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DUST BOWL LEGACIES:

The Okie Impact on California, 1939-1989

by James N. Gregory

It became one of those rare books that not only records history but makes history. Even as the first copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* rolled off the presses in the spring of 1939, it was clear that the novel was going to have an extraordinary impact. John Steinbeck's story of a dispossessed Oklahoma farm family struggling to survive among the fields of plenty in California touched the conscience of a nation. Steinbeck was not the first to write about the Dust Bowl migrants and their plight. For the better part of four years the story had been earning newspaper headlines, especially in California, where by 1939 the public was in the midst of a massive debate over the "Okie crisis." But Steinbeck did something that the journalists, photographers, and politicians could not do: he made sure that the Okies would never be forgotten. *The Grapes of Wrath* turned the Dust Bowl migrants into one of the enduring symbols of the Great Depression. Ever since 1939, Americans of various generations have found in the tragic heroism of the Joad family a metaphor for the nation's depression-era experience.

And what has become of the real Dust Bowl migrants, the Oklahomans, Arkansans, Texans, and Missourians who were the models for Steinbeck's book? On this fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is fitting that we update the story. Steinbeck never did. It is too bad, for he would have been quite surprised. The history of the Dust Bowl migrants in the past five decades has defied many of the understandings and expectations that governed his 1939 portrait.

The Grapes of Wrath foresaw a difficult future for the Okies and Arkies. Steinbeck was not at all sure

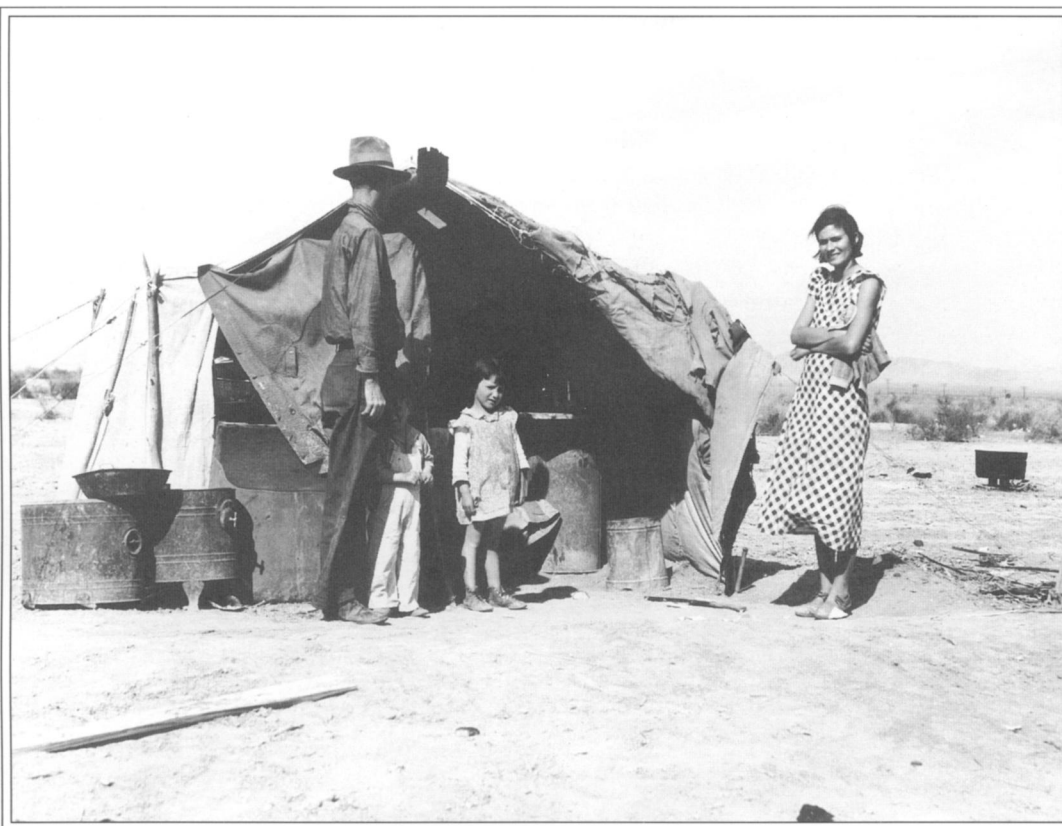
that California could or would provide an adequate home, and he thought a great deal depended upon important changes in the structure of California agriculture. In the novel, and even more clearly in a sequence of newspaper articles he wrote in 1936 and 1938, he linked the migrants' future to the success of farm labor unions. Only when the power of organized agriculture had been curbed and minimum living standards imposed would California's newest and poorest residents stand a chance.¹

Steinbeck seemed to think as well that the Dust Bowl migrants had a great deal to learn about the standards of modern life in California. For all of the book's rural romanticism, its tremendous empathy for the simple, honest way of life represented by the Joads, *The Grapes of Wrath* casts them as backward, barely educated, even premodern. The scenes in the government camp and the portrayals of religious activities reveal Steinbeck's assumptions. The migrants were going to have to learn how to live in an organized community and give up anachronistic attachments to enthusiastic religion.

