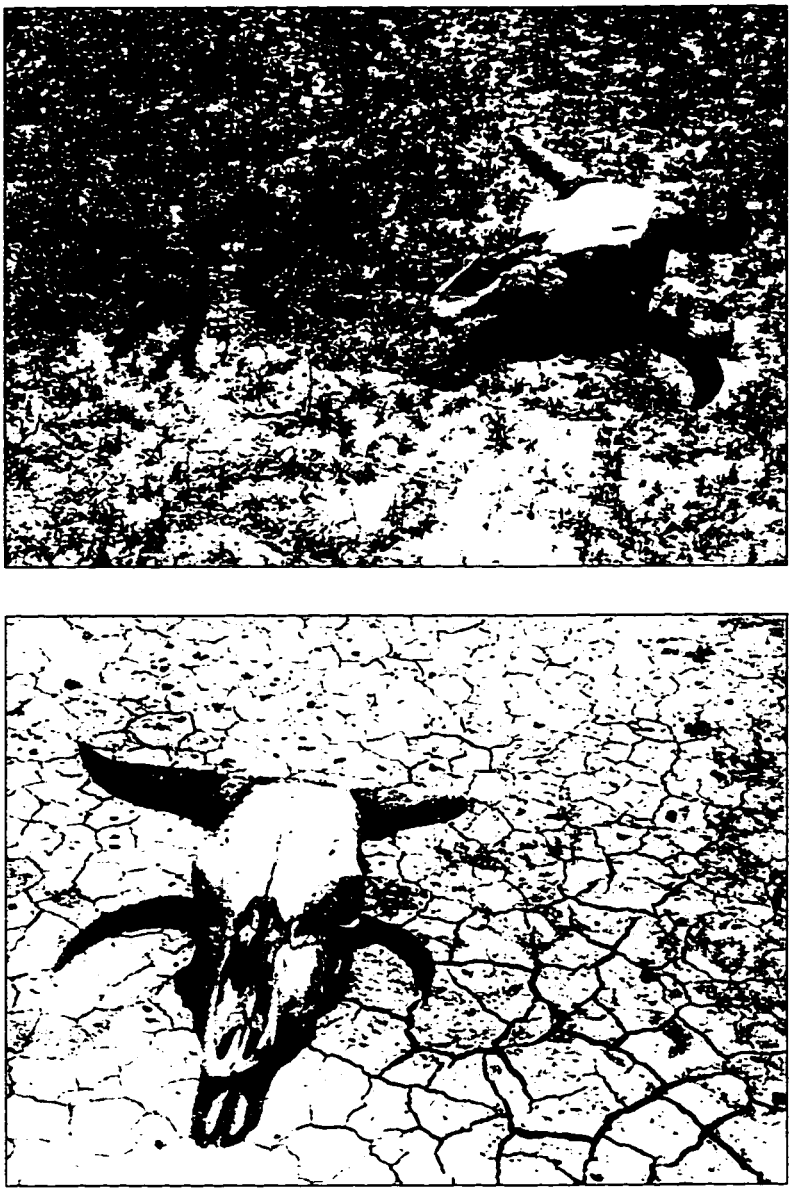

Figure 2. Arthur Rothstein, "A Cow's Skull, South Dakota, May 1935." Source: William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

rather than the manipulation of subjects.[28] Lange sought to observe and then select subjects who seemed to exemplify the situation she was trying to capture. She did not distract her subjects, but rather asked short questions, more often than not explained her purpose, and snapped the shots. Her background in portrait photography caused faces to be the favored subject of her images. "The human face," she said,

> is the universal language. . . . The same expressions are readable, understandable all over the world. It is the only language that is really universal, with its shades of meaning, its explosions; where a slight twinge of a few muscles run the gamut of a person's potential.[29]

The careful selection of subjects did not mean hours of forethought, as Lange was able to identify what she felt was significant as soon as she stumbled upon it. She described this ability in her recollection of the circumstances that surrounded the capturing of one of her most famous images, Migrant Mother (See Figure 3). Driving home from a month-long field assignment, Lange passed a highway sign pointing towards a pea-pickers' camp. Acting on what she described as "instinct," Lange turned the car around and travelled the twenty miles back to the camp. Immediately drawn to one woman like a "magnet," Lange asked a few questions of the woman and snapped five pictures. As the photographer recalled, the decision to select this woman to convey the conditions of the migrant camps was quick yet certain:

> The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment.[30]

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[28]Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 231.

[29]Dorothea Lange quoted in "This Is The Way It Is - Look At It! Look At It!," Popular Photography, (May 1966): 58.

[30]Dorothea Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget," The American West, vol. 7, no. 3 (1970): 46, originally published in Popular Photography, vol. 46, no. 2 (1960): 42-43.

Figure 3. Dorothea Lange, "Migrant Mother, Pea Picker's Family, California, 1936." Source: Therese Thau Heyman, Sandra S. Phillips and John Szarkowski, comps, Dorothea Lange: American Photographs (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), Plate 43.

Interestingly, Lange neglected to collect the woman's name or ask her about her situation. Although she was genuinely concerned and troubled by the migrant situation, it was Lange's skill as a photographer and her motivation to capture a social situation in a photograph, not her direct concern for the migrants, that made Florence Thompson the most influential face of the FSA photography project.

Although both Rothstein and Lange represented reality through different methods, the payoff for their images was the same. Both of the photographers created images that seemed to encapsulate the conditions of rural poverty and the interstate migration. Newspapers and critics agreed and complimented the photographers on their skill. Stryker applauded the ability of the two photographers to depict the conditions of the down-trodden in a way that would evoke sympathetic reaction. The images these two photographers produced were particularly pervasive and influential. They were published in newspapers, magazines, books and exhibits and were viewed in all areas of the country.[31] The images were so evocative that journalists and critics credited the photographers with producing "the pictures that altered America--the searching, seeking, uncensored views of lean years that truly interpret the conditions of an impoverished land and its people."[32]

Americans were presented with, and influenced by, the FSA images for a number of reasons. By the late 1930s, photographs had become an essential component of presenting the news. The thirties saw a quest for documentation and authenticity, as well as an urge to witness the experiences of others. In this regard, the FSA project complimented a broader role of

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[31]Karin Becker Ohrn, Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 88-89.

[32]"Portrait of an Era," U.S. Camera,(November 1962): 68.

documentary expression of the thirties.[33] Wire services, newspapers and magazines extensively used and depended on photographs to describe events. The photo-essay, with its series of images carefully laid out, emerged in magazines as a new way of telling a story about an individual or event. The general trend of running sensational or trivial photographs that had been popular prior to the depression gave way to an appreciation for common, everyday images in the news. A number of picture-and-word books that focused on poverty, small towns, minorities and agriculture appeared between 1938 and 1941 and drew on the FSA collection.[34] People of the 1930s were attracted to photographs of everyday life and ordinary people,[35] and the FSA photographs, with the distinct lack of movie star glamour shots, gave the audience everyday America in abundance.

The depiction of everyday life made the FSA images even more influential because they fit into the 1930s trend toward traditional values. For many Americans, the Depression was a sign that the country had drifted from its original path and had consequently inadequately adjusted to the new industrial order. Rather than calls for complete change in society, a desire emerged for a return to traditional values.[36] Common everyday people were the essence of what was distinctively traditional America and symbolized a time whose values needed to be reestablished.[37] The people captured in the FSA photographs reinforced conventional values of family, struggle and endurance. Despite the strained circumstances, many Americans internalized

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[33]Lawrence W. Levine, The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 273.

[34]Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 252-253.

[35]Ohrn, Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition, 331-332.

[36]Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 157; Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 313.

[37]Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 247.

a sense of personal liability and felt it was their responsibility to go on. Although this outlook softened somewhat as the decade progressed, the popular culture of the 1930s was filled with traditional values that stressed personal perseverance.[38] The most successful FSA photographs routinely focused on families and their struggles. Within these photographs the customary, gendered roles were reinforced, as the women were the pregnant or caring mothers and the men the drivers and workers. The images repeatedly displayed women as strong in their capacity to cope with tragedy. The most effective FSA photographs were of white mothers and families, again reinforcing to the audience, the traditional American family in its new struggle (See Figures 4 to 7). Although the dust bowl migrant population in California contained many black families, it was the images of white families that would elicit the sympathy the FSA required, as many Americans in the 1930s considered black poverty to be a perpetual outcome of racial inferiority rather than the direct result of contemporary circumstances.

The appeal and success of the FSA photographs came from their ability to evoke emotion which was achieved through the highly selective capturing and presentation of images. Pitiable in their squalor and overwhelming poverty, these families were also ennobled through their position of being at the mercy of the struggling American agriculture system and the natural environment. Never lazy, the families displayed an unwavering perseverance in the face of overwhelming blight. These families were not presented as lewd, cruel, drunk, fighting, screaming or even crying, a fact that to a degree challenges the accuracy of the depiction. The individuals in the photographs were wearing their own ragged clothes and were living in soggy roadside camps. Their homes were deserted and buried under dust. The

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[38]Levine, The Unpredictable Past, 214, 218.

