

Creating an Historical Myth with The Grapes of Wrath

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized help on this work.

As the top soil eroded and blew from the western plains, the farming people of the Midwest, who were migrants just a couple generations before, gathered their belongings once again and moved west to California. The migrants came from many states, mostly Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. In the time of the great exodus on Route 66, John Steinbeck the writer of The Grapes of Wrath, chose to focus on one Oklahoman family specifically, the Joads. In his narrative following the slow deterioration of the family and their hardships, Steinbeck portrays the Okies in their attempt to go to California and then their fate once they arrive. In this paper I will not try to contest the historical occurrences addressed in The Grapes of Wrath, but rather discuss whether Steinbeck created a historical myth of the plight of the Okies by exaggerating real events.

To set the scene of The Grapes of Wrath, the main protagonist of the novel, Tom Joad, walks up to his farm, and for the first time in years he notices the crops bent over from the Dust Bowl winds. This seemingly minimal observation gives rise to the first glaring error of the novel, which is a geographical one. According to the map given in Dust Bowl by Donald Worster, the Dust Bowl's most severe winds eroded the Pan Handle of Oklahoma.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate how far west the wind erosion went, the most severe winds were also in the border regions of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas.<sup>2</sup> The Joad family were from Salisaw, Oklahoma. Salisaw is to the extreme east, very close to the border of Arkansas, which is very far away from the devastating wind erosion. In another map in the book Defining Moments, the extent of the Dust Bowl is shown to reach to the middle of Oklahoma, but nowhere near Salisaw.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl; The Southern Plains in the 1930's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 30.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Magoc, *Environmental Issues in American History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), xxxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Hilstrom, *Defining Moments; The Great Depression And the New Deal* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc., 2009), 60.

Tom Joad, reunited with his family after a few years spent in prison is quickly informed that the Joads will not stay for long in the home they have lived in for generations. They had been evicted by the bank because their crops had failed and they could not pay the bills. Their land as well as many other farms around them were being consolidated into large industrial mono-crop cotton fields. Here is Steinbeck's second error. We cannot blame the banks for this situation. Through the New Deal, the Works Program Administration (WPA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) were started in order to help farmers.<sup>4</sup> The AAA, starting with one hundred and thirty four million dollars, paid farmers to decrease productivity to drive up wheat prices in the market.<sup>5</sup> With this money the farmers were, as Bennie L. DeWhitt writes, "egged on" to raise more cash crops with mechanized equipment, which they would buy with the subsidies.<sup>6</sup>

The plan of the AAA was that with the thirty four million dollars, they would subsidize farm owners, like the Joads. Unlike the Joads however, most of the farmers in Oklahoma were not farm owners at all, but sharecroppers. The AAA theorized that with the subsidies to the farm owners, the sharecroppers would get some of that money through a "trickle down effect."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for the sharecroppers, the "trickle down effect" did not work. With the money to reduce their average yield, many workers were laid off by their employers and then they had two choices, work for the WPA or try their luck in California.

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothea Lange & Paul S. Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Erosion* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Cooper, *Dust To Eat; Drought and Depression in the 1930's* (New York: Clarion Books, 1961), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Bennie L. DeWhitt, "Oklahomans' Attitudes Toward John Steinbeck" (AMT dis., Oklahoma State University), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest; A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 174.

Due to the continuous droughts that plagued the Western Plains from the late 1800s to the 1930s, the banks that owned the land repossessed the Joad family farm that had been in the family for three generations. This occurrence is traumatic and unfair for the family, as well as being the third major inaccuracy that can be found in the novel before the Joads even start to make their journey to California. In his book California and the Dust Bowl Migration, Walter J. Stein asserts that Oklahoma was less than thirty years old when the Dust Bowl migration started and that the people who lived there were very much used to migrating.<sup>8</sup> In their travels, the Joads encounter many more uprooted farming families much like themselves, looking for work in the promised land of California.

In the novel, much of the attraction for migrating to California was the hope of finding work. The father of the Joad family often mentioned the pea-picking advertisement pamphlet, which gave him and others in the book hope of finding jobs. The family was very concerned when they were told that there might not be much work in California; that the fliers were a ploy by large industrial farmers to lure cheap laborers en masse.<sup>9</sup> In fact fewer than four percent of the migrants to California had come in response to one of these fliers.<sup>10</sup> To have gotten one of these fliers would make the Joads extremely unlucky. Furthermore, those migrant families who did choose to travel to California generally had better knowledge of what to expect when they got there. The Joad family seemed to wander helplessly from one bad scenario to another; however,

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 9.

