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Drought Refugee and Labor Migration to California, June-December 1935¹

By PAUL S. TAYLOR and TOM VASEY²

THE drought which struck large sections of the United States from 1933 to early 1935 was particularly acute on the Great Plains. The great dust storms originating in that area scattered its topsoil over the Nation and dramatized the problems of human resettlement which center there. Following drought, and the depression which preceded drought, streams of stricken people began to seek refuge by migration to other regions. Undoubtedly, except for extensive assistance from government, these creeping lines of distress would have been vastly larger than they were.

One of the most important movements in the flight has been directed toward California, where nearly continuous harvests use extensively the unskilled labor of men, women, and children and offer ready opportunity for the inexperienced to earn something, however little that may be. The present article represents an effort to measure the volume of this migration of refugees. Although it was impossible entirely to segregate refugees from laborers engaged in usual interstate seasonal migration, or from those made destitute by causes other than drought, the results nevertheless illuminate very significant movements of population.

On all important highways entering California, the State department of agriculture maintains plant quarantine stations where incoming vehicles are stopped and inspected. The inspectors were instructed to note cars whose occupants were "persons in need of manual employment", and to designate them by symbols on their usual report forms, as white, Mexican, Negro, Filipino, or other. No more precise definition of the class it was desired to count was possible, but it was suggested that it was made up of persons moving usually in family groups, loaded with poor equipment, and known colloquially to inspectors as "tin-can tourists." Filipino laborers, who almost

¹ This study is part of the research initiated under Harry E. Drobish, director of rural rehabilitation, California Emergency Relief Administration, and continued by the Resettlement Administration. Other aspects of the movement of drought and depression refugees to California have been presented by the senior author in *Again the Covered Wagon*, Survey Graphic, July 1935, and by Walter Davenport in *California, Here We Come*, *Colliers*, Aug. 10, 1935. The cooperation of A. C. Fleury, chief of the Bureau of Plant Quarantine, California Department of Agriculture, and the staff of inspectors at border stations who made the traffic count of which these statistics are a compilation, is gratefully acknowledged.

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always move as groups of single men with better equipment, were also counted. Persons entering the State by train or by bus were not counted. No questions beyond those ordinarily required in line of duty were asked. But physical and material conditions of refugees and other laborers are so marked and so well known to the inspectors, who are capable and observant men, that the results may be relied upon with confidence.

The statistics include men, women, and children, but no classification by age or sex could be obtained. As already indicated, complete separation of refugees from regular seasonal labor migrants between States was impossible. However, the largest group of this type—seasonal laborers originating in California and returning to that State—were recorded separately because their vehicles bore California licenses. No statistical determination was made of the employment objective of the immigrants, but it is known from field observation that an overwhelming majority seek employment in California agriculture. Drought and depression were the principal expelling forces. Most of the immigrants were rural folk from farms and small towns.

An unknown, but large, number of "persons in need of manual employment" leave California, both seasonally and permanently. For the period under review those coming to California far exceeded those departing, but it is unfortunate that their numbers could not have been ascertained.

During the 6 months ending December 15, 43,180 persons, members of parties "in need of manual employment", entered California by motor vehicle. This number included men, women, and children, but did not include persons traveling by bus, or in cars bearing California licenses. Table 1 presents the statistics of this movement by months, and by States of origin. The peak of immigration occurred during the month ending September 15, which slightly anticipates the peak demand for labor in California agriculture. The volume at the peak was 50 percent greater than at the low point, which occurred during the month ending December 15.

Seventy-five percent of the emigrants came from States classified as "drought States" by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Six of these—Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas—furnished 50 percent of the total. Undoubtedly a great many of those who entered in cars bearing Arizona licenses, and some in those with New Mexico licenses, originated in States farther east. It is a very common practice for Oklahomans and others migrating westward to pause for work in the cotton harvest in Arizona, in order to obtain a temporary livelihood and funds for continuance of travel.

All or portions of the five States of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico have recently come to be known as the Dust Bowl. From these States came 37.4 percent of the emigrants,

and in addition an unknown number whose cars, for the reason given above, bore Arizona licenses. An interstate rural-labor migration, rather than immigration of refugees, is represented largely by the 14 percent of the total migration which came from Washington and Oregon.

Notable deviations from the fluctuations in volume characterizing the total influx occurred in the portions of the movement which originated in Arizona, Washington, and Montana. Migration from Arizona dropped sharply after July 15. The early peak occurred when demand for farm labor was rising sharply in California, and the low points in the fall coincided with the rising demand for cotton pickers and lettuce workers in Arizona. The peak of movement from Montana and Washington occurred during the month ending November 15. Probably the end of the sugar-beet harvest in Montana and the fruit harvest in Washington accounts for this.

