



Activity One

Farming in the 1920s

"TO THE RED COUNTRY and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth... In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread any more. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the

earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country... as the sharp sun struck day after day, the leaves of the young corn became less stiff and erect; they bent in a curve at first, and then, as the central ribs of strength grew weak, each leaf tilted downward. Then it was June, and the sun shone more fiercely. The brown lines on the corn leaves widened and moved in on the central ribs. The weeds frayed and edged back toward their roots... Every moving thing lifted the dust into the air: a walking man lifted a thin layer as high as his waist, and a wagon lifted the dust as high as the fence tops, and an automobile boiled a cloud behind it. The dust was long in settling back again."



A dust storm in the 1930s would cover whole counties. They were often called 'black blizzards'.

Drought was one of the causes of the Dust Bowl that forced so many off the land in the Mid-west. Besides the lack of rain, temperatures during the 1930s also made things worse. Handling the crisis was made more difficult by the Great Depression, as well.

It wasn't only drought that caused the soil erosion that gave the era its name. Research the farming methods used in the Mid-west in the 1920s and the role they played in the Dust Bowl.

Write a description of how a typical farm would have worked in Oklahoma in the decade before *The Grapes of Wrath* takes place. Be sure to cover a whole year from Spring to Spring.



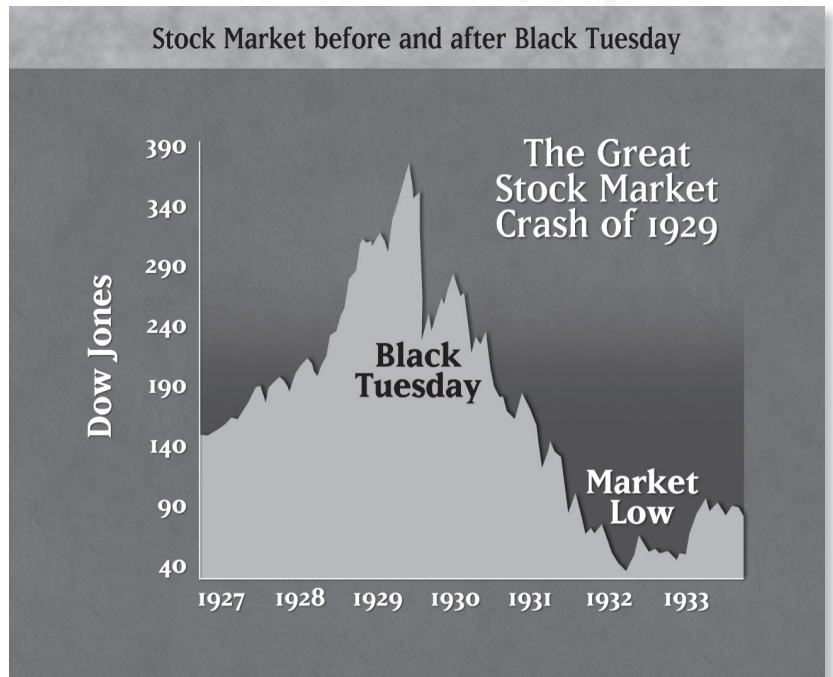
Activity Two

Dust Bowl and Recovery

America in the 1930s had no government run employment insurance program, no government welfare program, and no government help for farmers.

By the time soil erosion began resulting in serious loss of top soil to dust storms, the unemployment rate in the United States was at twenty-five percent. Even for those who still had jobs, things were bad. Between the stock market crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Dust Bowl in 1933, wages fell forty-two percent.

Likewise the US Gross Domestic Product (a measure of how much wealth the country produces) fell by fifty-percent during those four years, meaning the value of what was produced (like grain and other crops) was only worth about half of what it had been. As a result of the fall in GDP, the US government imposed stiff tariffs to protect domestic industries and jobs. This resulted in a drop in international trade of sixty-five percent.



The Dow from the Stock Market Crash.

The government of President Franklin Roosevelt passed a series of laws between 1933 and 1936 called the New Deal, specifically to help the economy recover and to help those who needed it most.

Put yourself in the shoes of one of those Americans affected by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Write a two to three page paper describing your experiences.

You should focus on:

unemployment	the level of devastation in agriculture
wages	measures taken by government to help the economy and the workers
GDP decline	the recovery of the nation before the onset of WWII



Activity Three

Farm Labor in Depression Era California

"...Don't take chances with em, an' if they argue, shoot first. If a kid'll kill a cop, what'll the men do? Thing is, get tougher'n they are. Treat 'em rough. Scare 'em.

What if they won't scare? What if they stand up and take it and shoot back? These men were armed when they were children. A gun is an extension of themselves. What if they won't scare? What if some time an army of them marches on the land as the Lombards did in Italy, as the Germans did on Gaul and the Turks did on Byzantium? They were land-hungry, ill-armed hordes too, and the legions could not stop them. Slaughter and terror did not stop them. How can you frighten a man whose hunger is not only in his own cramped stomach but in the wretched bellies of his children? You can't scare him—he has known a fear beyond every other.

In Hooverville the men talking: Grampa took his lan' from the Injuns.