<sup>9</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 201.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 22.

most migrants traveling to California followed a planned route to relatives already living and settled in California.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to point out that Route 66, immortalized for bearing the Western Migrants to California, was just a highway. It was in fact, a very direct highway that cut across eight states. Not all those heading in the direction of California had the intention to go there and those who were were not always going to stay. Those who did with good automobiles could make the trip in three days.<sup>12</sup> Although there was a large number of migrating agricultural families from mostly the Western regions, there was an equally large number of non-agricultural families traveling from as far as Michigan.<sup>13</sup> Most of the families in The Grapes of Wrath make it clear that their intention is to stay in California. A significant number, however, were just migrant workers or passing through to see family.<sup>14</sup> Many migrant workers went to California to work in the winters and then returned to Oklahoma to work in the spring and summers.<sup>15</sup>

Eventually, The Joads make it to California but only after much hardship. At first they come to a Hooverville that is overcrowded and dirty with little work to be found. The family is quick to leave however, because the local police come and burn it down to "move the laborers along." It should be noted that police were only allowed to enter migrant camps at the request of health authorities.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards, they travel to a Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp near Bakersfield.<sup>17</sup> There were two goals in these

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, Oxford University press, 1989), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> DeWhitt, *Oklahoman's Attitudes*, 20

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 285.

government sponsored camps: to provide sanitary places to live for workers and show the Okies how to live in a self-governed environment, outside state jurisdiction.<sup>18</sup>

The camps are well suited for the Joads, but not being able to find work, they must have to move on. Steinbeck wrote about the FSA camp in particular to draw national attention to how inadequate the relief being given to the migrants were.<sup>19</sup> Although it is possible that the Joads would have ended up in one of these camps, they were generally only populated by the very new to California or the very poor.<sup>20</sup> Steinbeck correctly articulated the stigma against the FSA camps. There was a one year residency rule, the migrants usually had to travel around to find work, and their employers were weary of them for giving rise to union organizers. It is amazing that the Joads ended up in an FSA camp, rather than the infamous communities called "Little Oklahomas" or "Okieville."

There was one such Little Oklahoma in Bakersfield at that time. Unlike the impression that The Grapes of Wrath gives of the migrants from Oklahoma, most came to California with the intention of buying land for homes and then did exactly that.<sup>21</sup> There is no mention of these communities in The Grapes of Wrath. Little Oklahomas did not go unnoticed by the population of California at the time, they were actually quite resented for being on the outskirts of society, having ugly and poor makeshift homes, and for being made up entirely of Okies.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the reason the Joads never made it to one of these communities is that they were just that poor. That does seem to be the

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<sup>18</sup> Where Steinbeck learned about the camps was from a famous social worker who orchestrated one himself to learn more about Okie culture, Tom Collins. The Book The Grapes of Wrath is dedicated to "Tom, who lived it." Stein, *California*, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Cladia D. Johnson, *Understanding The Grapes of Wrath: a Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 101.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 143.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 148-149.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 143.

point of Steinbeck's novel, although he got it across by exaggeration of living conditions, that there was not enough relief for the very poor migrant workers like the Joads. The book ends with a very bleak outlook on the way the Joad family will survive the coming years with no money and the growing season over for that year. Luckily for the real migrants of the Dust Bowl in California, the economy will come back around just a year later and then continue that trend until the mass mobilization of World War Two.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to discuss the various sources I have used for this paper because they are representing Steinbeck's historical myth. With their works, the various authors try to prove how Steinbeck made inaccuracies, exaggerations, or influenced history's memory of the Dust Bow. Peter Lisca in his book The Wide World of John Steinbeck points out that The Grapes of Wrath never had a chance at being accepted as a piece of fiction. The lines between social documentary and novel were so blurred it was accepted as fact right away.<sup>24</sup> In fact, many of the books I have used for research mention that The Grapes of Wrath portrays accurately the plight of the migrant workers who traveled to California.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Steinbeck was not the only artist through popular media who pushed the plight of the Okie Problem into mainstream awareness.