Table 1.—Migrants "in Need of Manual Employment" Entering California by Motor Vehicle, June 16–Dec. 15, 1935, by Months and by State of Origin ¹

State of origin	Total, June 16 to Dec. 15, 1935		Number of migrants, month ending—					
	Num-ber	Per-cent	July 15	Aug. 15	Sept. 15	Oct. 15	Nov. 15	Dec. 15
All States.....	43,180	100.0	7,162	8,057	8,955	6,309	6,845	5,852
Percent.....	100.0	-----	16.6	18.7	20.7	14.6	15.9	13.6
Drought States.....	32,312	74.8	5,268	6,200	6,959	4,588	4,681	4,616
Oklahoma.....	7,138	16.5	773	1,539	1,812	1,143	862	1,009
Texas.....	3,560	8.2	689	740	755	376	463	537
Arizona.....	3,467	8.0	1,109	886	555	361	310	246
Arkansas.....	2,786	6.5	319	514	576	484	456	437
Missouri.....	2,428	5.6	306	505	629	321	361	306
Kansas.....	2,257	5.2	282	357	645	390	299	284
Colorado.....	1,659	3.8	341	281	278	201	236	322
New Mexico.....	1,597	3.7	345	364	273	212	185	218
Nebraska.....	1,292	3.0	223	178	281	242	183	185
Idaho.....	1,188	2.8	116	130	213	170	286	273
Montana.....	841	1.9	67	53	101	95	334	191
Utah.....	754	1.7	221	145	145	99	72	72
Iowa.....	704	1.6	117	94	161	118	97	117
Nevada.....	602	1.4	161	149	151	66	34	41
North Dakota.....	548	1.3	39	53	92	72	184	108
Minnesota.....	475	1.1	57	45	82	115	111	65
South Dakota.....	447	1.0	44	64	79	63	126	71
Wyoming.....	343	.8	27	85	51	30	32	118
Wisconsin.....	226	.5	32	18	80	30	50	16
Pacific States.....	6,062	14.0	941	1,012	925	1,049	1,439	696
Oregon.....	3,770	8.7	633	747	633	654	728	375
Washington.....	2,292	5.3	308	265	292	395	711	321
Industrial States.....	3,261	7.6	669	574	737	450	500	331
Illinois.....	855	2.0	177	146	191	133	152	56
Michigan.....	709	1.6	229	116	128	68	78	90
New York.....	519	1.2	97	74	141	62	90	55
Ohio.....	450	1.0	43	114	99	68	51	75
Indiana.....	333	.8	50	63	63	70	66	21
Pennsylvania.....	273	.6	37	51	88	29	40	28
New Jersey.....	122	.3	36	10	27	20	23	6

¹ For definition of migrants "in need of manual employment", see text. Persons traveling in auto stages are not included in this study; they represent only a small proportion of the total immigration of this type. Federal Emergency Relief Administration classification of States is used. Note that persons entering in cars bearing California licenses are not included in this table, but are included in the remaining tables.

Table 1.—Migrants "in Need of Manual Employment" Entering California by Motor Vehicle, June 16–Dec. 15, 1935, by Months and by State of Origin—Con.

State of origin	Total, June 16 to Dec. 15, 1935		Number of migrants, month ending—						
	Number	Per-cent	July 15	Aug. 15	Sept. 15	Oct. 15	Nov. 15	Dec. 15	
Southern States.....	1, 290	3. 0	225	245	299	177	160	184	
Tennessee.....	302	. 7	37	57	91	36	22	59	
Georgia.....	214	. 5	16	19	68	48	33	30	
Louisiana.....	170	. 4	41	43	46	22	4	14	
Florida.....	129	. 3	47	17	29	16	12	8	
Alabama.....	113	. 3	26	17	24	9	19	18	
Kentucky.....	100	. 2	9	33	11	18	17	12	
Mississippi.....	76	. 2	19	8	7	6	26	10	
Virginia.....	63	. 1	16	8	-----	5	12	22	
West Virginia.....	35	(²)	5	8	8	2	7	5	
Maryland.....	30	(²)	1	14	3	4	2	6	
North Carolina.....	23	(²)	8	7	8	-----	-----	-----	
District of Columbia.....	19	(²)	-----	7	-----	6	6	-----	
South Carolina.....	16	(²)	-----	7	4	5	-----	-----	
Delaware.....	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	
New England.....	255	. 6	59	26	35	45	65	25	
Massachusetts.....	116	. 3	39	16	14	19	18	10	
Rhode Island.....	41	(²)	7	4	9	3	18	-----	
Maine.....	40	(²)	5	3	12	-----	9	11	
Connecticut.....	37	(²)	7	3	-----	10	13	4	
Vermont.....	13	(²)	-----	-----	-----	13	-----	-----	
New Hampshire.....	8	(²)	1	-----	-----	-----	7	-----	

² Less than one-tenth of 1 percent.

