

Title: 'Baked out and broke'
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[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

While the nation was just trying to get by during the Great Depression, nature dealt a second devastating blow. Years of land misuse on the Great Plains--cattle grazing and row planting--had created the potential for an ecological disaster. Then a series of severe droughts plagued the Plains in the 1930s. Overgrazed and dry, the topsoil began to blow away, leaving land that was unsuitable for farming. At times, the dry soil was blown into dunes high enough to cover a house or barn. Fifty million acres in the Midwest were so devastated by drought that the land became known as the "Dust Bowl."

Farmers could not raise the crops they needed to pay off their debts. It became nearly impossible to make a living in the Midwest. Unemployed, often with no other skills, and with the land unable to support them, people had to find work and a way to feed their families. These "baked out and broke" folks sold everything they could part with to raise money for some sort of transportation. Then they packed whatever was left--mostly bedding, cooking utensils, and food--into and onto their vehicles, and headed west.

People in the communities where these migrants settled thought--incorrectly--that the newcomers were all from failed farms in Oklahoma, the area hardest hit by the dust storms. So, all migrants who went west at that time came to be called "Okies."

Historians believe that about three and a half million people left the American Midwest in the 1930s, most in the second half of that decade. Although not all of these migrants were farmhands or failed farmers, they all were desperately poor. Many, hearing wonderful stories about the farms in California, started dreaming of a new beginning on fertile land.

But when the Okies reached California, they realized they had no hope of ever owning farmland there. Farms in that state were huge, not the small family-owned properties to which the migrants were accustomed. Plus, many farms in the West were controlled by large companies. The migrants were wanted only at harvest time, when they were paid just pennies for hours of backbreaking labor.

To add insult to injury, most migrants were forced to live in shabby "squatter camps"--shantytowns constructed of improvised shelters. "The outside appearance of most dwellings is repell[e]nt," one relief worker remarked. "Decay has rotted scrap construction material." The smell was awful. Disease was common.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

As if the poverty, living conditions, and illness were not enough, Okies also battled unemployment, a short life expectancy, and extreme prejudice. "The Okies," one Californian declared, are shiftless trash who live like hogs."

Even though tons of surplus food were produced by California farms, the Okies who worked on those farms suffered the very real threat of starvation. Author John Steinbeck witnessed the burning of extra produce by a California company--a result of the New Deal concept of limiting production of goods so that the demand, and thereby the price, would increase. Companies and businesses wanted to keep prices high, and so they destroyed excess food, crops, and livestock.

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If they managed to stay in California for a year, migrants were eligible for state relief funds. In the meantime, however, the neediest people were suffering terribly. So, the federal government stepped in to improve living conditions. By 1937, 10 federal camps had been built in California's fertile San Joaquin Valley. Within another four years, there were nine more, housing close to 50,000 migrants.

The federal camps provided migrants with small houses, showers, and toilets. There were playgrounds and community areas, such as auditoriums where dances were held. Visiting doctors and nurses provided medical care and checkups. If family members could not afford the low rent charged, they might be assigned odd jobs around the camp to earn their keep.

Despite the fact that the camps were temporary--and that some Californians resisted them fiercely--the Okies were there to stay. Even if they wanted to leave, many could not. "I made my mistake," one migrant explained to his homesick wife, "and now we can't go back. I've got nothing to farm with."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

FAST FACT

TWENTY STATES IN THE GREAT PLAINS SET DROUGHT RECORDS DURING THE DEPRESSION THAT STILL STAND TODAY.

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