

The Migrant Experience

A complex set of interacting forces both economic and ecological brought the migrant workers to California. Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops and caused Great Plains farmers to increase their productivity through mechanization and the cultivation of more land. This increase in farming activity required an increase in spending that caused many farmers to become financially overextended. The stock market crash in 1929 only served to **exacerbate** this already tenuous economic situation. Many independent farmers lost their farms when banks came to collect on their notes, while tenant farmers were turned out when economic pressure was brought to bear on large landholders. The attempts of these displaced agricultural workers to find other work were met with frustration due to a 30 percent unemployment rate.

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



Frank and Myra Pipkin being recorded by Charles L. Todd at Shafter FSA Camp, Shafter, California, 1941. Photo by Robert Hemmig.

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



Myra Pipkin, age 46, holding grandchild, Shafter FSA Camp, Shafter, California, 1941. Photo by Robert Hemmig.

California was emphatically not the promised land of the migrants' dreams. Although the weather was comparatively balmy and farmers' fields were bountiful with produce, Californians also felt the effects of the Depression. Local and state infrastructures were already overburdened, and



Children of Mexican migrant workers posing at entrance to El Rio FSA Camp, El Rio, California, 1941. Photo by Robert Hemmig.

the steady stream of newly arriving migrants was more than the system could bear. After struggling to make it to California, many found themselves turned away at its borders. Those who did cross over into California found that the available labor pool was vastly disproportionate to the number of job openings that could be filled.

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

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