Sources of Migration

DURING the same period that 43,180 persons, members of parties "in need of manual employment", entered California in cars licensed from outside the State, an additional 10,194 persons in similar economic situation entered in cars bearing California licenses. Of this combined total of 53,374 persons, 19.1 percent were returning Californians.

Table 2 shows the movement of returning Californians, by months. Seasonal fluctuation deviates somewhat from fluctuation in the movement from outside the State. Whereas the peak of the former movement occurred in June–July, the peak of the latter was in August–September (table 1). However, in both migrations the principal movement occurred in the first 3 months; during the period ending September 15, 59.3 percent of all returning Californians and 56.3 percent of all out-of-State migrants entered California.

The principal migration occurred across the Arizona border. By these routes 55.7 percent of out-of-State migrants and 45.6 percent of returning Californians entered California. The heavy movement of out-of-State migrants across the Arizona border, as compared with the Nevada and Oregon borders, is accounted for largely by refugees from southwestern drought States and to a lesser extent by the fact that Arizona is a source of labor which migrates seasonally to California. Arizona, Oregon, and Washington, particularly the first named, represent important areas of employment for migrant laborers who originate in California.

Table 2.—Route of Entry of Migrants Entering California by Motor Vehicle, June 16–Dec. 15, 1935

State and month	Total		Migrants entering via—		
	Number	Percent	Arizona	Nevada	Oregon
Total.....	53,374		28,714	12,827	11,833
Percent.....		100.0	53.8	24.0	22.2
In California cars—					
June 16–July 15.....	2,158	21.2	986	549	623
July 16–Aug. 15.....	1,985	19.4	923	457	605
Aug. 16–Sept. 15.....	1,909	18.7	681	653	575
Sept. 16–Oct. 15.....	1,354	13.3	553	249	552
Oct. 16–Nov. 15.....	1,679	16.5	786	247	646
Nov. 16–Dec. 15.....	1,109	10.9	722	176	211
Total.....	10,194		4,651	2,331	3,212
Percent.....		100.0	45.6	22.9	31.5
In out-of-State cars.....	43,180		24,063	10,496	8,621
Percent.....		100.0	55.7	24.3	20.0

The crowding of cars of refugees from the Southwest, which is such a conspicuous feature of their exodus, is shown plainly by table 3. From seven selected drought States, the migrants averaged 4.8 persons per car. From all other States, including California, the average per car was only 3.6 persons. Interestingly, the average number of Californians per car who returned across the Arizona border was 5.2, as compared with 2.9 persons per car of those who entered via Nevada, and 3.4 persons per car of those who entered via Oregon. The higher average per car among those who entered via Arizona is largely due to the great number of Mexicans and Filipinos returning to California by that route, who characteristically crowd their cars, and to the fact that Arizona agriculture offers more employment to family labor than do Nevada, Oregon, and Washington.

Table 3.—Average Number of Occupants per Car of Migrants Entering California, June 16–Dec. 15, 1935, from Specified States

State	Number of passengers	Number of cars	Average per car
Grand total.....	53,374	13,245	4.0
Selected drought States:			
Arkansas.....	2,786	507	5.5
Oklahoma.....	7,138	1,389	5.1
Missouri.....	2,428	490	5.0
New Mexico.....	1,579	323	4.9
Arizona.....	3,467	732	4.7
Kansas.....	2,257	516	4.4
Texas.....	3,560	832	4.3
Total.....	23,215	4,799	4.8
Other drought States.....	9,097	2,367	3.8
Oregon.....	3,770	1,246	3.0
Washington.....	2,292	877	2.6
California.....	10,194	2,636	3.7
Others.....	4,806	1,320	3.6
Total.....	30,159	8,446	3.6

Race of Migrants

PRACTICALLY 90 percent of all the migrants were classified as white. Mexicans constituted only 6.3 percent of the total. Of all nonwhite migrants, 41.7 percent were returning Californians, but only 19.1 percent of all returning Californians were nonwhites. Seventy percent of all the Mexican migrants traveled in California or Arizona cars, principally the former. Eighty-five percent of all Filipino migrants traveled in cars from California, Montana, or Washington, and more than half of them in California vehicles.