Figure 4. Dorothea Lange, "Migratory Farm Laborer on the Pacific Coast, California, 1936." Source: F. Jack Hurley, Portrait of a Decade. Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 53.

Figure 5. Dorothea Lange, "Eighteen year-old mother from Oklahoma now a California Migrant, California, March 1936." Source: Therese Thau Heyman, Sandra S. Phillips and John Szarkowski, comps, Dorothea Lange: American Photographs (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), Plate 45.

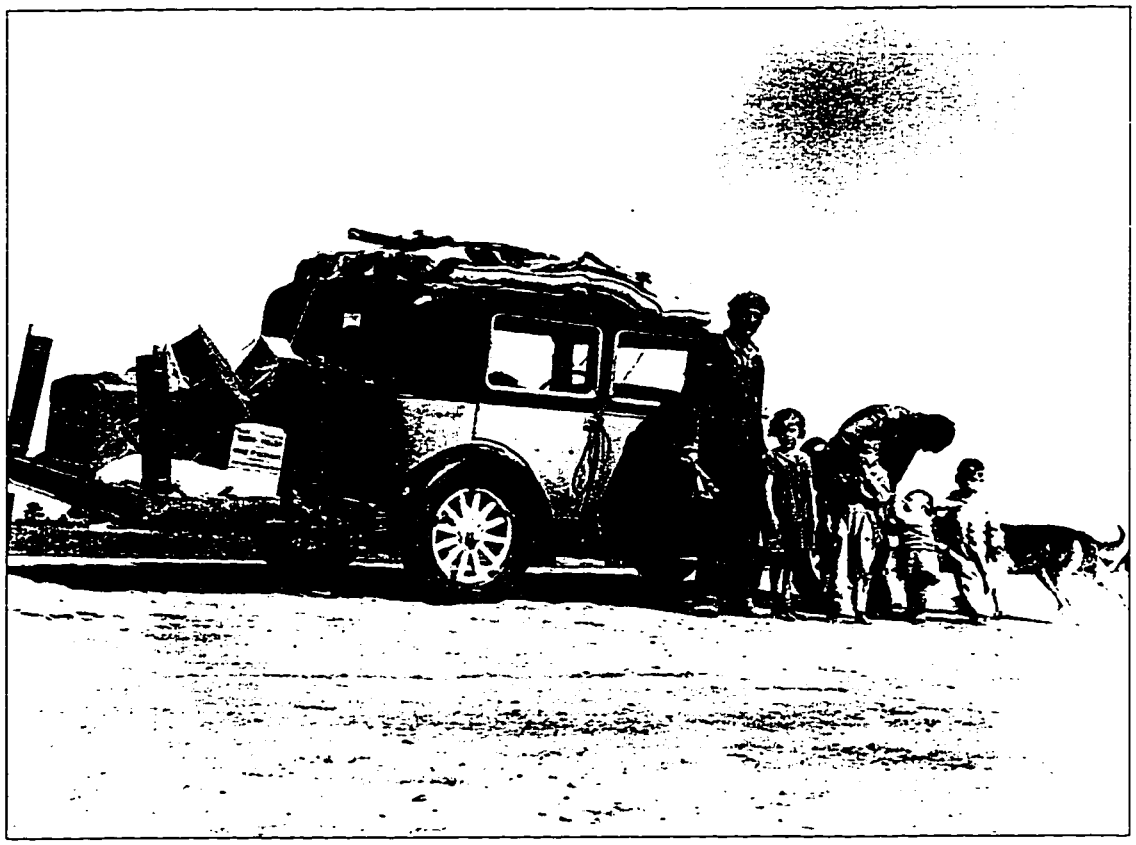

Figure 6. Dorothea Lange, "One-Man Caravan. Oklahomans on US 99, San Joaquin Valley, California, 1938." Source: Therese Thau Heyman, Sandra S. Phillips and John Szarkowski, comps, Dorothea Lange: American Photographs (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), Plate 19.

Figure 7. Dorothea Lange, "Woman of the High Plains, Texas Panhandle, 1938." Source: William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

photographs did present actual people and real events. The images often were closely cropped, eliminating most references to their specific content, and thus the individuals in the photographs could have been from anywhere.These families were common Americans. They were depicted as not responsible for their circumstances and, consequently, were worthy of help. This representation of the worthiness of the migrants despite their poverty was what the photographers and FSA, not the migrants, realized was necessary to rouse the necessary attention and funds.

Enhancing the emotional appeal of the visual component of the photographs was the routine accompaniment of captions. The names, occupations or locations of subject matter were often followed by reflective thoughts of the migrants as recorded or recollected by the photographers. These captions were blunt snippets, often isolated from the longer, contextualizing passages that gave precise accounts of the individual's predicament. They were consistently emotional sentiments expressed in exaggerated folk vernacular:

> Us people has got to stick together to get by these hard times
> Yessir, we're starved, stalled, and stranded.
> Hit's a hard get-by. The land's just fit fer to hold the world together.
> If you die, you're dead - that's all.

The quotations reflected both desperation and determination, and faithfully repeated the same message--the migrants were wronged yet strong.[39] Regardless of whether they were the exact words of the subject or a factual summary of the situation, the captions always fortified the message of the image.

The presentation of the migrants' words phonetically with the photographs reveals an aspect of the photography project--a paternalistic

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[39]Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 228.

relationship between the government agency and the migrants. Dirty in appearance and unsophisticated in words, the migrants in the photographs were infantilized. This representation placed the photographers and government officials into the position of savior and agent for the migrants. Even though accuracy in documentation can be used as one explanation for the phonetic spelling, the paternalistic point of view inherent in the images mutes the migrants' voices as their pleading faces and unsophisticated words seek help from those more capable. Within the photographic representation there was a lack of respect for the complexity of the migrants' situation. Incidents of violence, stealing, striking, racial discrimination and segregation all occurred within the migrant population. These aspects of the dust bowl migration were not represented in the FSA images, however, as the photographs were to provide one representation--the wronged yet strong families--and thus illustrate the specific goals of their onlookers.

Chapter 3

Reading Between the Lines: John Steinbeck and The Grapes of Wrath

The New Deal sponsored photography was not the only medium to represent migrant families as victims who nevertheless persevered under adversity. John Steinbeck advanced this portrayal through his most popular novel, The Grapes of Wrath. Published in 1939, the highly influential work helped to insert into the American consciousness the characterization of wronged but strong migrants. Like the photographs, the novel provided a broad, if simplistic, reasonably accurate portrait of the actual conditions of the migration.[1] The novel's protagonists, the Joad family, became the representative migrants of the Depression. But, like the photographs, the fictional family was the product of motivations often distinct from those of the migrants, motives that were the product of the author's personal experiences and of his deliberate attempt to create an image that furthered his philosophical vision.

Steinbeck's perspective on the dust bowl migration emerged through the fictional story of the Joads, an Oklahoma tenant farm family that is forced off its forty acres of land by a combination of environmental and man-made circumstances. Ravaged by dust storms and displaced by the accumulated effects of sharecropping and farm mechanization, the twelve individuals who comprise the extended family bid farewell to the land they have farmed for

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[1]William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 121.

generations. They stack the possessions they have not sold onto an overloaded jalopy and head west on Route 66, expecting to find an abundance of jobs and high wages awaiting them in California. The westward trek through the blazing sun of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona reveals to the family the severity of their situation and gives them glimpses into their upcoming hardships: mud, scorn, misery, hunger, abandonment and death. Crossing into California the family hears testimony of what awaits them in the state:

> Well, Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself, it's the way they say it. But I can't tell you nothin'. You got to go there. I hear there's three hundred thousan' of our people there -- an' livin' like hogs, 'cause ever'thing in California is owned. They ain't nothin' left. An' them people that owns it is gonna hang on to it if they got ta kill ever'body in the worl' to do it.[2]

The Joads nevertheless remain hopeful in their common dream of honest work for honest pay and the possibility of one day owning their own plot of land in California.

In California, what still remains of the Joads' hopes are quickly dispelled. Living in roadside shacktowns and Hoovervilles, the Joads abruptly discover the crooked hiring practices of growers and landowners. Although there is work in the agricultural valleys of California, there are too many would-be workers for the number of jobs, and animosity from residents and other migrant labourers confronts the Oklahoma family. A tense atmosphere of ripening hostility surrounds the Joads as they journey from one prospect to another. Discouraged and dirty, the Joads find refuge in the government camp at Weedpatch. Seemingly utopian, the camp offers the Joads sanitary provisions, food, clothing and even kindness and respect. The serene

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[2]John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Viking, 1939; Penguin, 1976), 264-265.

protection is momentary, however, as they are unable to find work. The Joads are forced to move northward. Hired as strikebreakers, the Joads face new turmoil as one of their adopted members, Casy, now a labour leader, is shot dead by deputies. Desperate and fearful of the law, the family again moves and ultimately finds refuge in an abandoned boxcar. The rainy season brings more hardship, forcing the family to fight rising floodwaters. In the final episode, the eldest Joad daughter, Rose of Sharon, bears a stillborn child, and in an act of generosity, offers a dying man her swollen breast.

