Migrant Workers, Agriculture, Setting

Migrant Workers

By the late 1930s there were an estimated 200,000 to 350,000 migrants: underpaid, underfed, and underemployed.

The migrant worker was always partially unemployed, the nature of the occupation making his work seasonal.

The maximum a worker could make was $400 a year, with the average about $300.

Yet California's agricultural system could not exist without the migrant workers. It was a problem that would continue for decades.

The farms in the state were more like food factories, the "farmers" were absentee owners, remaining in their city offices and hiring local managers to oversee the farming.

During these years, there were thousands of white Americans among the migrants, usually single men who followed the harvesting.

Steinbeck writes about them in Of Mice and Men. These "bindle-stiffs," as they were known, had no union representation for several reasons: They had no money to pay dues, and they moved from location to location so often that it was difficult to organize them.

In addition, American unionism, with its traditional craft setup, did not welcome unskilled workers like farm laborers.

Growers argued that they could not be responsible for paying workers year-round when they were needed only for a few weeks or months. Steady work was impossible not only because of the seasonal nature of the industry, but also because jobs were widely separated and time was lost traveling on the road.

Steinbeck wrote Of Mice and Men at a time when he was becoming involved in California's social and economic problems. In the novel, he wrote about a group of people, the white male migrant workers, who were to shortly disappear from American culture.

Agriculture during the Great Depression

During the late 1930s, California was struggling not only with the economic problems of the Great Depression, but also with severe labor strife. Labor conflicts occurred on the docks and packing sheds and fields.

Agriculture as a working-culture was undergoing an historic change. In 1938, about half the nation's grain was harvested by mechanical combines that enabled five men to do the work that had previously required 350. Only a short time before, thousands of itinerant single men had roamed the western states following the harvests. Their labor had been essential to the success of the large farms.

By 1900, about 125,000 migrants traveled along a route from Minnesota west to Washington state. Many traveled by rail in the empty boxcars that were later used to transport grain.

At the turn of the century, the men were paid an average of $2.50 to $3 a day, plus room and board. The "room" was often a tent.

itinerant - a person who travels from place to place, especially for duty or business