Time has proved the inadequacy of each of these expectations. The Dust Bowl migrants had nothing like the long-term difficulties that Steinbeck (and many others) foresaw, and deliverance had nothing to do with labor unions or any dismantling of California agribusiness. Equally, Steinbeck was wrong about the terms of the cultural negotiation that the Dust Bowl migrants would conduct with California. The issue, it turned out, was not modern culture versus rural backwardness, but rather one regional culture versus another. And the Okies were not the only ones to change. In ways that



A sharecropper and his family stalled in the desert as they enter California. Dorothea Lange, who took this photograph, is the best-known chronicler of the Okies in California. *Courtesy Bancroft Library.*



California had not been kind to this family. An infant died of exposure during the winter. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Bancroft Library.

Steinbeck could not have imagined in 1939, the Dust Bowl migrants managed to imprint many of their own values and outlooks on California.

First some background and some clarifications. Partly because of the novel, Americans today hold some misleading images of the Dust Bowl migrants. That label itself is confusing. There was no migration of any consequence from the actual Dust Bowl, because few people lived in the parts of the southern plains that were devastated by the dramatic dust storms of the mid-1930s. Thousands of people did leave the broader region formed by Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri, an area we can call the Southwest or better still the western South.²

Furthermore, migration from this region was not just a 1930s phenomenon. Southwesterners had been coming to California in large numbers since World War I. About a quarter of a million had settled in the state in the 1920s; during the depression another 350-400,000 came. But the biggest influx came during World War II, when defense work lured between 600-700,000 more Southwesterners to California. Migration continued at a somewhat reduced pace in the 1950s, until the sunbelt oil boom of the 1960s turned Texas and Oklahoma into job-rich, population-importing states. By 1960,

there were more than 1.7 million Oklahomans, Texans, Arkansans, and Missourians living in California, constituting one-eighth of the state population. The vast majority of them were whites.³

Standard impressions of the social composition of the migration are also too limited. Even in the 1930s phase, the migrants included many Southwesterners who were neither farmers nor poor people. Surveys show that about half came from rural areas, and half from towns and cities. The region suffered terribly from the depression, and that was a reason for much of the migration, but those leaving included a substantial representation of white collar families and industrial workers, as well as the stereotypic tenant farmers.⁴

Nor did they all head for California's agricultural valleys. In the 1930s, half of all Southwesterners moving to California settled in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, or San Diego—and a still larger percentage did so in the 1940s. This was not just a rural to rural migration of farm folk. The Joads, in other words, were not necessarily typical.⁵

Finally, it is important to modify impressions of what awaited them. Even in areas like the San Joaquin Valley, the conditions that the newcomers encountered were not uniformly horrible. Stories of hardship were real enough. Some people lived in tents, endured long stretches of unemployment,

and suffered from shortages of various kinds. There were cases of malnutrition, disease, and even death. But severe difficulties were not typical. Most people found what they were looking for—work and a better standard of living—and that is why they stayed.

The tragic images of this migration have been overblown. The experience was often tough, certainly by the standards of white middle-class society. But the challenge cannot be compared to the pioneer migrations of the nineteenth century, nor with the refugee migrations that occur with such frequency in the third world. The Latin Americans who continue to cross international boundaries in pursuit of an uncertain future in the United States know at least as much about risk, hardship, and struggle as the Dust Bowl migrants of the 1930s.

If Steinbeck's contemporary assessments were sometimes skewed, his reading of the future was more so. It could hardly have been otherwise. His anxiety about the migrants' place in California reflected the moods and conditions of 1939. He had no way of knowing how much the world around him would change, or how quickly.

There are two stories to be told about the Dust Bowl migrants' experience since the publication of

The Grapes of Wrath. The economic story is the most straightforward. The past five decades have meant considerable improvements in the social position and standard of living for the migrants and their descendants.

The changing occupational and income profiles of white Southwesterners can be followed in the Public Use Microdata samples recently issued by the U.S. Census Bureau. The starting point is the 1940 census, taken just one year after publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Southwesterners who had arrived in the previous decade were predictably concentrated at the low end of the socioeconomic scale. This was true in the Los Angeles and the Bay Area, where their rates of unemployment exceeded other whites and where almost three-quarters of those employed worked in blue-collar positions. It was much more true in the San Joaquin Valley, where in 1940, well over two-thirds of Southwestern males worked as unskilled laborers, mostly as farm workers. A similar percentage of the recently settled families in turn earned less than the \$790 annual income that experts termed a "subsistence" budget.⁶

Ten years later much had changed. World War II had restarted the economy, creating unprecedented



