

Northwest History Consortium

Children of the Dust Bowl

Michael Guelker-Cone
5th - 6th Grades

National Standard

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945) / Standard 1

Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society.

Washington State Standards (EALRs)

EALR 3.2.1: (Geography) - The student understands and analyzes how the environment has affected people and how people have affected the environment in the past or present.

EALR 3.2.3: (Geography) - The student understands the geographic factors that influence the movement of groups of people in the past or present.

EALR 5.1.1: (Social Studies) - The student understands positions on an issue or event.

EALR 5.1.2: (Social Studies) - The student evaluates the significance of information used to support positions on an issue or event.

NOTE TO TEACHERS

Tie to a contemporary migration of people in other parts of the world:

- The Mexican migration to this country was initially to agricultural jobs, then to jobs in service industries, and finally to becoming entrepreneurs.
- Chinese movement from agricultural lands outside the cities into the cities looking for better paying, less physically demanding jobs, which often do not exist.
- Guinea, West Africa, where the agrarian countryside villages are run almost entirely by women because the men have gone into the cities seeking jobs that do not exist.

BACKGROUND FOR TEACHER

"Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops and caused Great Plains farmers to increase their productivity through mechanization and the cultivation of more land. This increase in farming activity required an increase in spending that caused many farmers to become financially overextended. The stock market crash in 1929 only served to exacerbate this already tenuous economic situation. Many independent farmers lost their farms when banks came to collect on their notes, while tenant farmers were turned out when economic pressure was brought to bear on large landholders. The attempts of these displaced agricultural workers to find other work were met with frustration due to a 30 percent unemployment rate."

"At the same time, the increase in farming activity placed greater strain on the land. As the naturally occurring grasslands of the southern Great Plains were replaced with cultivated fields, the rich soil lost its ability to retain moisture and nutrients and began to erode. Soil conservation practices were not widely employed by farmers during this era, so when a seven-year drought began in 1931, followed by the coming of dust storms in 1932, many of the farms literally dried up and blew away creating what became known as the "Dust Bowl." Driven by the Great Depression, drought, and dust storms, thousands of farmers packed up their families and made the difficult journey to California where they hoped to find work."

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"Why did so many of the refugees pin their hopes for a better life on California? One reason was that the state's mild climate allowed for a long growing season and a diversity of crops with staggered planting and harvesting cycles. For people whose lives had revolved around farming, this seemed like an ideal place to look for work. In addition, flyers advertising a need for farm workers were distributed in areas hard hit by unemployment. Finally, the country's major east-west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 -- also known as 'Route 66,' 'The Mother Road,' 'The Main Street of America,' and 'Will Rogers Highway' -- abetted the westward flight of the migrants. A trip of such length was not undertaken lightly in this pre-interstate era, and Highway 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to an area just south of the Central Valley of California."

"Although the Dust Bowl included many Great Plains states, the migrants were generically known as "Okies," referring to the approximately 20 percent who were from Oklahoma. The migrants came primarily from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Most were of Anglo-American descent with family and cultural roots in the poor rural South. In the homes they left, few had been accustomed to living with modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing."

". . . Mexican immigrants had long been an integral part of agricultural production in the United States and were not newcomers on the scene even in 1940. In fact, when the Dust Bowl families arrived in California looking for work, the majority of migrant farm laborers were either Latino or Asian, particularly of Mexican and Filipino descent."

"California was emphatically not the promised land of the migrants' dreams. Although the weather was comparatively balmy and farmers' fields were bountiful with produce, Californians also felt the effects of the Depression. Local and state infrastructures were already overburdened, and the steady stream of newly arriving migrants was more than the system could bear. After struggling to make it to California, many found themselves turned away at its borders. Those who did cross over into California found that the available labor pool was vastly disproportionate to the number of job openings that could be filled. Migrants who found employment soon learned that this surfeit of workers caused a significant reduction in the going wage rate. Even with an entire family working, migrants could not support themselves on these low wages. Many set up camps along irrigation ditches in the farmers' fields. These 'ditchbank' camps fostered poor sanitary conditions and created a public health problem."

"Arrival in California did not put an end to the migrants' travels. Their lives were characterized by transience. In an attempt to maintain a steady income, workers had to follow the harvest around the state. When potatoes were ready to be picked, the migrants needed to be where the potatoes were. The same principle applied to harvesting cotton, lemons, oranges, peas, and other crops. For this reason, migrant populations were most dense in agricultural centers."

"The Arvin Migratory Labor Camp was the first federally operated camp opened by the FSA in 1937. The camps were intended to resolve poor sanitation and public health problems, as well as to mitigate the burden placed on state and local infrastructures. The FSA camps also furnished

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the migrants with a safe space in which to retire from the discrimination that plagued them and in which to practice their culture and rekindle a sense of community. Although each camp had a small staff of administrators, much of the responsibility for daily operations and governance devolved to the campers themselves. Civil activities were carried out through camp councils and camp courts."

