

Teacher Guide

Primary Source Set: Dust Bowl Migrations



[Boys sitting on truck parked at the FSA ... labor camp, Robston, Tex. 1942](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsac.1a34264)
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsac.1a34264>

On the fourteenth day of April of nineteen thirty five,
There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky:
You could see that dust storm coming, the cloud looked deathlike black,
And through our mighty nation, it left a dreadful track...
This storm took place at sundown and lasted through the night,
When we looked out this morning we saw a terrible sight:
We saw outside our windows where wheat fields they had grown
Was now a rippling ocean of dust the wind had blown.
It covered up our fences, it covered up our barns,
It covered up our tractors in this wild and windy storm.
We loaded our jalopies and piled our families in,
We rattled down the highway to never come back again.
(Woody Guthrie, from "Dust Storm Disaster")

Guthrie's song encapsulates the disaster that occurred between 1930 and 1940 in the southwestern Great Plains region of the United States. In the heartland of the U.S, poor soil conservation practices and extreme weather conditions exacerbated the existing misery of the Great Depression and instigated the largest migration in American history.

Agricultural and Natural Disasters

The semi-arid grasslands of the Great Plains were first settled for large-scale agriculture in the 1860s, when Congress passed the Homestead Act and encouraged thousands of families to move to the area. As the nation's demand for wheat grew, however, cattle grazing was reduced and more acres were plowed and planted. Dry-land farming in combination with overgrazing caused destruction of the natural prairie grasses. The land became increasingly bare and the strong winds found naturally in the Great Plains began to literally blow the land away. Huge clouds of dust darkened the sky for days and drifted like snow, covering farm buildings and homes.

Throughout the Dust Bowl decade, the Plains were torn by climatic extremes. In addition to dirt storms, residents of the Great Plains suffered through blizzards, tornadoes, floods, droughts, earthquake, and record high and low temperatures. In February 1933, temperatures dropped 74 degrees within 18 hours in Boise City, Oklahoma, and remained below freezing for several days while a dirt storm raged. In 1934, record high temperatures—as high as 120 degrees—caused hundreds of deaths in Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Sunday, April 14, 1935, is still remembered as “Black Sunday.” A day that began with mild warmth ended with a huge dust cloud, pushed at 60 miles per hour, blackening the sky.

Unfit for Man or Beast

The dust penetrated everything and everywhere. Wherever air could go, dust could infiltrate. No matter how well sealed a home might be, the dust coated furniture, clothing, and cooking and eating areas. During a dust storm, if anyone ventured outside, he or she was assailed by shovelfuls of sand flying into their faces.

“People caught in their own yards grope for the doorstep. Cars come to a standstill, for no light in the world can penetrate that swirling murk. ... We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions...” (Avis D. Carlson, *The New Republic*)

Livestock suffered equally. Poultry were suffocated and larger farm animals were blinded and sickened by the swirling dust.

Moving West

Though they tried to hang on, eventually millions of people left the Great Plains. Almost one-quarter of the population was forced out when they lost their farms and ranches in bank foreclosures. The need to feed their children and raise them in more healthful surroundings drove many families to pack everything they owned in cars and trucks and head west.

California became a popular destination. Its mild climate and diverse crops appealed to farmers looking for work. Popular stories depicted California as a veritable promised land. Flyers advertising work for farm workers were widely circulated. Further, in this pre-interstate-highway period, Route 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to the Central Valley of California.

Life in California

Sadly, life in California was not as idyllic as had been hoped. Many migrants gave up farming when they discovered that a good portion of California farmlands were owned by large, corporate farms that cultivated different crops and were far more modernized than the smaller farms of the Great Plains. There were often fewer jobs available than had been advertised, and desperate workers weren't in a position to refuse the poor pay and living conditions offered by the corporate farms.

So, for many migrants, their unemployment continued in California. Roadside camps proliferated, feeding the resistance to migrant workers that came from many local citizens. Groups of vigilantes beat up migrants and burned their shacks to the ground. The local law enforcement officers were often hostile as well. In Los Angeles, the chief of police authorized policemen to act as "bouncers" at the state border.

Eventually, federal help was given to the migrants. Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration built 13 camps designed to be self-governing communities. Each temporary housing complex accommodated 300 families in tents built on wooden platforms.

Over the years, migrants from the Great Plains were integrated into the California culture. The FSA camps disappeared, roadside shacks were replaced with real houses, and migrant children were sent to the local public schools. Unfortunately, discrimination against the "Okies" and "Arkies" continued in the job market for many years,

Suggestions for Teachers

Teachers may use these Library of Congress primary source documents to support teaching about the historical era: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945). This photo-rich primary source set documents the ravages of the Dust Bowl, the breadlines, the move from the Great Plains, and life in federally funded communities in California and New Mexico. It includes a map of California created by the Rural Rehabilitation Division, and song lyrics and sound files that memorialize the migrant experience.

The famous Dorothea Lange "Migrant Mother" photos offer an excellent opportunity to consider point of view in photography, the creative process, and the iconization of this series of images. The poems and song lyrics provide rich evidence of irony and the pathos of the time. Collectively, this set of resources offers a scaffold for comparing and contrasting historic migrations such as those that resulted from the Dust Bowl, the westward movement of the mid-19th century, and the forced migrations caused by hurricanes and other natural disasters in the early 21st century. The resources can trigger discussions about what causes migrations, transportation issues, hardships encountered, and eventual outcomes for migrants.