World War II provided California's Okies with steady jobs in industries such as the Kaiser Shipyard in Richmond, photographed here in 1943. One result was a trend toward integration into the existing and newly-forming urban communities, and a lessening of the Oakies' isolation. Photo by Dorothea Lange, © 1982. Courtesy Oakland Museum.

job opportunities both in the coastal areas, where the shipyards and aircraft factories were located, and in the valleys, where revitalized demand for agricultural products meant all sorts of new commercial and service jobs. By 1950, Southwesterners in both settings were rapidly working their way up the occupational and income scale. To take the San Joaquin Valley case, most Southwestern males were no longer doing farm work; now, instead of employing 58% of them, the fields provided a living for only 25%. The majority had moved into blue-collar trades, many working in construction, the oil industry, and transportation. Standards of living were also way up; family incomes had increased an amazing 276% in just one decade, although one quarter of that went to inflation.⁷

By 1970, the work careers of many of the Dust Bowl and defense era migrants were coming to an end. Some had already retired, but by tracing the occupations of men aged 40-62, we get some idea of the final economic position of that initial generation. The record shows further progress. Some were wealthy, a number having made fortunes in real estate, oil, or farming. Some were still poor. In the San Joaquin Valley, 14% continued to earn a living through agricultural labor, 10% reported incomes that fell below the 1970 poverty line, and 6% collected welfare payments. The majority were in between. Not too many had found their way into white-collar occupations, only 24% compared to 45% of other whites living in the valley. Most were closing out their working lives in blue-collar respectability. In the metropolitan areas, more had attained white-collar positions, but the general pattern was similar. Compared to the rest of the white population, Southwesterners of that first generation were more apt to be found in the lower-middle class.⁸

Unfortunately, there is no similar data on their children, who nowadays are middle-aged adults. There are indications that the second generation was less likely to go to college than other segments of the white population, but apart from that the evidence points to further socioeconomic progress. A large part of this generation found its way into white-collar and professional jobs.

How one sums up the issue of economic progress depends upon the point of reference. Relative to the expectations of John Steinbeck and most other 1930s witnesses, this has been a remarkable story. But in 1939 no one could predict the structural economic changes that over the course of the next generation would lift almost all white Ameri-

cans out of poverty. Seen in this newer context, there was nothing spectacular about the improvements registered by the migrants in California. With some notable exceptions, theirs has not been a rags-to-riches tale. Rather it is a story of modest, steady economic improvement, decade by decade, generation by generation—a story very similar to that of most white Americans of these age groups. One final perspective may be helpful. The economies of the Southwestern states also changed over these decades, and so did the fortunes of most residents. Whatever their economic success in California, it seems to be the case that the migrants would have had relatively similar chances had they remained in their home states.

Economic progress is the issue that has always attracted the most attention, but the Dust Bowl migration is ultimately more important to California because of its cultural impact. This is where the update gets interesting. The place to begin to understand the cultural legacy of the Dust Bowl migration is the San Joaquin Valley, particularly its southern end near Bakersfield, where John Steinbeck settled the Joad family. In all of California, this is where white Southwesterners gained the highest concentration in the overall population. In 1950, one out of every four adults in the San Joaquin Valley was an Oklahoman, Texan, Arkansan, or Missourian; and the ratio was closer to one in three in Kern County. The proportion is much reduced these days because migration from the Southwest slowed in the 1960s, even while the valley's growth continued from other sources. On the other hand, there are also many second- and third-generation Okies in the valley, though the census provides no count.⁹

The San Joaquin Valley is and always has been a complex, multi-cultural society, settled by all sorts of European and Asian groups, along with migrants from various parts of the United States. But nowadays visitors are apt to miss much of that. Especially in the southern counties, two cultural styles seem to dominate. The Latino influence is easily recognized, and serves notice that Hispanics are the fastest-growing group in the area. The other influence is confusing unless one knows something about American regional cultures. Coastal Californians notice the pickup trucks, the cowboy hats, the folksy mannerisms, the different ways that people talk, and assume that these are rural standards, that the valley is dominated by country folk. That is not quite right. The valley is not even

remotely a rural society. The vast majority of residents live in cities and have nothing to do with farms. The style of life there is not rooted in the land, it is rather a function of the cultural heritages of the people and the way those have been negotiated and modified over the last half century.¹⁰

The clues are there if one takes the time to look. Visit some of the coffee shops and notice the menus. Chicken-fried steak, chili, grits, and biscuits and gravy are favorites in the valley, just as they are in the western South. This is also Dr. Pepper country; Coke and Pepsi face the same sort of competition they find in the Dallas-based bottler's home region.

The churches offer other clues. For one thing, there are so many of them. Bakersfield and its surrounding area have more churches than San Francisco, with only a third the population. And notice the denominations: most are Southern Baptist and Pentecostal. Evangelical Protestantism dominates the religious life of the valley these days. This is California's bible belt.¹¹

It is also home to a particular commercial medium. To turn on the radio is to choose between three types of stations: Spanish language, religious broadcasts, and country music, lots of country music.