Throughout the narrative, the members of the family are continually desperate, yet determined. Repeatedly faced with mounting obstacles, setbacks and persecution, the family exhibits resilience and courage. The lack of control over their predicament is suffered by the entire family.

There are individual members, however, who distinctly foster the family's perseverance--the women. Ma Joad, the novel's heroine, is a "larger-than-life Earth Mother" who most strongly exemplifies the role of woman as the source of strength in the migrants' struggle for survival.[3] Ma Joad remains the protector and cohesive force for the family and the promoter of the family's will. In Steinbeck's words,

> She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them to herself. . . .From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really ever deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone.[4]

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[3]Louis Owen, "The Culpable Joads: Desentimentalizing The Grapes of Wrath," in Critical Essays on Steinbeck's the Grapes of Wrath, John Ditsky ed., (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), 111; Mimi Reisel Gladstein, "From Heroine to Supporting Player: The Dimination of Ma Joad," in Disky, Critical Essays on Steinbeck's the Grapes of Wrath, 125.

[4]Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 95-96.

Ma's role is carried over by her daughter, Rose of Sharon, who is transformed from a self-centred girl to a well of stoic strength. Although she is debilitated and malnourished, she accepts the responsibility of preserving life.[5] While the men in the novel also exhibit the drive to selflessly fight for better conditions for the family, it is the women who display the strongest capacity to overcome tragedy.

The particular representation of the Joads is transformed into a universal characterization of dust bowl migrants through the structure of the novel. Dispersed between fourteen narrative chapters are sixteen intercalary chapters in which Steinbeck makes general statements about the circumstances and affairs which prefigure and closely relate to the particular plight of the Joads. These chapters provide a socio-economic blueprint of the situation in which the Joads reside. The intercalary chapters provide, in an impersonal tone, commentaries and historical background that extend beyond the Joads' personal experiences. These chapters, without direct reference to the Joads, act as nonfictional reinforcement for the fictional account. They supply information that gives the narrative depth and broader significance to the migrant experience as a whole.[6] Descriptions of the causes and effects of the dust storms, the tactics of used-car salesmen, hunger amidst abundance, the persistence of the life force and the results of an imbalance in agriculture all contribute to a portrait that extends beyond the Joads' experiences and knowledge.[7] The intercalary chapters allow Steinbeck to place the Joads into the larger migrant picture, and, to that end, Steinbeck makes

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[5]Gladstein, "From Heroine to Supporting Player: The Dimination of Ma Joad," 135-136.

[6]Mary Ellen Caldwell, "A New Consideration of the Intercalary Chapters in The Grapes of Wrath," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath: A Collection of Critical Essay, Robert Con Davis, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 105.

[7]Charles J. Shindo, Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997), 70-71.

the Joads a microcosm of the entire country during the depression. His representation of the family is not to be read as just an isolated account. Rather, the Joads' suffering and strength is indicative of the struggle and courage of the entire migrant population.

Critics and readers considered Steinbeck's story of migrant families to be accurate and legitimate based on the author's extensive investigation of the subject. Steinbeck's earliest examination of California migrants culminated in his writing an earlier novel, In Dubious Battle, which was published in 1936, three years before The Grapes of Wrath.[8] In Dubious Battle described the pains, conflicts and communistic tactics of a group of migrant farmworkers striking to improve the low wages provided by apple growers. Although In Dubious Battle was not Steinbeck's first novel to focus on California and agriculture, it was the first one in which he focused on farm labourers and the dispossessed in a tone that was a clear departure from the romanticizing of his earlier works.[9] In Dubious Battle was quickly successful. It placed Steinbeck into the public eye, while giving him (whether he desired it or not) a reputation as a critic of the California farm labour system and the literary voice of the migrants.

It was his reputation as an expert on farm labour unionization and migrant welfare that prompted San Francisco News chief editorial writer George West to commission Steinbeck to write a series on the migrants. West, sympathetic toward the migrants, wanted Steinbeck to study the plight of the agricultural migrants in California and the efforts of federal and state governments to lessen the problem through the development of sanitary

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[8]Warren French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Viking Press, 1963; reprint, Clifton: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), 51.

[9]Jackson J. Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath", in Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, John Ditsky ed. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989), 51.

camps. At West's recommendation, Steinbeck met with Fred Soule, the Regional Information Advisor for the FSA in San Francisco. Soule provided Steinbeck with statistics and other information regarding the migrant problem and the FSA camp program. The FSA was pleased to have Steinbeck involved, hoping that a writer of Steinbeck's stature would assuage the public opposition to the agency and its efforts to ease the migrant problem. The agency was so pleased that the Regional Director in Charge of Management, Eric H. Thomsen, spent two weeks personally escorting Steinbeck through the Central Valley, touring Hoovervilles, shacktowns and farm labour camps, interviewing the families and workers that inhabited them.[10]

Steinbeck encountered one of his most valuable ongoing sources of information when Thomsen took him to the Arvin Sanitary Camp, informally known as Weedpatch. Thomsen wanted Steinbeck to see and compare the FSA camp's sanitary conditions with the squalor and polluted conditions of the Hoovervilles and shacktowns.[11] Weedpatch, one of the first government camps to be established, had been under the management of Tom Collins since it had opened in the fall of 1935, and it was Collins who would become Steinbeck's most important avenue to the migrant experience.

Collins provided a wide array of details about the migrants for Steinbeck, information that the novelist might not have been able to acquire elsewhere. Involved in the initial planning and organization of the camp, Collins had continued as an active manager. He was personally involved with the residents, often working with groups of two hundred to a thousand migrants, explaining basic sanitation as well as trying to foster a sense of cohesion within the camp.[12] Collins gave most of the daily responsibilities of

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[10]Ibid., 53-54.
[11]Ibid., 54.
[12]Ibid., 58.

running the camp to the residents, establishing a simple democracy wherein the camp was governed by a camp committee made up of representatives from different sections of the camp. Meeting weekly, the committee was responsible for setting up and enforcing rules, handling complaints and everyday operational problems. Collins maintained a close relationship with the committee and although he had the power to veto or reverse any committee decision, he seldom did. His records attest that he believed in allowing the campers to make their own mistakes and work things out for themselves. He wanted to provide support, not authority, and like Steinbeck he wanted the migrants to realize the potential of the democratic process.[13]

Steinbeck's working relationship and subsequent friendship with Collins proved advantageous for the author, giving him access to information that provided the rich detail and accuracy of the novel to come. Steinbeck spent time with Collins at Weedpatch and surrounding squatters' camps, interviewing and observing the migrants.[14] Collins also supplied Steinbeck with the weekly reports he submitted to the FSA. Generally ranging from twelve to twenty pages, Collins' reports contained observations, statistics, anecdotes pertaining to camp operations and camp activities, and lists of supplies that were needed, such as insect spray and toilet paper. Additionally, Collins included numerous and detailed lists, surveys and tallies. These components recorded information such as the former states and occupations of campers, the types and years of the automobiles in the camp, the attitudes and beliefs of the campers and local growers, analyses of illnesses and diets of the migrants, and statistical information such as how many

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[13]Jackson J. Benson, "'To Tom, Who Lived It': John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch," Journal of Modern Literature, vol. 5, no. 2 (1976): 164-170.

[14]Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath," 58.

campers there were per bed per month.[15] Finally, the camp manager recorded the lengthy recollections of the campers that included memories, stories, songs, dialogue and "bits of wisdom." From this first trip to Weedpatch, Steinbeck returned to his home in Los Gatos with approximately four hundred carbon copies of these documents.[16]

From the camp reports, his tour with Thomsen, and his time with Collins and the migrants, Steinbeck had enough material to write his newspaper series and publish his personal feelings regarding the migrants. Entitled "The Harvest Gypsies," the series ran from October 5 to 12, 1936. The articles outlined the history of migrant labour in California, distinguished the new dust bowl migrants from the existing migrant labour force, contrasted the living conditions of the squatters' camps and government camps, discussed the state of California agriculture and the relationships between growers and workers, and made recommendations. Steinbeck's sympathies were evident throughout his articles and particularly in his summation on October 12:

> The new migrants to California from the Dust Bowl are here to stay. They are of the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful, and, if given a chance, socially responsible. To attempt to force them into a peonage of starvation and intimidated despair will be unsuccessful. They can be citizens of the highest type, or they can be an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need. On their future treatment will depend which course they will be forced to take.[17]

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[15]Arvin Report, 5 September, 1936 as described in Ann M. Campbell, "Reports From Weedpatch, California. The Records of the Farm Security Administration," Agricultural History, vol. 48, no. 3 (1974): 403-404; Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath," 59.

[16]Benson, "'To Tom, Who Lived It': John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch," 180.