"When they were not working or looking for work, or tending to the civil and domestic operations of the camp, the migrants found time to engage in recreational activities. Singing and making music took place both in private living quarters and in public spaces."

"As World War II wore on, the state of the economy, both in California and across the nation, improved dramatically as the defense industry geared up to meet the needs of the war effort. Many of the migrants went off to fight in the war. Those who were left behind took advantage of the job opportunities that had become available in West Coast shipyards and defense plants. As a result of this more stable lifestyle, numerous Dust Bowl refugees put down new roots in California soil, where their descendants reside to this day."

Fanslow, Robin A. 6 April 1998. Based on information from *Voices from the Dust Bowl: 1940-1941* by Charles M. Todd and Robert Sonkin. [The Library of Congress \(The Migrant Experience; American Folklife Center\)](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tsme.html). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tsme.html>>. Reprinted with permission.

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PROBLEM (WORKSHEET FOR STUDENT USE)

Student Problem Worksheet

B Hypotheses, your ideas or hunches	K What you already know	W What you need to know – your questions	H How you will find your information	L What you learned

SCENARIO

You are a member of the city council. You and the members of the council have noticed that an influx of “Okies” into your community has put a serious strain on social services, especially schools, medical, and charitable services. There is a growing concern in the community, and some vocal members of the community are angry and demanding action be taken. They want these “Okies” to be driven out of town and others turned away should they try to enter town. Some are even considering forming vigilante groups to set up road blocks at the city limits and refuse the “Okies” entry into the community.

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TASK

The council has decided that it must take action. They must decide what action(s) to take to deal with this growing problem.

RESOURCES

Book

Egan, Timothy. Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Internet

"Dust Bowl Photographs." Wind Erosion Research Unit (Kansas State University). 1947 - 2010. Manhattan, KS. 21 Dec. 2010 <http://weru.ksu.edu/new_weru/multimedia/dustbowl/dustbowlpics.html>.

Fanslow, Robin A. 6 April 1998. Based on information from *Voices from the Dust Bowl: 1940-1941* by Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin. The Library of Congress (The Migrant Experience; American Folklife Center). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshtml/tsme.html>>.

"Surviving the Dust Bowl." Chana Gazit, author and producer. PBS. 2007. DVD Public Broadcasting Organization (WGBH). 2010. Boston, MA. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/dustbowl/>>.

Todd, Charles. L. "Trampling Out The Vintage" from *Common Sense*, July 1939. The Library of Congress (Voices from the Dust Bowl: 1940 - 1941; American Folklife Center). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=afcts&fileName=clip004/clip004.db&recNum=1>>.

Todd, Charles. L. "The Okies Search For A Lost Frontier" from *The New York Times Magazine*, 27 Aug. 1939. The Library of Congress (Voices from the Dust Bowl: 1940 - 1941; American Folklife Center). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=afcts&fileName=nyt001/nyt001.db&recNum=1>>.

"Voices from the Dust Bowl: The Migrant Worker Experience Collection, 1940 - 1941." 8 Jan. 1998. The Library of Congress (The Migrant Experience; American Folklife Center). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshtml/>>.

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ASSESSMENT

Project Evaluation Rubric

Category	Excellent 4 Points	Good 3 Points	Progressing 2 Points	Beginning 1 Point
Project	Shows exemplary creativity and historic accuracy	Shows knowledge of history and is well done	Shows some knowledge of history	Shows very little knowledge of history
Historical Accuracy	Has at least 15 accurate facts/all sources cited	Has 10-14 accurate facts/all sources cited	Has 4-9 accurate facts/at least half of sources cited	Has 0-3 accurate facts/at least one source cited
Step Up To Writing (Writing Grade)	All sentences are well-constructed with varied structure. Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Most sentences are well-constructed with varied structure. Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Most sentences are well-constructed but have a similar structure. Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Sentences lack structure and appear incomplete or rambling. Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.

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REFERENCES/CITATIONS

Fanslow, Robin A. 6 April 1998. Based on information from *Voices from the Dust Bowl: 1940-1941* by Charles M. Todd and Robert Sonkin. The Library of Congress (*The Migrant Experience*; American Folklife Center). Washington, DC. 21 Dec. 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tsme.html>>. Reprinted with permission.

Guelker-Cone, Michael. "Children of the Dust Bowl." NWESD Organization. 2008. Anacortes, WA. 22 December 2010 <http://www.nwesd.org/1510101216191755740/lib/1510101216191755740/8.1_Children.DustBowl.Guelker-Cone.5-6>.

"History Standards for Grades 5-12 United States." UCLA National Center for History in the Schools. 2005. Los Angeles, CA. 22 December 2010 <<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/us-standards5-12.html>>.

OSPI. "Washington State Social Studies Learning Standards." Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. 2010. Olympia, WA. 22 December 2010 <<http://standards.ospi.k12.wa.us/ComponentWithGLEs.aspx?subject=6,GLE&gl=12&ea=36&co=105>>.