All of these institutions and symbols derive from a particular regional heritage, from the Southwest, or more broadly from the white South. If you listen closely to the people, you hear other clues. The accents are not rural; they are Southwestern. Most whites in the valley have picked up a bit of the diphthongal vowels characteristic of Oklahoma or Texas.¹²

The area's politics and social values are telling too. This is one of the most conservative sections of California. Only recently has voting registration shifted towards the Republican party, but the San Joaquin Valley has been voting conservative for some time. Racism is also a problem. Blacks in Bakersfield face difficulties not common in many other parts of California, and there is conflict as well between whites and Hispanics. Cesar Chavez and the UFW are decidedly unpopular in most Anglo circles.¹³

Much has changed in this part of California since the 1930s. A former Oklahoman who came to California as a child more than fifty years ago summarized the transformation. "I think that we won," he told an interviewer. "By that I mean, we took over . . . By moving into the cities and moving into the towns, the society got

changed by us. When I go there [he no longer lives in the Valley] I feel I am in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas."

How did this happen? How did a despised and economically impaired group become so influential? Numbers are part of the answer, but only part. The large representation of Southwesterners in this section of California clearly makes this possible. But there is more to it than that. A lot of Americans from different regions have poured into California over the years without leaving such an imprint. Usually they become quickly Californianized, more or less fitting into California society on California's terms.

Two additional factors help explain the Southwestern cultural influence. One is the prejudice and hostility that the migrants faced in the 1930s. Calling the newcomers "Okies," a label which initially had the pejorative connotations of "poor white trash," Californians in effect created a minority group. Facing social rejection, many Southwesterners—particularly in the San Joaquin Valley where the tensions were greatest—pulled together defensively. Treated as outsiders, they fashioned a separate group mentality, and that in turn encouraged them to maintain some of the distinguishing cultural traditions of their region of birth.

The other factor has to do with the nature of those cultural resources. Southwestern influences have been successfully transferred to California via a discrete set of institutions, and as a result only a particular version of Southwestern culture has taken root. This is the way subcultures often establish themselves. A migrating group does not just come into an already settled society and then recreate its old way of life. The host society leaves only certain limited venues for independent community life. With towns, schools, political parties, and media institutions already well established, there was not much room for Southwesterners to build their own infrastructure. On the other hand, sometimes the newcomer group brings with it institutions or commitments that are new and that have some potentially wider role to play in the host society. Examples can be seen in the experiences of other ethnic groups. The Irish found such an institution in the Catholic church; Jews something similar in the garment industry and Hollywood; African-Americans have likewise gained both legitimacy and influence through a century of contributions to the world of music. My argument is that the key to Okie cultural authority in California is to

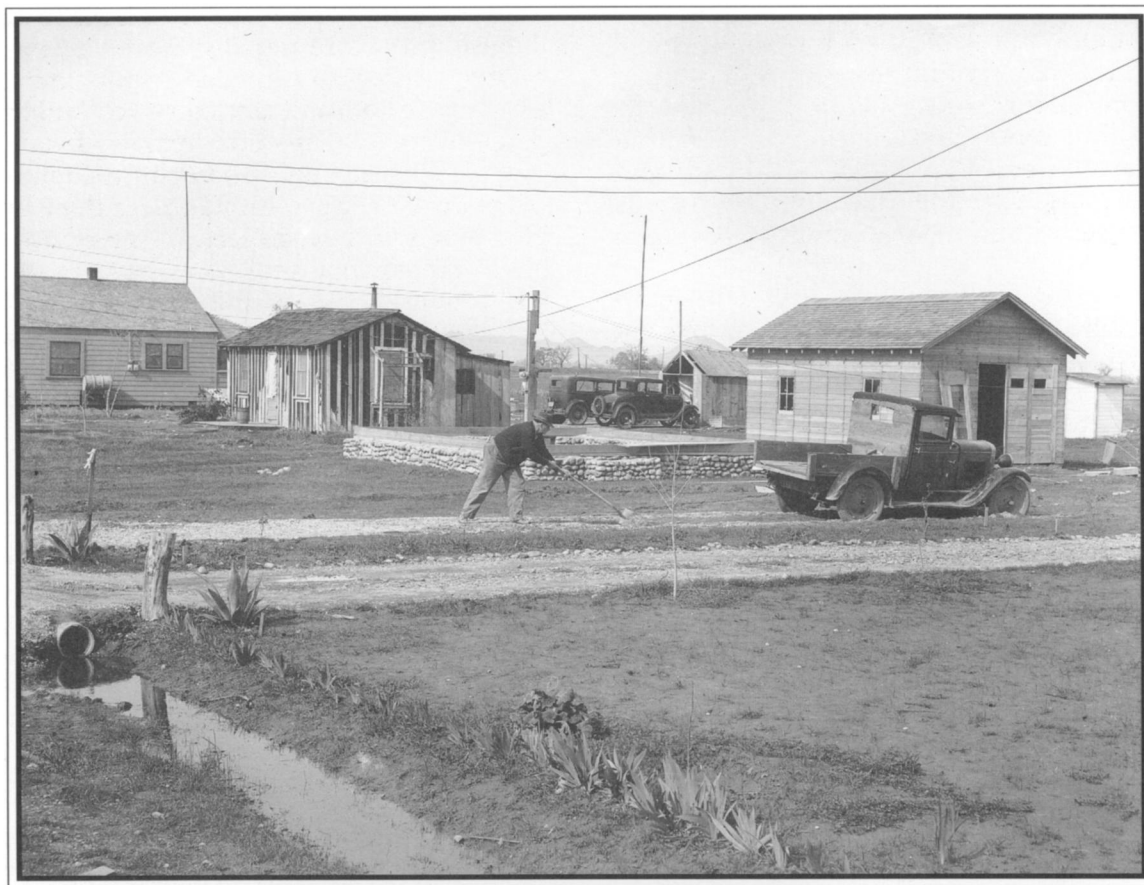
be found in two similar structures—evangelical Protestantism and country music.¹⁴