[17]John Steinbeck, "The Harvest Gypsies," San Francisco News, 12 October, 1936; Brian St. Pierre, John Steinbeck: The California Years (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1983), 81.

Typical of his interest in oppressed labour, Steinbeck's summation voiced an opinion that the author would continue to promote in his writing: the need to allow the migrants to reach their full potential in their new environment.

Steinbeck's well-known sympathies towards the migrants enabled him to observe further the migrant situation. In reaction to Steinbeck's articles, early the following year the author was approached by Life magazine photographer Horace Bristol, who suggested that the two men collaborate on a book, heavily pictorial, depicting the migrant situation. Bristol had been covering the American West and the migrant situation, working with Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor. Although Steinbeck had reservations about profiting from the misery of the migrants, he accepted Bristol's offer.[18] At the time, Steinbeck was working full time on his next novel, Of Mice and Men, and Bristol was busy working for Life, so the two spent weekends touring roadside camps and shacktowns, interviewing and photographing hundreds of displaced families. Bristol later wrote that as Steinbeck continued his personal interviews the author began to realize that the material he was collecting was "too good to be used for just a photographic book with limited text."[19] Steinbeck subsequently broke with Bristol, and, as the photographer begrudgingly recalled, "I should have known John intended to write a novel in the first place."[20]

Steinbeck had the makings of a novel. While composing his newspaper articles in September 1936, Steinbeck watched the already-tenuous labour situation worsen. Early in that month a lettuce-pickers strike in Steinbeck's former home town, Salinas, had been put down violently by

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[18]Horace Bristol, "Documenting the Grapes of Wrath," Californians, vol. 6, no. 1 (1988): 40.

[19]John Steinbeck quoted in Bristol, "Documenting the Grapes of Wrath," 47.

[20]Ibid., 47.

officially deputized vigilantes acting under a local rendering of martial law.[21] The violence of the event and the blatant disregard for the civil liberties of the workers angered Steinbeck, igniting a new literary idea. The author began a satirical novel that focused on the hypocrisy of the growers and landowners. The manuscript, entitled "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," had been started by the end of 1936 but the migrant story was becoming overwhelming to Steinbeck. He wrote to his agent, Elizabeth Otis:

> The new book has struck a bad snag. Heaven knows how long it will take to write. The subject is so huge it scares me to death. And I'm not going to rush it. It must be worked out with great care.[22]

Ultimately, it would take more time and experience for Steinbeck to write his migrant novel. When Of Mice and Men was published in February 1937, it gave Steinbeck and his wife Carol enough money to spend the summer in Europe. Returning in August, Steinbeck felt the impetus to return to the project of a novel on the migrants. Accordingly, he spent the autumn months touring migrant camps, often accompanied by FSA camp manager Tom Collins. For four weeks the two travelled through the Great Central Valley down from Weedpatch towards Barstow, driving over the Tehachapi Mountains through the Mojave Desert to the Arizona state line near Needles.[23] Travelling in an old bakery wagon purchased by Steinbeck (he could hardly have mixed with the migrants in his new car), Collins and Steinbeck travelled, lived, and often worked with the migrants. This journey to the state line became an object of folklore, expanding to an exaggerated tale of Steinbeck's travels to Oklahoma and the adventure back to California with

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[21]St. Pierre, John Steinbeck: The California Years, 79.

[22]John Steinbeck, letter to Elizabeth Otis, January 27, 1937, in Steinbeck a Life in Letters, Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds., (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 134.

[23]Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath," 65.

the migrants--a journey that Steinbeck never made and a story that he cautiously never confirmed but cleverly never denied.

Further experiences solidified Steinbeck's sympathetic position on the migrants. Back in Los Gatos in November 1937, Steinbeck began to work again on his manuscript. He was interrupted, however, by the rainy season in early 1938. Fred Soule, at the FSA Information Division, asked Steinbeck to report on the worst of the California flooding, again realizing that under Steinbeck's byline the stories would be printed and more justification for FSA programs established.[24] Spending ten days in February with Collins in one of the worst areas of the flooding, Steinbeck gathered what information he could while helping with the FSA flood relief efforts.[25] The consequences and conditions of the flooding had a deep affect on the author. Returning on a second trip to the flood areas under a tentative commission from Life magazine, Steinbeck wrote to Elizabeth Otis:

> It is the most heartbreaking thing in the world. If Life does use the stuff there will be lots of pictures and swell ones. It will give you an idea of the kind of people they are and the kind of faces. I break myself every time I go out because the argument that one person's effort can't really do anything doesn't seem to apply when you come on a bunch of starving children and you have a little money. I can't rationalize it for myself anyway. So don't get me a job for a slick. I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this but I can best do it through newspapers.[26]

Steinbeck's emotional letter reflected not only the author's sympathies for the migrants, but his belief that the migrants were victims of circumstances brought on by others, in this case "the greedy bastards" of large-scale California agribusiness.

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[24]Letter to Elizabeth Otis, February 14, 1938, in Steinbeck: a Life in Letters, 159.
[25]Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath," 67-68.
[26]Letter to Elizabeth Otis, March 7 1938, in Steinbeck: a Life in Letters, 162-162.

Based on his growing reputation, additional information regarding the migrants was made available to Steinbeck. During the early months of 1938 the author was approached by Helen Hosmer, co-founder of the Simon J. Lubin Society, who wanted permission to reprint Steinbeck's earlier newspaper series. Named after the late Sacramento businessman and founder of the California State Commission of Immigration and Housing, the Simon J. Lubin Society "promoted unity between family farmers and migrant labour and exposed the antiprogressive political activities of California agribusiness."[27] Steinbeck gave his permission, adding an epilogue to the series. The articles were then reprinted in an illustrated pamphlet entitled Their Blood is Strong. Steinbeck used the opportunity to supplement his sources for his migrant novel, utilizing Hosmer's personal files which had been compiled during her years working for the FSA.[28]

After his experiences in the flood, Steinbeck decided that the tone in "L'Affaire L'ettuceberg" was not right. The manuscript, which had been in the works for two years, was finished in May 1938, but Steinbeck hated the epic, asking his agent to "burn it up and forget it."[29] The manuscript was an angry novel that Steinbeck believed would simply create more anger. Scrapping the project, he began again in June, writing a novel that this time focused on the migrants rather than the hatred and persecution that encompassed them.[30] This was a fortuitous decision, as it was Steinbeck's direct focus on the migrants, rather than those who oppressed them, that enabled him to create the Joads. It is the Joad family that evoked emotion

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[27]Helen Hosmer, Interview by Randall Jarrell, 1977, Regional History Project, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz, Ca., ix.

[28]Ibid., 58.

[29]Letter to Elizabeth Otis, March 7 1938, in Steinbeck: a life in letters, 161-162.

[30]Benson, "The Background to the Composition of The Grapes of Wrath," 70.

from the reader and made the novel a success. Interestingly, although Steinbeck's new novel was about the migrants, it was intended for the public, not the migrants themselves. By the beginning of 1939, The Grapes of Wrath was complete.

Prior to writing The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck had been developing a series of convictions that played a crucial role in shaping the thematic direction of the novel that were based on a broader world view rather than simply the migrant situation. This set of philosophical beliefs can be summarized as three components that built upon each other. First, Steinbeck was interested in the relationship between individuals and the larger social units in which they functioned. Steinbeck described this relationship through what he called the phalanx theory, after the term used to describe the compact battle formations of ancient Greek legions which banded together for a common purpose.[31] Informed by a mixture of ideas from biology and psychology, the phalanx theory endeavored to explore and explain how a social unit is more than the sum of its parts. Based on the observation that individual cells, when joined, formed an entirely different individual with a nature "new and strange to his cells," Steinbeck argued that a group of humans, in forms such as a mob, party or soviet, became a different organism.[32] Further, this new organism controlled the free will of its component members for the goals of the unit.[33] This control did not necessarily negate the individuality of the member, however. Rather, by contributing to the cause of the larger unit the individual member gains

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[31]Richard Astro, John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 62-63.

[32]John Steinbeck, "The Argument of Phalanx," quoted in Astro, John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist, 65.

[33]David Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 158.

protection, perseverance and a new form of freedom. In Steinbeck's words, the

> Phalanx resistance to circumstance is far greater than the individual man's resistance. Once a man has become a unit in a phalanx in motion, he is capable of prodigies of endurance of thought or of emotion such as would be unthinkable were he acting as an individual man.[34]

Steinbeck believed the freedom and collective security of the phalanx was the natural way and, therefore, brought people closer to happiness and perfection.[35]

The perfectibility of man was the second component of Steinbeck's philosophy. He believed human perfection was possible through a form of equality. This equality could best be achieved through a rational democracy in which an informed group--a phalanx--could effectively work toward a balanced distribution of material wealth and civil rights. Steinbeck's philosophy provided an opportunity for each individual to contribute to the best of his or her ability to the group. By contributing particular skills, an individual earned a place within the democratic society and thereby gained a purpose, a sense of control and personal dignity. The realization of this world view could be elusive in reality, however. Steinbeck, therefore, advocated teaching people of all social levels that human betterment and perfection could be achieved through group action.[36]

Not alone in his convictions, Steinbeck strongly believed in the educative and revolutionary potential of the novel. Thus, the final component of the author's philosophy was ensuring that people at all social levels, and in particular higher, learned levels, understood what he saw as

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[34]John Steinbeck, "The Argument of Phalanx" quoted in Astro, John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist, 65.

