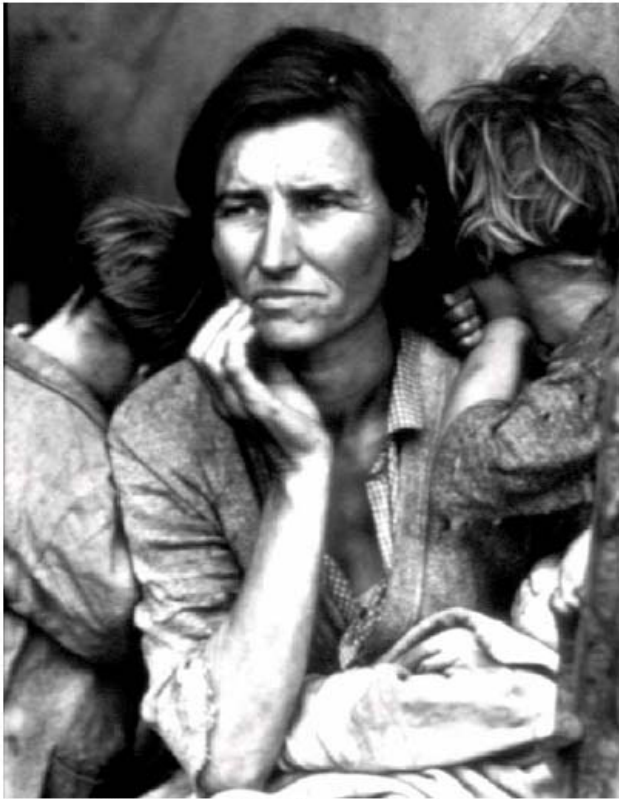


Of Mice & Men

EXPLORING THE CONTEXT - The Great Depression



Migrant Mother by Photographer Dorothea Lange

The 1920s, sometimes known as the Roaring Twenties, were a period of great national prosperity for the United States. The United States had become the richest country on Earth following World War I. A major cause was the strength of industrial innovations such as mass production, which allowed technological products, including automobiles and radios, to be developed and sold more cheaply. Credit and loans became readily available, and many citizens used this credit to speculate on the stock market, becoming even wealthier.

In late October 1929, however, the stock market crashed. Investors rapidly sold off their stocks as the value of their investments plummeted. Banks, which had lent money to investors to purchase stock, were losing that money at unprecedented rates, forcing them to go out of business. With the banks out of business, and with individual investors having lost their savings, other businesses were forced to close,

sending unemployment rates sky-high. The nation was in crisis.

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 kicked off The Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the history of the industrialized world.

Wealth was not spread evenly throughout the United States. The richest .1% of society earned the same total income as the poorest 42%. The wealthiest citizens did not need to buy new products and chose to save their money instead. The most impoverished citizens were too poor to buy new products.

As a result, manufacturers were producing more goods than they could sell, disrupting the economic system known as *supply and demand*. There were simply more products available than people wanted to buy; the supply was much higher than the demand.

The United States economy began to crumble. Fifteen million Americans – one quarter of the work force – were unemployed. No group within the United States society was spared. In Ohio, fifty percent of the Cleveland work force and eighty percent of Toledo's work force were out of jobs. Farmers and other rural workers were hit equally as hard, as prices for crops fell by forty to sixty percent. African Americans were hit particularly hard, as their jobs were often taken away and given to newly unemployed white workers; in 1930, one out of every two African-Americans was unemployed.

California in the Depression

Californians suffered through The Depression as intensely as the rest of the nation. Unemployment throughout the state reached twenty-eight percent by 1932. In 1934, over one-fifth of the state's population was receiving some type of public assistance. As a whole, California farm income was sliced in half from 1929 to 1932, just three years after the Stock Market Crash.

With employment so scarce, California residents began to fear that recent immigrants were taking jobs from native-born workers. In 1935, Congress passed the Filipino Repatriation Act, offering to pay the transportation expenses of any Filipinos who wished to return to their homeland. The hope was that this would reduce population and open up employment opportunities. Mexican immigrants were also targeted through similar programs. Almost one hundred thousand Mexicans were deported, either voluntarily or through force.

California's depression woes were made worse by the arrival of residents of the Great Plains who were fleeing the effects of the Dust Bowl – a series of massive dust storms that had rendered much of the nation's farmland uninhabitable. Many years of poor farming techniques combined with an ongoing, multi-year drought to dry out soil throughout many states including Oklahoma, Texas, the Dakotas, and Montana.



Toward Los Angeles, California. 1937. Photographer: Dorothea Lange. Perhaps 2.5 million people abandoned their homes in the South and the Great Plains during the Great Depression and went on the road.



Migrant workers 1936

The soil was then picked up by high winds and carried throughout the country, forcing many citizens to abandon their homes. As much as fifteen percent of the population of Oklahoma left the state. These Dust Bowl refugees often became migrant workers, moving from town to town or even state to state in search of their next temporary farming job.

John Steinbeck told the story of a family of displaced Dust Bowl farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is often considered his masterpiece and received the Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

Migrant Workers



American Migrant Workers - 1936

What are Migrant Workers?

* They are people who might be born in another country, state, or city and travel to work in another place.

* Unlike regular workers, migrant workers usually work in labor-intensive jobs (farm work or construction for example), are paid in cash, and have little other benefits such as a retirement fund or medical insurance. They certainly do not work at a desk with a computer and phone!

* In the past, migrant workers, such as George and Lennie, would literally move to wherever the work was, therefore they would have no fixed home address. Today, this is less true, but the work is still hard!

* By the time that *Of Mice and Men* was published huge combine harvesters harvested almost half of America's grain. In other words, 5 men could do what would have taken 350 men a few years earlier. George and Lennie are some of the last of the migrant farm workers.

* Huge numbers of men traveled the countryside between the 1880s and early 1930s harvesting wheat. They earned \$2.50 or \$3.00 a day, plus food and very basic accommodation.

* During the 1930s, when there was very high unemployment in the United States, agencies were set up under the Government's New Deal to send farm workers to where they were needed. George and Lennie got their work cards from Murray and Ready's, one of those types of agencies.



Migrant Workers in the Field