There is room only for a few words about the religious institutions. California, which had been largely settled by Northeasterners, Midwesterners, and European Catholics (that is after the Mexicans and Indians had been pushed aside), knew relatively little about the fervent, fundamentalist side of Protestantism. Southwesterners brought the Southern Baptist faith with them, and were also the primary constituency for the holiness and pentecostal movements. Initially in the 1930s and 1940s, these churches were small, insulated institutions, catering solely to congregations of poor and still despised Okies. But in the decades that followed, as many Americans turned to organized religion, and as evangelical Protestantism gained legitimacy and stature throughout the country, these became the fastest growing churches in California. Today, the Southern Baptists are the state's

second largest Protestant denomination, and the more diffuse pentecostal movement gains converts even within the mainline churches. For their Okie proprietors, the success of these institutions has brought validation and feelings of pride. The churches have served as centers for maintaining Southwestern culture and identity, and also, as they grow more and more popular, for spreading aspects of that regional culture.¹⁵

Country music has worked in much the same way, and its role warrants a closer look. Country music is both one of the Southwest's gifts to California and a medium for the infusion of other aspects of Southwestern culture. The music has inspired regional loyalty among transplanted Southwesterners and their children, while also inspiring interest in certain values and outlooks among wider groups of Californians. It is, I argue elsewhere, the essential language of the Okie subculture.¹⁶

When country music emerged as a commercial medium with the spread of radio in the 1920s, its



The Oakies, refused by many towns, established their own communities. One of these was Olivehurst, in Yuba County. Land was cheap, and many of the migrants built their own modest homes. *Photo by Dorothea Lange, © 1982. Courtesy Oakland Museum.*



Sunday school pick-up near a labor camp in Kern County, 1938. Within a generation, Southwesterners would help make evangelicalism the fastest-growing force in California Protestantism. Photo by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Bancroft Library.

major markets became the South and the rural Midwest. Californians showed but slight initial interest. A few hillbilly and cowboy singers could be heard on California radio stations prior to the mid-1930s, but most Californians regarded that sort of music as rustic and unsophisticated and left it to a marginal audience of senior citizens and newcomers from regions where it was more popular.¹⁷

As it happened, the California market began to grow just about the time that migration from the Southwest reached major proportions. This was only partly due to the newcomers; the advent of Gene Autry and Hollywood's new fascination with singing cowboys also created a wider demand among Californians. But the timing enabled Okies effectively to take charge of the medium, doing so both as performers and audience.¹⁸

Southwesterners dominated the production of country music in California for obvious reasons. It had been Texans and Oklahomans who had pioneered the cowboy styles just then becoming popular. And in recognition of that fact Hollywood began importing professional musicians from the Southwest. By the early 1940s, Gene Autry headed a list of Southwestern-born film and radio stars which included Tex Ritter, Stuart Hamblen, Bob Wills, Patsy Montana, Jimmy Wakely, Spade Cooley, Tim Spencer, Eddy Dean, and Elton Britt—Roy Rogers, an Ohioan, was a major exception.¹⁹

Many of these performers had made names for themselves before moving West, but the singing cowboy craze also provided opportunities for migrants who had initially come to California with different purposes in mind. Arriving in Los Angeles in 1937, Oklahoman Woody Guthrie found his relatives busy trying to capitalize on the Gene Autry phenomenon. Cousin Jack Guthrie had outfitted himself in cowboy gear and was trying to talk his way into auditions with local radio stations. Several other relatives had also formed a band and were hoping to get into the movies. The band went nowhere, but Jack got his audition, invited Woody to become his singing sidekick, and launched two musical careers, one of them legendary.²⁰