[35]Shindo, Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination, 56.

[36]Ibid., 56, 64.

the natural way of life. His commitment was not to devising political solutions but to using his work as an educative tool that could communicate the possibilities of group action.[37] Not only was it possible for a writer to communicate larger, philosophical messages for the betterment of society, but it was his or her social responsibility to do so:

> The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement. Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit -- for gallantry in defeat, for courage and compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.[38]

The Grapes of Wrath, like many of Steinbeck's works, was a vehicle for his beliefs. Throughout the novel, the Joads increasingly become aware that they are part of a large unit, a larger family. This awareness fuels the family's strength. Benefit comes from the fellowship within the larger group of migrants, as only in the larger unit can the migrants battle against their mutual distress:

> One man, one family driven from their land; this rusty car creaking along the highway west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I am alone and I am bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is a node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here 'I lost my land' is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate -- 'We lost *our* land.' The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first 'we' there grows a still more dangerous thing: 'I have a little food' plus 'I have none.' If from this problem the sum is 'We have a little food,' the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. Only a

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[37]Ibid., 56.

[38]John Steinbeck, "The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," 1962, quoted in Shindo, Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination, 55.

> little multiplication now, and this land, this tractor is ours. . . . This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning -- from 'I' to 'we.'[39]

Steinbeck thus promulgated a kind of Marxist view of class consciousness: the collectivity of the migrants is central to their recovery of dignity and control. As the Joad family grows to understand their situation within their own social strata and the value of their participation within it, the reader is shown the place of the individual within humankind.[40]

Steinbeck's need to inform politicians and the educated public gave The Grapes of Wrath a paternalistic tone. The Joads and the other migrants in The Grapes of Wrath were given a childlike naiveté regarding their expectations of what would be awaiting them in California and from whom--the government camp workers--they are to find assistance. In the novel, this naiveté was illustrated, as in the captions of the FSA photographs, through the phonetically spelled vernacular of the migrants. A drawl that produced utterances such as "them toes of yourn," placed the migrants in the position of inferiors that needed help from the more educated and fortunate audience to whom Steinbeck was communicating.[41] In this manner, Steinbeck constructed himself as an informed and eloquent voice for the unsophisticated migrants.

Steinbeck was not alone in advocating a social vision through literature. Responding to the obvious economic and social upheaval, many works emerged that reflected social conditions and protest. Fiction of the 1930s represented a new freedom and boldness in dealing with the reality of life.[42] Realistic concerns were depicted in an attempt to reveal the raw truths

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[39]Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 194.

[40]Shindo, Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination, 68, 70.

[41]Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 321.

[42]Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction, 1920-1949 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 12-21.

about human nature. As writers of the thirties assessed the devastation, anger and confusion the Depression had caused, there emerged "a new respect for the resilience and toughness of ordinary Americans."[43] The Grapes of Wrath, considered in literary circles as "the most sensational social protest novel of the decade, . . . captured this consensus."[44] Making sense of what was happening in society permeated literary movements of the time and The Grapes of Wrath fit comfortably into this movement. Regardless of where the novel fit within the literature of the decade, however, The Grapes of Wrath made a significant impression on its audience, which did not include and had not been intended to include many migrants, as Steinbeck felt the solutions could not come from the migrants themselves.

The sales records, promotion, criticism and controversy that surrounded The Grapes of Wrath attest to its literary and emotional impact. The American populace was hungry for such social commentary. The Grapes of Wrath had a relatively short prepublication promotion; its impending release was announced to literary publications and the press on December 31, 1938, which was less than three months prior to its publication.[45] Nevertheless, by its release in mid March 1939, nearly 50,000 copies of the novel had been ordered. The Grapes of Wrath had attained the highest ever advance sales record for its publisher, Viking Press, and went on to become one of its fastest-selling publications. The first printing produced 19,804 copies and so only a portion of the orders placed before March 1 received first edition copies. By its release date, the novel was in its third printing. One week after its release, 56,181 copies had been distributed and new orders placed increased

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[43]Emory Elliot, ed., Columbia Literary History of the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 751.

[44]Ibid., 753.

[45]French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 105.

the demand to 94,500 copies.[46] Owing to Steinbeck's reputation, by early May the novel was at the top of the best-seller list and despite the economic constraints present in 1939 was selling at a rate of 2500 copies per day at a cost of $2.75 each.[47]

Politically, The Grapes of Wrath stirred up a pot that had been only simmering through the worst years of the migration. Following the novel's release, President Franklin Roosevelt stated on national radio that the migrant situation in California was a problem that had eluded his administration's regard for three years. However, that was to change. As the President explained:

> I have read a book recently; it is called 'Grapes of Wrath.' There are 500,000 Americans that live in the covers of that book.[48]

Subsequently, the two federal committees that investigated the migrants, the La Follette Committee which investigated California's agricultural system and the House Committee on the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens (the Tolan Committee), referred to the FSA photographs as well as The Grapes of Wrath as revealing a situation that required attention.[49] Prompted by the publicly acknowledged severity of the situation, both Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt visited the migrant camps in 1939, with Eleanor Roosevelt later commenting that she "never thought the Grapes of Wrath was exaggerated."[50] Ultimately, however, the increased

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[46]Publishers' Weekly, vol.135 (April 8, 1939): 1374; Publishers' Weekly, vol. 135 (April 29, 1939): 1609.

[47]French, A Companion to the Grapes of Wrath, 106.

[48]Samuel Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Random House, 1940), 57.

[49]French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 125; Richard Lowitt, The New Deal and the West (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 181.

[50]The San Francisco Chronicle, April 3, 1940; Stein California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 210.

federal regard was superceded by the onset of World War II, as the labour requirements of the defense industry drew in the migrants.[51]

People wanted The Grapes of Wrath because of the reputation of its author and its evocative subject matter. By the late 1930s, Steinbeck was known as a skilled literary talent. Further, his experiences with the migrants were also known, particularly in California. The subject matter and Steinbeck's experiences made The Grapes of Wrath especially interesting to Californians and Oklahomans, who were not only aware of the migrant predicament but often directly or indirectly involved in the situation. Depending on an individual's position, what Steinbeck had to say in fiction was, and rightly so, taken as personal criticism or commendation.

People also wanted the novel because, despite its apparent vulgarity and serious subject matter, it comfortably reinforced traditional values of family, personal responsibility and perseverance, themes that percolated throughout Depression culture.[52] For those not directly involved in the migrants' plight, The Grapes of Wrath provided a form of escape from their own predicament while reaffirming their own struggle. In this light, similarities existed between The Grapes of Wrath and another best-seller of the 1930s, Gone With The Wind (1936).[53] Generally considered successful during the 1930s because of its escapist qualities, Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind told of the plight of Southern-belle Scarlett O'hara and her refusal to give in to the circumstances of the Civil War that are clearly beyond her control. The heroine rises above her situation and becomes a stronger, better person for it. Although the solutions for the characters in the two

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[51]Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration, 214-215.

[52]Lawrence W. Levine, The Unpredictable Past: Explorations In American Cultural History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 218-219.

[53]Margaret Mitchell, Gone With the Wind (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

novels stem from different perspectives--Scarlett's relief comes from her individual will while the Joads' solace grows from their collective purpose--perseverance remains the paramount message. Just as Scarlett vows that "After all, tomorrow is another day," Ma Joad attests that "they ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people -- we go on."[54] The significance of the Joads for many American families was clear: redemption from arduous circumstances was possible.[55]

After the novel's publication the initial advertising campaign was, as described by Publishers' Weekly in 1939, "only the first shots in a long and sustained bombardment."[56] Advertisements were placed in prominent dailies, weeklies and literary reviews.[57] As sales of the novel increased, Viking Press doubled the advertising allocation for the book, spending an unprecedented $40,000 on promotion by the end of November 1939.[58] The advertising agency for Viking Press, Green Brodie, met daily, revising and enlarging advertisement appropriations. The publicity emphasized two points: (1) The Grapes of Wrath had become the fastest-selling book in the United States; (2) the novel was "Steinbeck's greatest work, . . . the Uncle Tom's Cabin of our time. . . [and] possibly the great American novel."[59]

Additional excitement bolstered sales of the novel. During the first week of publication, the sale of the film rights was announced. Despite the

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[54]Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, 360.

[55]Levine, The Unpredictable Past, 219.

[56]Publishers' Weekly, vol. 135 (April 29, 1939): 1609.

