

Standards Focus: Historical Context*Migrant Workers of California*

In addition to the economic hardship felt by the impact of the stock market crash, another important event contributed to the devastation of the Great Depression: an event known as the *Dust Bowl*. The Dust Bowl got its name from the dust storms stirred from the top soil following an immense drought across the United States. The areas hit hardest by the drought—Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and parts of Colorado and Texas—were devastated, as farms and crops and ultimately farmers' **livelihoods** were totally destroyed. Because so many farmers lost everything they had, they decided to try to find a better place to live. Many farmers decided to head west, to California, Oregon, and Washington.



"Okies" (people from Oklahoma) on Route 66 to California. (Farm Security Administration: Circa 1935)

During the 1920s, California became a tropical oasis, as it was heralded as an agricultural **mecca**. California had once touted itself as a state with a perfect climate for agriculture with plenty of jobs in the industry. Thousands of those forced out by the Dust Bowl flocked to California, and the state became overwhelmed with people looking to restart their lives. These people were not only farmers, but others such as retailers and those whose income relied on farm communities. Such people became known as **migrant workers**, since they would travel from place to place looking for jobs. There was work available for some, and many were able to start over in California. However, there were not enough jobs for everyone, and many people found themselves jobless and homeless.

Since so many migrant workers found themselves without work, they traveled wherever they could to find a job, often riding trains illegally, traveling from camp to camp with other homeless migrant workers. These camps became known as "squatter camps," "shack towns," or "Hooverilles," named after President Herbert Hoover, who many disgruntled Americans blamed for the problems leading up to the Depression. These temporary camps were usually set up by rivers or streams and provided little shelter—usually a tent or shack. There were no toilets or showers, and the little food they had was cooked over an open campfire. According to a report of the National Labor Board in 1934, "we found filth, **squalor**, an entire absence of sanitation, and a crowding of human beings into totally inadequate tents or crude structures built of boards, weeds, and anything that was found at hand to give a pitiful **semblance** of a home at its worst. Words cannot describe some of the conditions we saw. During the warm weather, when the temperature rises considerably above 100 degrees, the flies and insects become a pest, the children are fretful, the attitude of some of the parents can be imagined, and innumerable

Name _____ Period _____

inconveniences add to the general discomfort. In this environment there is bred a social **sullenness** that is to be deplored, but which can be understood by those who have viewed the scenes that violate all the recognized standards of living.”

Some farmers attempted to help more permanent workers by allowing them to live on the land on which they worked. Government agencies also tried to help the situation by setting up camps run by the people living there. Facilities such as toilets, showers, and washing machines were available at these camps. Relief in the form of money (often less than \$40 per month per family) and food was made available to those who had been in California more than three years, but those who had been in California less than three years were left helpless. Still, those who received aid had to wait in long lines and since there were so many who needed help, many were turned away once food rations were gone.

When workers were able to work, the competition was fierce and the conditions were poor. A report from Alameda County in 1936 described these circumstances: “At one ranch 150 to 200 persons, Mexicans, Americans, high school boys, some families; reported at 6:30 in the morning, waited under the trees for call, some waited all day and were not called at all, others would work two hours and then check out, waiting until another truck was available, which again brings up the question of duration of employment. Twenty-five cents an hour is the scale, yet a person may only work four hours out of the twelve, but they must spend the rest of the time waiting in the hot sun or under the trees, subject to call of the foreman. It is certainly an unsatisfactory situation...”

Hope eventually came in the form of the New Deal and the creation of the Works Progress Administration, which provided thousands of jobs across the country. The program put many to work building government buildings, transportation systems, and projects including those in the arts, media, and literacy.

Comprehension Check: Migrant Workers of California

Directions: After reading the article about *Migrant Workers of California*, answer the following questions using complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.

1. Use a dictionary to define the following words: livelihood, mecca, migrant, squalor, semblance, sullenness.
2. Why did so many farmers decide to migrate to the west?
3. What is a migrant worker?
4. Using your own words, describe the living conditions of many migrant workers.
5. Why are there quotation marks around part of the 3rd paragraph?
6. What kind of help was offered to the migrant workers?
7. Why did the migrant workers face competition for jobs? What did they have to do in order to get a job? How much might they get paid for their work?
8. What type of work did the Works Progress Administration provide?