The same sort of aspirations registered in the valley, where the growing migrant population was attracting the attention of radio station managers, dance promoters, and tavern owners. When folklorists Charles Todd and Charles Sonkin visited the migrant labor camps operated by the Farm Security Administration in the summers of 1940 and 1941, they found more musical talent than they had time to record. Young men and women stepped forth to showcase their talents, claiming that they were "goin' on the air soon."²¹

Rose Maddox started her career in that formative period when California was beginning to listen to country music. Eleven years old, she sang her first audition for a Modesto radio station in 1937, accom-



Western Swing started among the migrants, but gained a large and enthusiastic audience. The Dude Martin band was popular in the San Francisco Bay area during the War. *Photo by Dorothea Lange © 1982. Courtesy Oakland Museum.*

panied by her four brothers. The manager liked their sound, and within a few years the Maddox Brothers and Rose had a recording contract and a nationwide following.²²

For those who were not performers, the music served other purposes. Apart from the obvious pleasure it provided listeners, it became for Southwesterners something of a group enterprise. They were initially its chief fans and took pride in the music's expanding popularity. Even as audiences grew, the music belonged to Okies in many symbolic ways.

For one thing, country music of the 1930s and 1940s was loaded down with Southwestern references. Many of the most popular songs of the period utilized the landscapes, folk heroes, and place names of the region. Texas, for obvious reasons, figured prominently as a setting for cowboy songs. Compositions like "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "By the Silvery Rio Grande," and "Red River Valley" appeared in endless number. Songs about Oklahoma were fewer but included some of the most popular tunes of the period: Bob Wills' "Take Me Back to Tulsa," Spade Cooley's "Oklahoma Stomp," and Woody and Jack Guthrie's "Oklahoma Hills."

The connection to the Southwest was also established in the names of bands. In addition to Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, bands performing in California included Don Churchill and his Texas Mavericks, Jerry Irby and his Texas Ranchers, Merle Lindsay and his Oklahoma Nightriders, a female singing group called The Oklahoma Sweethearts, and "T" Texas Tyler, who with his Oklahoma Melody Boys, managed to identify with both states.

The naming practices suggest a two-way relationship between audience and performer. Musicians catered closely to their core audience, and many Southwesterners in turn invested great loyalty in this medium and its stars. What Frank Sinatra was to Italians, and Paul Robeson was for blacks, Gene Autry and Bob Wills were to Okies: standard bearers for a group looking for symbols of success and pride.

Bob Wills was the real favorite. He drew enormous crowds of transplanted Southwesterners wherever he appeared. Future country star Merle Haggard was too young to attend the dances, but when Wills came to Bakersfield in the late 1940s, Haggard and his friends would stand outside the hall absorbing the excitement. These periodic appearances were events of communal significance

for the area's Southwesterners, particularly for the younger generation. "We needed a hero," Haggard recalls, "and Bob was certainly that and more . . . it was like he brought some of home with him."²³ Oklahoma-born Ken Griffis speaks in similar terms of Wills' effect on Southwesterners living in Los Angeles. Wills, he insists, "was very important to people like myself . . . He was one of us Okies and Arkies. People would say 'That's old Bob, that's our boy' . . . We were on that stage with Bob Wills."²⁴

This was audience involvement of a special kind, and with it went a great deal of potential influence. Country music played a role in the adjustment experiences of Southwesterners in California, providing symbols and ideas that shaped a group identity while preserving commitments to ways of life that people had known back home. The music, for example, was an obvious factor in the retention of Southwestern speech patterns into the second and subsequent generations. Here was a powerful counterweight to the admonitions of school teachers who tried to teach young people the benefits of a California accent. What did they know? If radio heroes like Ernest Tubb and Lefty Frizzell could stretch their vowels, if Bob Wills could carry on in his high-pitched Texas twang, why should young people be ashamed of a Southwestern accent?

Songs and performers also helped the migrants establish some of the social and political perspectives that have become emblematic of the Okie presence in California. The Okie subculture has important ideological dimensions that have made it an influential force in California's complex political system, and country music has been intimately involved.

Coming from a region with historic links to the South, many of the migrants brought with them elements of a political culture that is best labeled "plain-folk Americanism." Derived from principles once widely held throughout Protestant America, the perspective enjoys its most consistent constituency among rural and working class whites in the greater South. It blends several elements: first an egalitarian ethos, a populist commitment to ordinary folks as the bone and sinew of American society, but a commitment that in practice worries more about elitist styles than actual disparities of wealth and power. Second, an ethnocentric impulse that at times manifests itself through racism, at other times through patriotic or nativistic fervor. And third, a celebration of toughness and