[57]By August 1939, advertisements for The Grapes of Wrath were placed in such prominent publications as New York Herald Tribune Books, New York Times Book Review, Atlantic Monthly, Harpers Magazine, Nation, New Republic, New Yorker, Forum, Saturday Review, Time, Newsweek, Life, New York Times Daily, New York World Telegram, and twenty-eight newspapers in twenty-seven cities. Publishers' Weekly vol. 136 (August 5, 1939): 355-356.

[58]Publishers' Weekly, vol. 136 (August 5, 1939): 1532; French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 106.

[59]New York Herald Tribune Books, April 30, 1939, ix.

consensus among critics that such a fine, realistic novel would not interest Hollywood, a reported $75,000 was paid by Twentieth Century Fox for the work, the highest price then to have been paid for a novel.[60] In 1939, a survey conducted by the Palo Alto Times revealed that twenty-two per cent of the residents of the California town over twenty-one years old had read the novel. Further, based on 300,000 copies sold, Viking Press estimated that slightly less than four percent of the nation had read the book. If the country was to reach California's estimated readership, 1,672,000 copies would be sold. Although it did not reach that figure in 1939, The Grapes of Wrath was the highest seller for that year and remained one of the ten best-sellers for 1940.[61]

From the moment it was published, controversy surrounded the novel and, if anything, only increased interest in the book. Reviews of the novel ranged from "beautiful and magnificent" to a "mass of silly propaganda."[62] While literary reviews debated the artistic merits of Steinbeck's subject matter and unconventional structure, popular analysis voiced reservations regarding the novel's vulgarity. Although politically oriented publications generally responded favorably, they cautioned readers about the risk that social novels confuse the reader regarding the real and the invented:

> 'The Grapes of Wrath' is a novel of great significance, and one cannot write of misery and men crushed to the ground without having access to words that are earthy. But at times I think a kind of phoniness creeps in.[63]

All told, however, the early reviews of the novel--of which there were a vast number in an array of publications that ranged from North American

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[60]Publishers' Weekly, vol. 135 (April 29, 1939):1609.

[61]French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 106.

[62]St. Pierre, John Steinbeck: The California Years, 98-99.

[63]Heywood Brown, review in New Republic as quoted in "Red Meat and Red Herrings," The Commonweal vol. 3, no. 25 (October 13, 1939): 562; French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 108.

Review to Newsweek to The Junior League Magazine--were mixed and reluctant to commit strongly one way or another. Sales figures never declined, however, and only increased throughout 1939.

Despite the occasional criticisms, the novel elicited noteworthy praise and reward. In February 1940 The Grapes of Wrath was selected as the favorite novel of the American Booksellers Association. Later in April, the novel received the first annual fiction award of Social Work Today, a publication of the Social Service Employees' Union.[64] Most significantly, on May 6, 1940, The Grapes of Wrath was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the year's most distinguished novel. Finally, decades later, the novel would be the centrepiece in the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Steinbeck in 1962.

Despite its literary merits, the similarities of the fictional subject matter of the novel to the actual migrant situation caused disapproval and hostility among groups and individuals that felt directly attacked by Steinbeck. Responding to the negative portrayal of California business farmers, in August 1939 the Kern County board of supervisors banned The Grapes of Wrath from county libraries and schools, and the Associated Farmers of Kern County urged organizations throughout the San Joaquin Valley to support the prohibition.[65] Oklahoma reviews also reflected a general objection to the characterization of the Joads' home state. Arguing the depiction was inaccurate, unfair and unfavourable, Oklahoma reviews expressed outrage and disappointment and denied the portrayal, stating that "all Oklahomans are not Okies."[66] Objections to the novel on the grounds of obscenity resulted

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[64]French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 115.

[65]Publishers' Weekly, vol. 86, no. 10 (September 2, 1939): 777.

[66]"Red Meat and Red Herrings," 563; French, A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 129.

in the book being banned in several Oklahoma towns, as well as Buffalo and Kansas City. The Library board of East St. Louis went as far as to order that three copies of the book be burned, an act Viking Press characterized as "the first known case of actual burning à La Hitler."[67] Although the order was soon rescinded and attempts to suppress the novel were challenged and generally overthrown, The Grapes of Wrath continued to elicit anger. Again, the reaction came from those surrounding the migrants and not the migrants themselves, as the book was neither intended for nor reportedly read by the migrants.

Regardless of the controversy (and perhaps somewhat because of it), The Grapes of Wrath has remained continuously in print, continually shaping our understanding of the 1930s.

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[67] Publishers' Weekly, vol. 86, no. 22 (November 25, 1939): 1994.

Chapter 4

Lasting Impressions: Contemporary Renderings of the FSA Photographs and The Grapes of Wrath

The representation of the interstate migrants created by the photographers of the FSA and author John Steinbeck have helped to shape our understanding of the migrants and the Great Depression. The ongoing use and prominence of the photographs and The Grapes of Wrath in a range of popular and academic mediums perpetuates an image of the migrants as victims who persevered under arduous circumstances. This particular image of the migrants has remained pervasive, influencing how people since the 1930s have understood the Great Depression. Further, the same reasons that the photographs and novel were so influential in establishing the migrants as icons for the thirties are still behind the continued influence of these representations. Repeatedly the images are evoked to draw comparisons with contemporary situations. Thus, not only have The Grapes of Wrath and FSA photographs influenced contemporary understanding of the 1930s dust bowl migration and Great Depression, but also contemporary understanding of our own era.

Since the project's completion in 1943, a reverence for both the technical quality and symbolic meaning of the FSA photographs have led them to be frequently reprinted. The photographs have appeared in academic textbooks, popular history retrospectives and a range of news, entertainment,

photography and science publications.[1] A variety of collections of FSA photographs have been published and exhibits have been staged at prominent museums such as the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Considered the cornerstones of any Great Depression retrospective, the photographs are seen to epitomize the era and expeditiously convey the events and the feelings of the Great Depression.[2]

Discussions of photojournalism and photographic skill repeatedly make reference to the images created by the FSA photographers. Journalistic and academic discussions of documentary photography praise the FSA photography project for its quality and effectiveness. The project has been considered by historians as the epitome of 1930s documentary expression, as well as an undertaking that redefined the philosophy and direction of the documentary mode.[3] Still considered to have captured the essence of the thirties, the photographs have not diminished in power, but rather have continued to endure and even to be enhanced, owing to what journalists and academics consider their inherent integrity, humanity and style.[4] For some, the FSA project stands as a testament to the art form and the contemporary value placed on visual forms of discourse.

The famous photographs of Dorothea Lange, perhaps the most talented FSA photographer, have continued to capture the imagination because of her

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[1]Hugh Sidey, "Echoes of the Great Dust Bowl," Time, vol. 147 (10 June 1996): 28; Howard Chapnick, "Markets and Careers," Popular Photography, vol. 91 (September 1984): 36; Elizabeth Pennisi, "Dancing Dust," Science News, vol. 142 (3 October 1992): 218.

[2]Kathleen Burke, "Images form the New Deal," The Smithsonian, vol. 18, no. 4 (1987): 151.

[3]William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 2d. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), x; Maren Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89.

[4]Penelope Dixon, Photographers of The Farm Security Administration. An Annotated Bibliography, 1930-1980 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), xix; Stange, Symbols of Ideal Life, 130.

proficiency and the images she captured. Contemporary academic discussions of Lange's photographs are often accompanied by accounts of her experiences with the migrants, her personal motivations, and her artistic concerns, in an attempt to discover how she was able to "capture the decade" on film.[5] Her photographs continue to be considered objective in their portrayals:

> Meaningful photojournalism is based on incisive and decision-moment photography. It is the opposite of much current photographic illustration which uses manipulated elements to create contrived photographs that have no relation in reality.[6]

Numerous retrospectives on Lange and her career that spanned four decades have focused on the photographs of the migrants and how these images contributed to the documentary movement of the thirties and have remained the most influential images of both her career and photography itself. Further, it was the FSA photographs and her four-year association with the federal agency that is credited with the shaping of Lange's subsequent journalistic photographs of events such as World War II and photographic portraits of people she came in contact with and knew.[7]

Widely read when it was initially published, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath has continued to be read for its entertainment value and literary merit. In 1982, the New York Times reported it was the second-highest selling novel ever produced in paperback in the United States, with 14,600,000 copies, second only to Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind.[8] The novel has never been out of print and has continued to be read inside

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[5]Howard Chapnick, "Markets and Careers," Popular Photography, vol. 91, no. 9 (1984): 36.

[6]Chapnick, "Markets and Careers," 36.

[7]Karin Becker Ohm, Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 113.