In the book Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination by Charles J. Shindo, He examines other secondary sources, pictures, as well as books like The Grapes of Wrath. A large part of Shindo's books also gives credit to the Dust Bowl making its way into popular media through Doratheia Lange, with her picture documentaries of the

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<sup>23</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in a Strange Land: Patterns of Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 329

<sup>24</sup> Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 148-149.

<sup>25</sup> Stein, *California*, 19; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 44; Cooper, *Dust to Eat*, 69; Barbara A. Heavilin (ed), *The Critical Response to John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 72; Charles Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 2; Hilstrom, *Defining moments*, 73.

Dust Bowl and Woodie Guthrie, who produced numerous famous folk songs expressing the migrants hardship.<sup>26</sup> John Ford's movie adaption of The Grapes of Wrath brings the issue to much more of a mainstream media as it is much easier to watch a movie than read.<sup>27</sup> Shindo concludes that the entire cultural understandings of the Dust Bowl migration and its effects on California cannot be accurately portrayed by texts and images alone.<sup>28</sup>

In Bennie L. DeWhitt's master's degree thesis, *Oklahomans' Attitudes Toward John Steinbeck*, DeWhitt gives a strikingly unusual account of what the population of Oklahoma thought of Steinbeck's Nobel Prize winning novel. Most wrote it off as an embarrassing inaccurate representation of Oklahoman people, but as the book gathered more attention, opinions turned more sour. Why was there such an outcry against Steinbeck's novel? People believed it. With his dissertation, DeWhitt inserts numerous newspaper clippings, letters to the governor, and speeches giving their reaction to the novel. The first response to The Grapes of Wrath in the Oklahoman press was entitled, "Grapes of Wrath, Obscenity and Inaccuracy."<sup>29</sup> DeWhitt points out that if Steinbeck had made a documentary rather than a novel, it might have gotten a more rational reaction, but it is a fictional novel, and therefore "became fair game for all."

There is of course a counterargument to the one that I have proposed, and truthfully, it is a good one. The Grapes of Wrath is a novel, and a novel by definition is a piece of fiction. Steinbeck had the artistic right to exaggerate the events of the Dust Bowl as much as he wanted to. What Steinbeck did with his book was not maliciously

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<sup>26</sup> Shindo, *Dust Bowl*, 184.

<sup>27</sup> DeWhitt, *Oklahomans' Attitudes*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Shindo, *Dust Bowl*, 222.

<sup>29</sup> DeWhitt actually wrote his thesis on Oklahomans' attitudes towards The Grapes of Wrath as a student of Oklahoma State University. For the purposes of this paper, there is really no better sources for how Oklahomans' felt about the book and how it affected them. DeWhitt, *Oklahomans' Attitudes*, 11.

done, far from it. The reaction that it brought from the American public was consciously made.<sup>30</sup> What he wanted was "something like participation" from his audience.<sup>31</sup> Some have commented that the novel was one "wherein naturalism has gone berserk."<sup>32</sup> In his book, Lisca opposes this argument by concluding that one should not just focus on minute historical inaccuracies to try and tear down The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck wrote about the injustice of the situations between the migrants of the West and the people of California is from a naturalistic point of view, all people are made up of the same things, and that all people are equal in the struggle of life everyone faces.

Lisca's conclusion is one I agree with. Although Steinbeck did exaggerate certain facts about the Okies and the extent of their plight in their journeys to California, the real people, the ones that Lange captured with her images, and the ones Woody Guthrie sang about were real. There were people who had "the worst hard time" as Timothy Egan puts it. Some people of Oklahoma cried out in outrage at Steinbeck's novel, saying that it gave their state a bad name, but we must remember the migrants that had to make the journey to California. Take the famous picture of a despairing pea-picker mother and her children taken by Lange.<sup>33</sup> Would anyone who faced such hardship not want others to know of what they endured? Steinbeck in his own way immortalized the Okies with his historical myth. He made them an unforgettable part of American history.

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<sup>30</sup> Michael P. Malone & Richard W. Etulain, *The American West; A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 178.

<sup>31</sup> Heavilin, *The Critical Response*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> Lisca, *The Wide World*, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Decent* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 31.

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