Table 4.—Major Race Groups of Migrants Entering California, June 16–Dec. 15, 1935, from Selected States

Selected States	Total	White ¹	Mexican	Filipino	Negro	Other ²
Total.....	53,374	47,777	3,382	1,211	577	427
Percent.....	100.0	89.5	6.3	2.3	1.1	0.8
California.....	10,194	7,860	1,396	668	173	97
Arizona.....	3,467	2,268	963	57	132	47
Texas.....	3,560	3,165	322	-----	66	7
Montana.....	841	503	62	253	3	20
New Mexico.....	1,597	1,335	258	-----	4	-----
Washington.....	2,292	2,146	-----	131	2	13
Oklahoma.....	7,138	7,017	85	-----	36	-----
Other.....	24,285	23,483	296	102	161	243

¹ "White" is used as an inclusive term for all not classified otherwise.

² "Other" includes Japanese, Chinese, American Indians, and Hindus, and 294 gypsies.

Mexican Migrants

COMPARISON of present interstate labor migration with that of past years is almost impossible because of failure to gather basic statistics in the past. It is possible, however, to compare movement of Mexican migrants into California through one of the most important points of entry, viz, Fort Yuma, during the 6 months ending December 15, 1935, with similar movement during the same period in 1927 and in 1928. During all three periods the data were gathered by inspectors at the same quarantine station, with the same officer in charge. Upon each occasion the classification Mexicans meant essentially Mexican laborers. The comparative statistics are presented in table 5.

The drop in volume of Mexican migration from 1927 to 1928, and again to 1935, is very conspicuous. The earlier traffic counts were made during the closing months of unrestricted Mexican immigration to the United States, when large and continuous accretions to the Mexican population of California via Texas were in progress, and when the volume of seasonal labor movement between California and Arizona was greater than at present. In 1935, fresh immigration from Mexico had long ceased, and local labor supplies in each of the two States were more ample, lessening the necessity of interstate migration.

Seasonal fluctuation in volume of migration was essentially the same in each of the 3 years, because the migration of Mexicans was and is predominantly a labor migration, rather than a flight of refugees. In 1928, from June to November, 53.7 percent of the Mexicans traveled in California cars, 24.4 percent came from Arizona, 12.6 percent from Texas, and 2.1 percent from New Mexico. In 1935, from June to December, 47.1 percent of them were in California cars, 30.7 percent came from Arizona, 11.9 percent from Texas, and 9 percent from New Mexico.

Table 5.—Mexicans Entering California at Fort Yuma, June 16–Dec. 15, 1927, 1928, and 1935, by Half-Month Periods ¹

Period	1927		1928		1935	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All periods.....	8, 270	100. 0	3, 660	100. 0	1, 994	100. 0
June: Second half.....	702	8. 5	306	8. 4	271	13. 4
July:						
First half.....	808	9. 8	368	10. 1	348	17. 5
Second half.....	1, 049	12. 7	485	13. 3	405	20. 3
August:						
First half.....	1, 202	14. 5	309	8. 4	145	7. 3
Second half.....	755	9. 1	130	3. 6	170	8. 5
September:						
First half.....	573	6. 9	230	6. 3	148	7. 4
Second half.....	546	6. 6	383	10. 5	88	4. 4
October:						
First half.....	520	6. 3	277	7. 6	66	3. 3
Second half.....	403	4. 9	250	6. 8	69	3. 5
November:						
First half.....	652	7. 9	355	9. 7	85	4. 3
Second half.....	478	5. 8	290	7. 9	87	4. 4
December: First half.....	582	7. 0	277	7. 6	112	5. 6

¹ Data for 1927 and 1928 from Paul S. Taylor, Mexican Labor in the United States: Migration Statistics II, p. 5.

Significance of Migration Movement

THE movement into California of 53,374 persons, members of parties "in need of manual employment," during 6 months in 1935 represents a labor migration and population shift, both of them of major import. Although the combined labor and refugee movements constituted only about 5 percent of the total number of passengers of all classes who entered California by motor vehicle during the period under review, their significance is not measured in these terms. The labor migration, which is seasonal and interstate, is of continuing importance to farmers, to the United States Employment Service which assists in direction of its flow, and to the schools or other agencies which feel the social effects of its pulsations. The movement of refugees is an index of major problems of relief, rehabilitation, and human resettlement with which the appropriate agencies of the Government are grappling and must continue to grapple. Were it not for their extensive activities, the numbers seeking refuge by flight to California, or elsewhere, would undoubtedly be much greater than is shown by this record.