[8]Brian St. Pierre, John Steinbeck: The California Years (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1983), 98.

and outside the United States, and used in courses in literature, history, sociology, economics, philosophy, political science and popular culture.[9]

Steinbeck's representation of the migrants has been adapted and reinforced by dramatic adaptations of The Grapes of Wrath. The 1940 Academy award winning movie based on the book has returned to popular acclaim this decade in a 1990 Broadway production. The show has been billed as "a portrait of a family in agony and dissolution" that is "actually better--less sentimental and truer--than the landmark 1940 film version."[10] Winning the Tony Award for best play, the stage production drew crowds reportedly enticed by the production's precise adaptation of the novel. Reviews from a diverse array of publications including Vogue, Time, and The Progressive praised the production's attention to recreating the novel on stage. One reviewer wrote that the play was "faithful to the book and, on its own terms, as harrowing and powerful."[11] While evaluating the play for its acting and production abilities, each reviewer also focused on the plot, detailing the plight of the Joad family for those who had not read the book. The reviewers' descriptions were emotional, using evocative language to convey what they still considered provocative subject matter. The Joads on stage were again depicted as the wronged but the strong, with the characters still considered tough yet frightened. They were victims of hardship but not so pathetic as to arouse contempt. The popularity of the play and the critical acclaim attest to the novel's entertainment value, which, to a large degree, depends on its believability.

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[9]Warren French, "The Grapes of Wrath," in A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to his Major Works, Tetsumaro Hayashi, ed.(New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1974), 29.

[10]William A. Henry, "Just What the Doctor Ordered: Broadway looks robust with three powerful dramas," Time, vol. 135, no. 14 (1990): 71.

[11]June Jordan, "A Chance at Grace," The Progressive, vol. 54 , no. 10 (1990): 10.

Even contemporary comedy has found a use for the Joads. In the Canadian-produced Second City Television, the predicament of the family is parodied in a sketch entitled "The Grapes of Mud."[12] The popular magazine Gentlemen's Quarterly updated the 1940 film version of the Depression classic that "eulogized those desperate times."[13] In the lead roles of this spoof, the magazine depicted contemporary Hollywood actors Tom Hanks and Michelle Pfeiffer, forced off their homestead by bulldozers clearing space for a spa, heading west to California in an overloaded Volvo, convinced that there is an abundance of career opportunities as personal trainers. Although comedic and trivial, these contemporary uses of The Grapes of Wrath are still reproducing images of the Joads and their predicament.

In addition, The Grapes of Wrath has continued to provoke controversy. Not only was the novel initially banned from many county libraries and schools on the grounds of vulgarity and obscenity, but as late as 1981 the use of The Grapes of Wrath was challenged in Richford, Vermont. A parent-led group in the 2,500-person town objected to its use in the curriculum on religious grounds, arguing that high school students were not mature enough to understand the work. It is important to note the value placed on the novel as the banning was overturned by the local school board, which argued it was "essential" for young people's education.[14]

Criticism of Steinbeck and his novel has also continued to come from the Joads' home state of Oklahoma. Even though, after reviews in Oklahoma described the depiction as unfair, inaccurate and derogatory, [15] Steinbeck

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[12]Dave Thomas, SCTV: Behind the Scenes (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996).

[13]"Dateline Hollywood," Gentlemen's Quarterly, vol. 61 (March 1991): 218.

[14]John Mutter, "The First Amendment: 'Grapes of Wrath' survives banning attempt in Vermont town," Publishers' Weekly, vol. 220, no. 24 (1981): 9.

[15]"Red Meat and Red Herrings," The Commonweal, vol. 3, no. 25 (1939): 563.

wrote apologetically that he "had no intention of insulting a people who are already insulted beyond endurance," some in Oklahoma still object that The Grapes of Wrath has negatively influenced an entire nation's conception of the state. Stereotypes of Oklahomans as lower-class and primitive have led to what has been considered a persistent phenomenon of national ridicule.[16] Despite Steinbeck's apologies and claims that the novel did not stereotype Oklahomans in an insulting way, journalists argue that the derogatory image of Oklahomans was and still is fostered by The Grapes of Wrath:

> These were cruel judgments arising from the almost wilful refusal to understand the history of Oklahoma, yet they became habitual among Americans, so trite that even readers who understand Steinbeck's love of the Joads have grown to perceive Oklahomans as fundamentally different from the people in their own parts of the country.[17]

The public's continued interest in Steinbeck has meant that his writings, and thus his representations of the migrants, have continued to be influential. The 1962 awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Steinbeck and the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of The Grapes of Wrath in 1989 produced retrospectives on the author and the novel. Articles tracing Steinbeck's travels and experiences with the migrants appeared in a number of publications ranging from Esquire to The Christian Century.[18] His home town of Salinas, California (an area that had been designated by its residents as "Steinbeck Country" at the time of the novel's initial publication), boasts tributes to the author, including a life-sized bronze statue that stands at the entrance of the Salinas public library, renamed the John Steinbeck Library in

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[16]Bret Wallach, "Oklahoma: When the Jokes Wear Thin," Focus, vol. 42, no. 4 (1991): 32, 36.

[17]Wallach, "Oklahoma," 36.

[18]John Steinbeck, "The Thirties: Living with Hard Times," Esquire, vol. 99, no. 6 (1983): 27-33; John H. Timmerman, "The Grapes of Wrath Fifty Years Later," The Christian Century, vol. 106, no. 11 (1989): 341; John Steinbeck, "America and the Americans" The Saturday Evening Post, vol. 248, no. 5 (1976): 14, written originally in July 1966.

1969. A paperback Guide to Steinbeck Country contains information about the author and his works, as well as a guide to sites such as his restored childhood home and the locations noted in his major written works. Each summer the Steinbeck Library hosts the "Steinbeck festival," a series of events that centre around the author and his works, including The Grapes of Wrath.[19]

Popular magazines have been extremely effective in keeping alive the representation of the migrants created by the FSA photographers and John Steinbeck.[20] In general, popular historical recollections of the depression have surfaced more during periods of economic stress, and in these recollections The Grapes of Wrath and especially the FSA photographs have been used to encapsulate the suffering of the migrants and the entire country. During the 1930s, these two sources created an image of life that led migrant families to epitomize the hardships of the decade, and in contemporary journalistic accounts their iconic role is even stronger. In 1994, under the title "The 30s: A Vision of Fear and Hope," Newsweek summed up the events of the 1930s using Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" photograph to represent the Depression.[21] With the cutline "The Face of the Depression," Lange's photograph and an FSA photograph of a Hooverville shanty town were accompanied by photographs of Shirley Temple, the Hindenburg, Franklin Roosevelt, the Spanish Civil War, and Amos and Andy.

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[19]Brian McGinty, "American Landmarks: Steinbeck Country," American History Illustrated, vol. 24 (September/October 1989): 18; "Home-town Salinas shares its Steinbeck memories," Sunset, vol. 158 (March, 1977): 40.

[20]Lewis Lord, "The Rise of the Common Man," U.S. News & World Report, vol. 115 (October 25, 1993): 11-15; "Route 66: Ghost Road of the Okies," American Heritage, vol. 28, no. 5 (1977): 26-32; William Howarth, "The Okies: Beyond the Dust Bowl," National Geographic, vol. 166, no. 3 (1981): 323-349; "Dust Bowl Days," Weatherwise, vol. 48, no. 3 (1995): 32-33; Michael Parfit, "The Dust Bowl," Smithsonian, vol. 20, no. 3 (1989): 45-68; Marilyn Coffey, "The Dust Storms," Natural History, vol. 87, no. 2 (1978): 72-82.

[21]"The '30s: A Vision of Fear and Hope," Newsweek, vol. 123 (January 3, 1994): 24-25.

Lange's Depression-era photographs, particularly the images of the migrant mother and broken-down families, are felt by commentators on society to contain a relevance for contemporary society. Photographic essays and journalistic commentaries on current rural poverty use Lange's images as reminders of what has been and can again happen. Readers are urged to note the striking similarities between Lange's images of the Depression and contemporary dilemmas:

> Her fears are our fears, her visions, our visions, her images, our images - of the homeless, the poor, the ever-growing, functionally illiterate underclass, the continuing fragmentation of the family, the evil of discrimination, and the steady erosion of the human capacity to love one's neighbor. Her legacy is enduring, but only if we make the effort to see.[22]

The shock value of the poverty captured in the photographs has not diminished. Rather, the images Lange created continue to secure the attention of the audience and draw it to issues of poverty and injustice that the journalist feels need addressing.

Some reviewers feel the misfortune but determination of the Joads is even more significant in the 1990s arguing that Steinbeck's vision of humanity speaks to global political events of misfortune and injustice.[23] The vulnerability of unskilled labour, the destructive impact of poverty, forced vagrancy, along with the celebration of the common person's will to continue despite adversity were all themes contained in the Depression story that are still considered relevant issues. One black feminist reviewer went on to extrapolate the key contemporary themes in a description of the 1990 dramatic production based on the novel:

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[22]Louis C. Gawthrop, " Dorothea Lange and Visionary Change," Society, vol. 3, no. 5 (1993): 67.

[23]William A. Henry, "Just What the Doctor Ordered," 71; Jack Kroll, "Of the People: Steinbeck's Okie Classic," Newsweek, vol. 115, no. 14 (1990): 55.