Additional Online Resources

General Library of Congress Links

[Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b29527))+@field(COLLID+fsa))) [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b29527\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b29527))+@field(COLLID+fsa)))

[Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3c31366))+@field(COLLID+fsa))) [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3c31366\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3c31366))+@field(COLLID+fsa)))

[Bound for Glory: 1939-1943.](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/boundforglory/)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/boundforglory/>

[Documenting America: Photographic Series](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fadocamer.html)

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fadocamer.html>

[Photographers of the FSA: Selected Portraits](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fsap.html)

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fsap.html>

[Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wwghhtml/wwghome.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wwghhtml/wwghome.html>

Lesson Plans

[Brother, Can You Spare a Dime: The Effects of The New Deal on the Great Depression](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/dime/intro.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/dime/intro.html>

[Enhancing a Poetry Unit with American Memory](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/poetry/poem.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/poetry/poem.html>

[Figuring Somepin 'Bout the Great Depression](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/migrant/intro.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/migrant/intro.html>

[The Grandparent/Elder Project](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/grand/overview.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/grand/overview.html>

[The Grapes of Wrath - Scrapbooks and Artifacts](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/01/grapes/index.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/01/grapes/index.html>

[The Great Depression and the 1990s](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/97/depress/overview.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/97/depress/overview.html>

[Images of Our People](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/westnew/overview.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/westnew/overview.html>

[Immigration/Migration: Today and During the Great Depression](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/migrate/intro.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/migrate/intro.html>

[Nature's Fury](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/00/nature/overview.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/00/nature/overview.html>

[The New Deal: North Carolina's Reconstruction?](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/97/newdeal/lesson.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/97/newdeal/lesson.html>

[Our Changing Voices](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/voice/overview.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/voice/overview.html>

[Using Oral History](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>

[Visions In the Dust: A Child's Perspective of the Dust Bowl](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/dust/intro.html)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/dust/intro.html>

Links Outside the Library of Congress

[History Matters: What Can Companion Images Tell Us?](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos/question4.html#alys)

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos/question4.html#alys>

[The Migrant Mother Sequence](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/lang.html)

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/lang.html>

Citations: Dust Bowl Migrations

Teachers,

Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations (Chicago Manual of Style) is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students.



Rothstein, Arthur. "Boys sitting on truck parked at the FSA...labor camp, Robston, Tex." January 1942. From the Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Color Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1939-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsac+1a34264\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsac\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsac+1a34264))+@field(COLLID+fsac))).



Rothstein, Arthur. "Heavy black clouds of dust rising over the Texas Panhandle, Texas." March 1936. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3c30515\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3c30515))+@field(COLLID+fsa))).



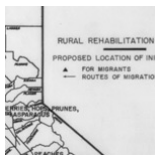
Rothstein, Arthur. "Dust storm, Amarillo, Texas." April 1936. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b27554\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b27554))).



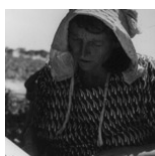
Rothstein, Arthur. "Stock watering hole almost completely covered by shifting topsoil, Cimarron County." From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3c29097\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3c29097))+@field(COLLID+fsa))).



"Breadline at McCauley Water Street Mission under Brooklyn Bridge." [c 1930]. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8e08017\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8e08017))+@field(COLLID+fsa))).



Map of California by the Rural Rehabilitation Division showing areas where different crops are grown, proposed location of initial camps for migrants, and routes of migration. 1935. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3a00965\)\)+@field\(COLLID+cph\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3a00965))+@field(COLLID+cph))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Where is Tranquility, California? she asked..." 1935. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3b31573\)\)+@field\(COLLID+cph\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3b31573))+@field(COLLID+cph))).



Hemmig, Robert. "Group of children posing under sign that reads: 'U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Security Administration Farm Workers Community'." 1941. From Library of Congress, Voices from the Dust Bowl: The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940-1941. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(p014\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(p014))).



Rothstein, Arthur. "Boy building a model airplane while other children look on, FSA labor camp, Robstown, Tex." January 1942. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Color Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsac+1a34266\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsac\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsac+1a34266))+@field(COLLID+fsac))).



Rothstein, Arthur. "Community clothesline, FSA...camp, Robstown, Tex." January 1942. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Color Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsac+1a34262\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsac\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsac+1a34262))+@field(COLLID+fsac))).



Lee, Russell. "School at Pietown, New Mexico is held at the Farm Bureau Building." October 1940. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Color Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsac+1a34104\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsac\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsac+1a34104))+@field(COLLID+fsac))).



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Lange, Dorothea. "To harvest the crops of California thousands of families live literally on wheels, San Joaquin Valley." 22 February 1935. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3b16553\)\)+@field\(COLLID+cph\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3b16553))+@field(COLLID+cph))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Family who traveled by freight train. Washington, Toppenish, Yakima." August 1939. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b34311\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b34311))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Example of self-resettlement in California. Oklahoma farm family on highway." August 1936. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b38486\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b38486))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Migrant pea pickers camp in the rain. California." February 1936. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b38194\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/fsaall:@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b38194))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two." 1936. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. PDF, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b29516\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b29516))+@field(COLLID+fsa))).



Lange, Dorothea. "Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven children without food. Mother aged..." 1936. From Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. Photograph, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b29525\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b29525))+@field(COLLID+fsa))).



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Robertson, Flora. "Why We Come to California [Californy]." 1940. From Library of Congress, Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkn Migrant Worker Collection, 1940-1941. MP3. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(st116\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(st116))).

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We go around all day
While the rest of the
And we have to be as
with half enough to
we have to live in
Or else we live in
For when we buy our
There's nothing left

I'd rather not be or
Or work on the #, 2,
We'd rather work for

Hunter, Lester. "I'd Rather Not be on Relief" 1938. From Library of Congress, Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940-1941.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(st045\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/toddbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(st045)))