**The Dust Bowl**

**Dust** **Bowl** was the name given to parts of the Great Plains in the 1930s after severe drought and high winds degraded farmland. Huge **dust** storms literally buried farmhouses and equipment, forcing people to flee. The disaster was not entirely due to natural causes: years of overproduction and poor farming techniques had stripped the land of protective topsoil and left it vulnerable to the winds. The **Dust** **Bowl** spurred a massive migration of people, desperate for work, from the plains into California. The struggling migrants became symbols of the misery endured by so many Americans during the Great Depression.

**Overproduction and Drought**

The Great Plains, a swath of land east of the Rocky Mountains, extend from North Dakota and eastern Montana in the north to western Texas in the south. During the early 1800s explorer Zebulon Pike (1779-1813) reported that the prairies were "incapable of cultivation." Hordes of pioneers moved into the area and began farming and ranching anyway. Cattle overgrazed the land, stripping it of the shrubby grasses that had held the soil in place for centuries. Farmers unfamiliar with the semiarid climate of the region used growing methods common to the more humid eastern United States. Although droughts occurred occasionally, the land provided abundant crops, particularly of grains, such as wheat.

During World War I demand for agricultural goods skyrocketed, particularly in Europe. Optimistic U.S. farmers took out loans to buy more land and newly developed mechanized equipment. Plains farmers ramped up production, using tractors and plows that churned the ground more deeply than before. In the 1920s, however, many farmers suffered economic hardship when agricultural supply outpaced demand and pushed prices downward. The agricultural sector was already in crisis when the stock market crashed in October 1929.

The drought began in the summer of 1930 in the southeastern United States and spread across the plains. The Southeast suffered until late 1931, when rain fell regularly again. The central plains, however, experienced nearly continuous drought for almost a decade. As the **dust** storms turned the sky black and scoured the landscape, people lost their farms and homes to foreclosure and farmworkers and tenant farmers—those who live on and farmland that is owned by others—lost their livelihoods.

**Western Migration**

Thousands of farmers uprooted from the **Dust** **Bowl** traveled west, hoping to find jobs in the fertile agricultural fields of California. Some found temporary work picking crops—usually for very low pay and usually competing for work and wages with each other and the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers already in the state. Migrants wandered from place to place, living in tents and makeshift shacks or in their cars. Although not all were from Oklahoma, they were commonly called "Okies."

In the mid-1930s the federal government erected more than a dozen camps in California to provide clean living quarters for the migrant workers. For the residents and government of the state of California, however, the camps were small comfort. They considered the dilapidated shantytowns and temporary camps to be menaces to the public health. Sheriffs set up roadblocks at the state's border and refused entry to bedraggled migrants. For a few months in 1936 the Los Angeles Police Department deployed more than a hundred officers to border towns to stop vehicles and freight trains as part of a "bum blockade." California began enforcing a decades-old law that prohibited anyone from transporting into the state "any indigent person who is not a resident of the state." In 1941 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Edwards v. People of State of California* that the law was unconstitutional because it violated the freedom of interstate commerce. The Court acknowledged that migrants produced "staggering" problems for the state in terms of "health, morals, and especially finance," but insisted that it could not be allowed simply to "shut its gates" as a remedy.

**Labor Unrest**

Tension between California residents and migrants was aggravated by ongoing labor strife: dozens of farm strikes erupted in 1933, some led by Communist organizers or their sympathizers. In response a group of wealthy farmers and businessmen formed an antiunion group, Associated Farmers (AF), which recruited local sheriffs and citizens to harass migrant workers who were considered troublemakers. Major strikes in 1936 by lettuce pickers in Salinas and in 1937 by cannery workers in Stockton ended in violence when the AF sent hundreds of armed vigilantes to break up the strikes with tear gas. In 1939 Senator Robert La Follette, Jr. (1895-1953), a Republican from Wisconsin, formed a committee to investigate the AF and its union-busting activities. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee found many activities that violated labor laws; its findings, however, were overshadowed by the nation's entry into World War II in 1941.

**Public Attention**

The plight of the migrant workers was publicized widely. Some newspapers and magazines printed the photographs of Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), who became famous for her frank portrayals of down-and-out people and their living conditions. More common were articles such as "The Harvest Gypsies," a series written by John Steinbeck (1902-1968) in 1936 for the *San Francisco News*. "They arrive in California," wrote Steinbeck, "usually having used up every resource to get here, even to the selling of their poor blankets and utensils and tools on the way to buy gasoline. They arrive bewildered and beaten and usually in a state of semistarvation, with only one necessity to face immediately, and that is to find work at any wage in order that the family may eat."

In 1939 Steinbeck used his research to write a novel about a fictionalized migrant family, the Joads, who were tenant farmers from Oklahoma. Driven west from the **Dust** **Bowl**, they roamed the migrant camps, encountering discrimination against Okies and mistreatment by local authorities and farmers. The novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which became the definitive work about the Great Depression, created a storm of controversy. Californians were outraged by the negative depiction of their state. Some critics complained that Steinbeck exaggerated the poor condition of the migrants and that he had Communist leanings. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) came to his defense, praising the book in her daily syndicated newspaper column, "My Day."

**The Rain Returns**

Not all farmers left the **Dust** **Bowl**. Those who remained behind scraped out a living as best they could or depended on government aid. Twenty-one percent of rural residents in the plains states received federal emergency aid in 1936—as many as 90 percent of the residents in the hardest-hit counties. The government supplied cash payments, farming supplies, and feed for livestock and set up medical-care facilities to meet the everyday needs of poor farmers and ranchers. It also conducted research to determine and implement better land-management techniques for the region. During the spring of 1938 the rains finally returned. By 1941 the drought was over, and the prairies of the **Dust** **Bowl** had been rejuvenated.

**The Legacy of the Dust Bowl**

The drought of the 1930s would have been ruinous on its own, but its arrival at the same time as the Great Depression greatly magnified its effects. Local relief agencies—the traditional source of aid to rural America—were overwhelmed, so the federal government became involved in the lives and financial affairs of the nation's farmers in an unprecedented way. Besides financial aid, it created programs to inspire new farming methods. The Soil Erosion Service (1933) fostered such techniques as contouring, terracing, and crop rotation to preserve valuable topsoil. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935 established the Soil Conservation Service (now the National Resource Conservation Service), which made land use and conservation a high priority in agriculture.

**Source Citation:**

"The Dust Bowl." *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. History: Government and Politics*. Ed. Anne Marie Hacht and Dwayne D. Hayes. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Student Resource Center - Junior*. Gale. Cobb County Schools. 24 June 2013 <http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&source=gale&srcprod=SRCJ&userGroupName=cobb90289&prodId=SRC-4&tabID=T001&docId=EJ3048400163&type=retrieve&contentSet=GSRC&version=1.0>.