> We who saw this mystery enacted, we stood up in gratitude and shock. We had seen something completely realistic that was human yet not monstrous, or narrow or threatening. We stood because we knew we had been staring at our own desperation and our own power as we beheld that on-stage-moment of such unexpected tenderness.
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> We had glimpsed the possibilities of shelter that only we can raise as codes of conduct in the world. And we, the homeless and the affluent, the black kids dancing in the street outside the theater and the theater goers who turned their backs; we the women who can find no safety anywhere, and the men who pretend to despise or who destroy domestic conditions of peace; we cannot avoid the always growing harvest of those grapes of wrath.[24]

Not everyone agreed with the contemporary relevance of the story, arguing that Steinbeck's portrait was too sentimental to effectively prescribe any contemporary solutions. However, even these dissenters agreed that The Grapes of Wrath still held value as the parable of the American family surviving despite all odds.[25]

Whenever current events and situations mirror some element of the 1930s, the photographic images of the FSA and the words of John Steinbeck reappear. When dust storms, drought and agricultural upset affect the American Prairies, mainstream media publications draw on the earlier images. From news weeklies and science journals to entertainment and human interest magazines, contemporary publications juxtapose accounts, maps and photographs of the current drought alongside these earlier images. This use of Depression documents is not merely a result of the frequent inclination to compare past and contemporary events. Such images are a shorthand method by which the current situation quickly appears more dire and understandable when placed beside Steinbeck's evocative language and the face of the migrant mother. For example, in 1997, when a Canadian family from Ontario set off westward following the collapse of the family

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[24]Jordan, "A Chance at Grace," 10.

[25]Robert Brustein, "Robert Brustein on Theater: What Makes a Play Live," New Republic, vol. 202, no. 19 (1990): 30.

business, their predicament, including a broken-down vehicle, was likened in a newspaper account to Steinbeck's novel. Under the headline, "Payday on way for modern-day 'Grapes' family," the situation was described as "a page out of the Depression-era novel Grapes of Wrath."[26] The connotations that the Grapes of Wrath and FSA photographs carry are given a contemporary relevance as the hardship and perseverance of the interstate migrants is transferred onto the present victims of environmental and agricultural devastation and forced migration.[27]

The current value placed by conservatives on the survival of the American nuclear family gives the Depression-era migrants additional contemporary power. The emphasis on the perseverance of families in the FSA photographs and The Grapes of Wrath makes the thirties' migrants relevant to people living in a decade that has witnessed a resurgence of "family values." Persevering as a family is a popular and politically charged theme for people living in a era felt by many politicians and journalists to be in social and moral decay. The FSA photographs and Steinbeck's novel reinforce these traditional values through their various depictions of the family.

Furthermore, people across the political spectrum concerned with current political and social problems that in some manner mirror the interstate migration of the Great Depression also invoke the FSA photographs and The Grapes of Wrath. Often, the literature and photographs

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[26] "Payday on the Way for modern-day 'Grapes' family," The Edmonton Sun, (July 27, 1997): 15.

[27] Eloise Salholz, Karen Springen and Frank Gibney Jr., "When Hopes Turn to Dust," Newsweek, vol. 111, no. 26 (1988): 22; Hugh Sidey, "Echoes of the Great Dust Bowl," Time, vol. 147 (June 10, 1996): 28; Elizabeth Pennisi, "Dancing Dust," Science News, vol. 142, no. 14 (1992): 218; "Diaries From the Drought," Life, vol. 11 (September, 1988): 32-36; Darcy Jenish and Anne Gregor, "The wrath of drought," MacLeans, vol. 104 (February, 1991): 40; Harold E. Dregne, "The Sands of Wrath," The Unesco Courier, vol. 30, no. 7 (1977): 14.

are used in the service of the poor. For example, critics of the ongoing plight of Mexican migrant agricultural workers attempt to gain sympathy from references to the Joads.[28] In the 1980s a documentary was shown on American college campuses and labour halls called "The Wrath of Grapes." Proponents of change in contemporary agriculture use titles as deliberate as "On the Land, Then. . . On the Land, Now," to compare the "soul-destroying poverty so powerfully documented in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath" and illustrated by Dorothea Lange's photographs with current words and images.[29] The lesson is clear: the desperate situation of the Depression migrants is similar to the desperate state of the current migrants; the contemporary families are persevering despite arduous circumstances beyond their control. Such current uses demonstrate the ability of people today to invoke the cultural authority of the products of literature and photography.

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[28]Eric Schlosser, "In the Strawberry Fields," Atlantic Monthly, vol. 276, no. 5 (1995): 94.

[29]"On the Land, Then...On the Land, Now," The Living Wilderness, vol. 46, no. 157 (1982): 17-23.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Whether perfectly accurate or not, the representations of the migrants created by John Steinbeck and the Historical Section of the FSA have become embedded in the public's conception of the 1930s. The portrayal of the migrants in The Grapes of Wrath and FSA photography established the displaced families as victims who persevered despite circumstances beyond their control and, therefore, were worthy of assistance. This portrait of the migrants was, and remains, widely embraced by the popular and academic mind. The representation remains influential due to the emotional power and artistic merits of these works. The effectiveness of the representation is bolstered by the extensive experience and knowledge of the photographers and Steinbeck, giving their representations a legitimacy of "having been there." The deliberate attempt to influence public conception resulted in a consistent portrait of the migrants as the wronged but strong and therefore the image of the worthy poor was used to justify the unprecedented federal intervention of the New Deal.

The content of the FSA photographs and The Grapes of Wrath was not fabricated. However, the identity of the migrants was carefully constructed according to very specific goals and expectations that did not always have to do with the needs of the migrants. A range of motivations guided Steinbeck and the photographers in constructing propaganda using the migrants. These motivations became inextricably intertwined with the creative process.

Genuine concern guided the photography project and The Grapes of Wrath. For Tugwell, the RA and FSA, the scale of poverty confirmed the need for widespread government intervention. Therefore, they issued a desperate call for reform and relief, challenged their critics, and denied the humanity of those who would call such intervention unnecessary. The photographers and Steinbeck believed their documentation could help improve the conditions they depicted. They saw their role in ameliorating the migrant situation not as devising political solutions, but rather as raising public awareness.

The photographers and Steinbeck wanted their art forms to be instruments of social change and they used the migrant situation to achieve this larger goal. For Stryker and the photographers, the effectiveness of the photographs affirmed their belief in the power of documentary photography to foster social change. For Steinbeck, the migrant situation provided the means to communicate a personal philosophical vision that was a commentary on a declining social structure and its possible renewal. The photographs and novel did more than merely present the facts; they communicated a message. To borrow an idea from popular contemporary culture, the medium became the message. Photography and the novel communicated to a mass audience the essence of a social crisis. The images and words were taken seriously. They influenced government agencies toward aid and relief for the migrants. For Stryker, the photographers, and John Steinbeck, the representations had fulfilled their purpose. They roused federal and mass attention, funds and emotions, and therefore reinforced their faith in photography and literature to effectively communicate and mobilize.

While raising awareness of the migrant situation, the representation of the migrants reflected a paternalistic perspective of the photographers and, particularly, Steinbeck. The emphasis on squalor and dirt, along with the phonetically spelled vernacular of the Joads and the photography captions, portrayed the migrants as unsophisticated compared with the educated group of onlookers. The FSA appeared to be the justified saviors, and the photographers and Steinbeck the trustworthy agents for the migrants. Steinbeck's paternalistic position was further established by his contention that the displaced families needed social and political uplifting, not just funds, to achieve happiness and reach their full potential.

The values contained in the photographs and The Grapes of Wrath make these works powerful and influential. The ideals of the importance of family and perseverance spoke directly to people during the 1930s. Women were conveyed as key figures in their traditional roles as mothers; they represented the provider of life for the family and its source of strength. A desire for the return to earlier America, brought on by economic devastation, created an interest in the common man and woman. The Joads and the photographed families were those common people.

The FSA photographs and The Grapes of Wrath are powerful works from which a mass audience has come to understand the Great Depression. The novel and the photographs are easily obtained. Because of their past and present power, these sources need to be analyzed and contextualized. Only then can we discover that the depiction of the migrants is not simply the documentation of the movement of roughly 400,000 people. Rather, interpreting the construction of these representations of the migrants can provide an avenue to a greater understanding of the societal values, political

movements and ideologies, and personal goals and philosophies of artists and reformers during the 1930s.

Early on, as I explored these depictions of the migrants I was troubled by the fact that these documents appeared to be both objective and biased. However, in carrying out this research it became clear that accurate depiction and manipulative construction can both exist within the same historical source. For me, the reconciliation lies in the evaluation of these sources in conjunction with surrounding facts and contextual information, and the loosening of boundaries of perspective of historical study. Thus, the value for historians in studying these documents is an increased understanding of the dust bowl migration and the Great Depression through a perspective that includes not only the migrants but, those who focused their attention on them and used them as representatives of an entire country for an entire era.

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