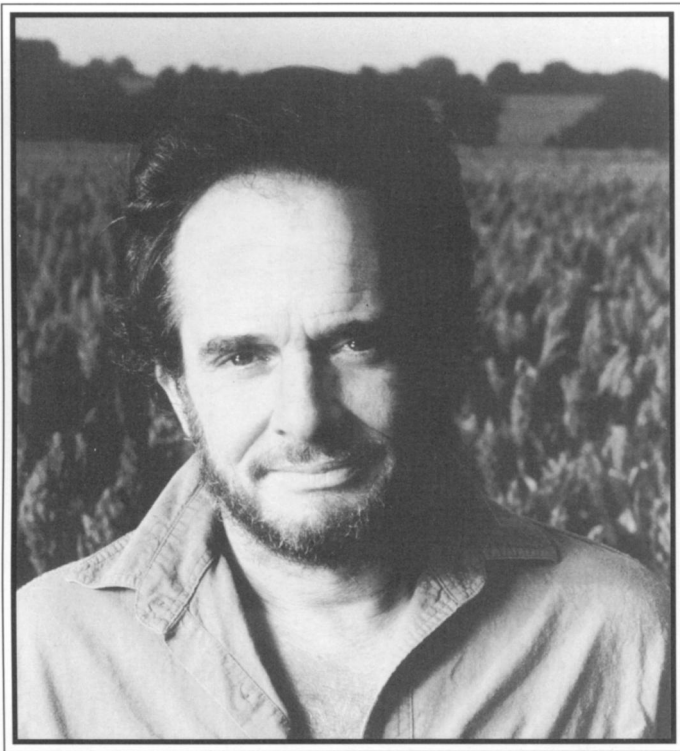
individualism, a belief in hard-jawed individualistic solutions to most problems.²⁵

Country music helped promote these values, both reinforcing them for resettled Southwesterners and introducing them to a wider audience of Californians. Much about the medium has changed over the years, but not its populist flavor, its down-home allegiance to ordinary people, especially ordinary white people. Highly didactic, with songs that often narrate a partial story—usually one that explores important personal problems—the medium has generally stressed some combination of traditionalism and heroic individualism. Whether the symbols are the brave cowboys and sweet mountain homes of the 1930s or the truck drivers and warmly remembered mamas of recent years, the dualism blends toughness and independence with moral and sometimes political conservatism.

The 1960s witnessed a dramatic expansion of both country music and the political culture that it supported. Disturbed by the social upheaval of that decade—by Civil Rights measures, anti-war protests, and counter-cultural rejection of traditional morality—many white Americans, particularly in the lower-middle class, embraced populist-conservative formulas that previously had belonged mostly to the white South. Country music helped with the diffusion. As sociologists Richard Peterson and Paul Di Maggio have shown, its locus had by then shifted "from region to class." Country was now the favorite medium of lower-middle-class Americans. Its audience was almost entirely white, mostly blue-collar, over thirty, and increasingly conservative.²⁶

Okies had quite a lot to do with these changes in California. One Okie in particular became the nation's foremost symbol of blue-collar conservatism and country music's tough new patriotic populism. Merle Haggard was born near Bakersfield in 1937. His parents had left Oklahoma a year and a half earlier, heading to California like so many others to find a better life. Their initial years out west were tough but not the stuff of the Joad family. Merle's father found work with the Santa Fe railroad not long after arriving. The family's first California home sounds worse than it was, an old converted box car. Sometime later, they moved to Oildale, a Kern county community consisting almost entirely of fellow Southwesterners.²⁷

Tragedy struck when Merle was nine years old. His father died suddenly, and although his mother was able to support the family working as a book-



Merle Haggard, "The Okie from Muskogee," in a recent photograph. Randee St. Nicholas, Courtesy CBS Records.

keeper, the loss made a huge impact on the young boy. Restless and troubled, he fell in with that portion of the younger generation who got more out of toughness and juvenile delinquency than school. At age ten he hopped his first freight train and turned up in Fresno. At fourteen he hitchhiked to Texas, bought his first cowboy boots, and spent his first week in jail, an adult jail. Juvenile arrests had started earlier, for truancy, theft, fighting, and drinking. In and out of reform school more often than he could count, he was every inch the rebel he later sang about in songs like "Mama Tried."

It was a road that finally led to San Quentin. He "turned twenty-one in prison," to quote another song, serving almost three years for burglary and attempted escape. But the experience had its desired effect. When they released him in 1960, he was ready to change his ways.

He had always loved music, learning that apparently from his fiddle-playing father, and at an early age became good with the guitar. When not up to some wildness, he made a few dollars singing in the dives and honky tonks that sprinkled Kern County. By the time he got out of prison, Bakers-

field had developed a reputation as an up and coming center for country music. Big name performers rolled through town on their western tours, and the area supported a variety of radio programs, a daily country music television show, and a couple of fledgling record labels. Most important, Bakersfield was just then producing its first genuine star, a sandy-haired former Texan named Buck Owens, who over the next decade would build the city a reputation as "Nashville West."²⁸

Merle Haggard followed in his footsteps. He made his first record in 1962, hit the charts in 1964, signed with a major label in 1965, and then caught on with a string of number one and top ten hits. Most of this early material featured themes from his rough and rowdy youth, mostly remorseful convict songs like "Sing Me Back Home," "Branded Man," and "Mama Tried." He thus quickly became identified with the social realist perspective that was changing the tone of country music in the late 1960s, turning the medium in more topical and political directions.²⁹

