

# Farmers and the Great Depression

## FARMERS AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

### Disaster

The Depression was one of the most devastating agricultural disasters in American history, and American farmers suffered terribly. In 1934 more than 30 percent of all Americans still lived on farms, and agriculture—even in that drought year—produced \$9.5 billion. But a combination of natural disasters and human miscalculations devastated American farming in the 1930s. The decade opened with a series of natural catastrophes: in 1930 hail destroyed wheat crops, and 1932 to 1935 were years of unrelenting drought. This, combined with plummeting agricultural prices, ruined countless farm families. Caroline Henderson, who lived on her family farm in Shelton, Oklahoma, wrote in the summer of 1935: "[Our] daily physical torture, confusion of mind, gradual wearing down of courage, make that long continued hope look like a vanishing dream...."

### Despair

Such despair was common among farmers and their families. Rural America had traditionally embraced bedrock values such as hard work, thrift, religion, and self-reliance. Few understood the impersonal force of world agricultural markets that continued to drive down agricultural prices: the harder the farmers worked, the cheaper the product, and the less money they made. For traditionalists the Depression created an inverted world where the values they embraced only made things worse. Yet they were reluctant to ask for help, viewing their problems as a consequence of their own incompetence, or as divine punishment for sins. Shame and guilt compounded a bad situation. Some turned to God and interpreted the events of the 1930s as presaging the apocalypse. Some turned to politics and organized farm strikes and vigilante actions against bankers. But most adjusted their individualistic outlook and took what help they could find. The rest moved to the cities, advancing the depopulation of the countryside, a long-term historical trend that by 1960 resulted in fewer farmers than college students in the United States.

### Bad Practices

Farmers were partially to blame for the agricultural depression. The lowered agricultural prices and easy credit of the 1920s meant that farmers put more land into production, exploiting millions of acres of farm-land, grazing, plowing, planting, and harvesting. Many of these farmers engaged in unsound agricultural practices, such as plowing straight up and down inclines and hills and refusing to allow fields to lay fallow. Topsoil was accordingly exhausted or eroded, and unable to support productive crops. Western grazing land was overgrazed, its stock of hearty grasses depleted. For generations American farmers had simply exhausted the land and then moved on to new farms on the western frontier. In the 1930s the frontier was closed, and the Depression forced farmers to reconsider their agricultural habits.

## **Government Aid**

The federal government intervened in the farm crisis, but its help was insufficient. The Soil Erosion Sendee was established in 1933 to organize farmers into soil conservation districts, but the repair process was slow and farmers could not wait. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 was slightly more successful. The Taylor Act established carefully monitored grazing districts that helped to stabilize the depletion of range, although it could not repair longstanding damage. Between 1933 and 1934 the Federal Emergency Relief Administration also spent \$85 million to buy out farmers and take land out of production, partially restoring its fertility,

## **Foreclosure and Dispossession**

Between 1930 and 1935 nearly two hundred of every thousand farms in the states of the Midwest, the South, and the Plains succumbed to foreclosure proceedings. When the owners failed, croppers and tenants were also forced off the land. Increasingly, farmers banded together to oppose the bankers and government agents throwing them off their land. Iowa farmers threatened to lynch bank agents who came to repossess farms. Wisconsin farmers hijacked milk trucks and spilled their contents in an effort to raise milk prices and protect their farms. Socialist leader Norman Thomas organized the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in 1934 to protect the interests of Arkansas share-croppers. The Roosevelt administration inaugurated several programs to help farmers pay their mortgages, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Farm Resettlement Ad-

ministration, and the Farm Security Administration. Their financial supplements, price supports, and debt relief eased the pain of dispossession, but only temporarily. The historical trend was inexorable and unmistakable: the economy had shifted to an industrial base and could no longer sustain millions of American farmers.

## Migration

People forced off the land in the South in the mid 1930s had to leave not only their farms but their home states, because there were no jobs. Oklahoma lost more than 440,000 people, and Kansas lost 227,000 in the 1930s. A total of 2.5 million people left the Plains states in the 1930s. Most moved to neighboring states, but some 460,000 people moved to the Pacific North-west, where they found jobs in lumbering or building the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams. More than 300,000 more moved to California.

## "Okies" Move to California

Called "Okies," masses of poor white families displaced by farm failure in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas sought opportunities in the Golden State. Some had relatives waiting with homes and even jobs. But most were rural refugees who quickly discovered that California's large-scale agribusiness left no room for a family farm. Learning this, many settled in California's major cities, where they were hardly welcomed. Los Angeles authorities were already busy shipping Mexican Americans back to Mexico, and they balked at the prospect of yet another burden on their charity rolls. In February 1936 Los Angeles police chief James E. Davis sent 125 police to patrol the state's borders at Arizona and Oregon, trying to keep transients out. Davis's gesture was unconstitutional. The city was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union and widely ridiculed.

## Okies

Thus, Okies continued to flow into California, many scattering into poor and middle-class white urban neighborhoods, while 110,000 others joined California's population of 200,000 migrant farmworkers. Okies arrived after intense labor activism by California's farmworkers in 1933 and 1934. Thirty-seven strikes involved more than fifty thousand workers producing everything from cotton to walnuts. The strikes achieved as much as a twenty-five-cent increase in the hourly wage and greater union recognition.

## Crackdown

But California agribusiness thought the increase excessive and responded in the summer of 1934 with a crackdown against the union. With union leaders in jail on charges of criminal syndicalism, labor agitation subsided. Okies in fact contributed to the union's decline. They were white, Christian fundamentalists, with little union experience or sympathy. Bringing southern racism to California, they were not inclined to mix with Mexican American farmworkers who supported the union, and the Okies were strike-breakers more often than strikers.

## Poor Living Conditions

These white migrants soon made up almost half of California's farm labor. Working as families, they traveled up and down the state, from the southern Imperial Valley to the northern Sacramento Valley. They lived in squalid shacks in communities called ditch camps, located on the sides of the road where water ditches ran. Hardly fit for human habitation, ditch camps were filthy and disease-ridden. At one point, two children a day were reported dying in Tulare County, in another county fifty babies died of diarrhea and enteritis in only one picking season. Wages were too low to get these families out of poverty; average income for a white farm-labor family was \$1,300 per year, \$500 less than the average for all white California families, but \$315 higher than the average for nonwhite Californians. These poor migrants gained the contempt of their neighbors, as one woman complained: "These 'share croppers' are not a noble people looking for a home and seeking an education for their children. They are unprincipled degenerates looking for something for nothing."

## Source:

James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).