His next song-writing phase established him as the leader of this movement. With songs like "Working Man's Blues," "I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am," and "The Fighting Side of Me," he gave voice to the angry, conservative populism that was sweeping lower-middle-class white America and which had come to him by way of his upbringing in California's Okie communities. By 1969 the press was calling him "the poet laureate of the hard hats," song-writer to the Silent Majority. The composition that really fixed this reputation was the one he wrote with Roy Burris twenty years ago, "Okie from Muskogee." Catchy, semi-humorous, but ultimately quite serious, the lyric that began "we don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee" spoke for millions of white Americans worried about Vietnam protests, campus radicalism, and "hippies out in San Francisco."³⁰

Haggard's influence was nationwide in those years, but nowhere was the impact more profound than in California. The songs that he sang and the public recognition that he received helped bring about an important change in the relationship of former Southwesterners to California. His songs kindled a major outpouring of Okie pride. "Okie from Muskogee," though it said nothing about the Dust Bowl migration, offered California's Southwesterners a compelling slogan. "I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee" became something of a rallying cry.

And that was not Haggard's only contribution to the Okie renaissance. Even before his blockbuster hit, Haggard had begun writing songs specifically about the Dust Bowl migrant experience, songs that eventually included "Mama's Hungry Eyes," "Cotton Fields," "Tulare Dust," "They're Tearing the Labor Camps Down," and "The Roots of My Raising." Here he resurrected stories of hardship and struggle that had received little attention in almost a generation. The Okie experience—largely forgotten since the Depression, except by those who lived personally with the memories—now was being celebrated and reaffirmed.

Former Southwesterners and their children and sometimes grandchildren responded enthusiastically. By the mid-1970s an Okie pride movement was in full flower. Other musicians, like Buck Owens, Tommy Collins, and Larry Hosgood, turned out additional Okie pride songs. A literary circle led by writers Gerald Haslam and James Houston began to publish the poetry and fiction of a dozen or so second-generation Okie authors. Newspapers caught the spirit and commissioned a new round of "where are they now?" articles about the Dust Bowl migrants. Colleges, libraries, and city administrations in the San Joaquin Valley sponsored programs to celebrate or study the Okie experience, and one or two high schools and colleges experimented with Okie Studies programs.³¹

All this attended a more far-reaching change at a personal level. For the first time it had become acceptable, almost fashionable, to be an Okie. A proliferation of "Okie Pride" bumper stickers, belt-buckles, and trucker caps heralded the change. First and second generation Okies, some of whom had spent the better part of a lifetime hiding from that label, now embraced it. For Frank Manies, who had at times passed himself off as an Arizonian, for Peggy Staggs, who had spent her formative years becoming a perfect Californian, for Ernest Martin, who as a young man had fled the valley so as not to be "associated with the 'Okie' image," these years brought a new reckoning with what had been a troublesome background.³²

Haggard, it must be understood, was the catalyst, not really the cause. His songs reflected a search for roots which blossomed in many corners of America during the 1960s and 1970s. His quest and the response to it rested on recent changes in the way Americans thought about ethnicity and cultural differentiation. Okie pride was closely tied to the new ethnic consciousness that swept the

country in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The "new ethnicity" made it socially acceptable to be an Okie, just as it made it safe to be Jewish, Italian, Chicano, and so on. In an era that was uniquely and genuinely celebrating pluralism, many Americans were thinking in new ways about their backgrounds.³³

But it was no accident that country music provided the medium for the reconstruction of Okie consciousness. All along, that industry had helped to define the migrants' changing relationship with California. A group project that paid dividends of recognition and validation as it became more and more popular, it was also a fluid cultural system that again and again conveyed symbols of great meaning to the group.

John Steinbeck predicted none of this. How could he? In 1939 he looked at the Southwesterners settling in his state and saw mostly tragedy and injustice. How could he know that a generation later these victims, these scorned newcomers, would be presiding over important changes in California's religious and political values? How could he have known that the San Joaquin Valley, site of so much antagonism and hostility in his day, would, a few decades later, bear the clear imprint of an Okie subculture? How could he know that Kern County, where in 1939 public hysteria had culminated in the removal of *The Grapes of Wrath* from schools and libraries, would one day regard a guitar-playing second-generation Okie as its most illustrious citizen? How could he possibly understand the transforming historical processes that would years later allow Bakersfield's mayor to conclude that Merle Haggard's songs speak for Kern County. "Merle Haggard summed up our philosophy here," Mayor Donald S. Hart announced not long ago. "We respect and love America, its flags and symbols. We believe in paternalism, a strong family . . . and the merits of good old hard work. That's all —nothin' very sophisticated about it?"³⁴ CHS

See notes beginning on page 146.

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