Now, this ain't right. We're a-talkin' here. This here you're talkin' about is stealin'. I ain't no thief.

No? You stole a bottle of milk from a porch night before last. An' you stole some copper wire and sold it for a piece of meat.

Yeah, but the kids was hungry."

The question of who owns the land and who has the right to the use of it occurs several times throughout the novel.

Near the beginning, it is the owners who tell the tenant farmers that they cannot farm or work the land anymore, not for any reduction in income. Later, we hear about how the new American migrants to the west coast encountered the Mexicans living there and drove them off the land because they were hungrier for it than the ones who lived there. Both at the beginning and near the end we hear of the Natives and how they were driven off the land by the ancestors of the Mid-western farmers themselves.

Organizing against the police and the large landowners is something mentioned several times in the story and someone even talks about how farmers have been planting crops in fields owned by others just to feed their families.

Who owns the land?

Research the period of the depression in the 1930s in California and write an essay describing the measures taken by the farm workers to get decent paying work. You should include any information you find about strikes, unions, occupations of land, and government intervention either for or against the workers.



Activity Four

Historic Route 66

Major Intersections of Route 66 in 1947

West end:

US 101 Alt. in Santa Monica, Cal.

Major junctions:

US 101 / US 99 in Los Angeles, Cal.

US 91 / US 466 in Barstow, Cal.

US 89 from Ash Fork to Flagstaff, Ariz.

US 85 in Albuquerque, N.M.

US 60 / US 87 / US 287 in Amarillo, Tex.

US-81 in El Reno, Okla.

US-64 in Tulsa, Okla.

US 71 from Joplin to Carthage, Mo.

US 40 / US 50 / US 61 in St. Louis, Mo.

US 51 in Normal, Ill.

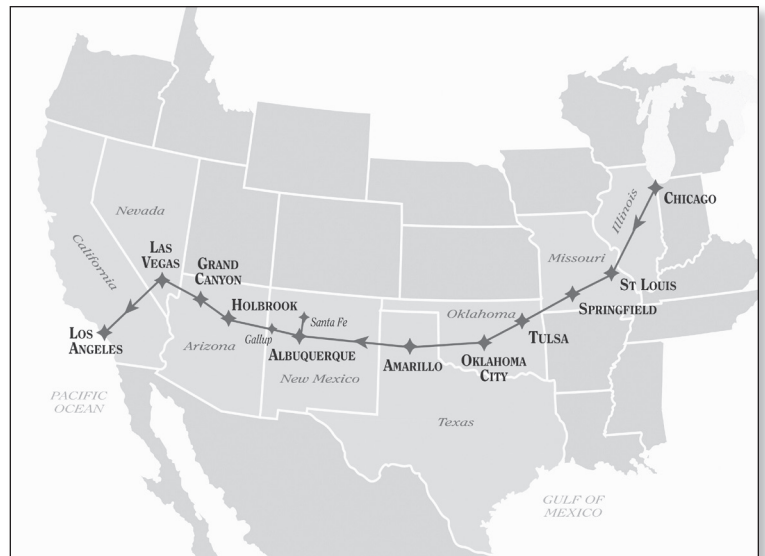
East end:

US 41 / US 54 in Chicago

The Joads traveled Route 66 from Oklahoma to California. Route 66 would become famous in part because of the migration of farm labor to California during the Dust Bowl.

It was called **The Will Rogers Highway**, **The Main Street of America**, and **The Mother Road**.

It remains a part of American culture to this day, even though the highway ceased to exist in 1985.



Route 66

Research some of the stories of Route 66, focusing on individuals rather than groups. Find stories of people who lived or worked along the road as well as travelers. Try to find pictures especially. Put together a scrapbook of some stories and pictures, placing both in order from East to West along the road.



Activity Five

Religion: Good or Bad?

"I was a preacher... But not no more... Jus Jim Casy now. Ain't got the call no more. Got a lot of sinful idears—but they seem kinda sensible..."

"... I quit an went off by myself an' give her a damn good thinkin' about... Maybe we been whippin' the hell out of ourselves for nothin'... Before I knowed it, I was sayin' out loud, 'The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say.'"

— Chapter 4

"The woman put one... hand on Rose of Sharon's knee... 'You let me warn you now. They ain't but a few deep down Jesus-lovers lef'. Ever' Sat'dy night when that there strang ban' starts up... They's clutch-an'-hug, I tell ya..."

"... Gettin' so's you can almos' count the deep-down lamb-blood folks on your toes. An' don' you think them sinners is puttin' nothin' over on God, neither. No, sir, He's a-chalkin' 'em up sin by sin, an' He's drawin' His line an' addin' 'em up sin by sin. God's a-watchin', an' I'm a-watchin'. He's awready smoked two of 'em out..."

"... I seen it. Girl a-carryin' a little one, jes' like you. An' she play-acted, an' she hug-danced. And... she thinned out and she skinnied out, an'—she dropped that baby, dead."

"'Oh, my!' The girl was pale."

— Chapter 22

John Steinbeck's portrayal of religion in *The Grapes of Wrath* is decidedly unsympathetic. Good people, like the Joads, especially Ma, consider themselves Christian but are strongly disapproving of the 'Jehovites' (Ch. 18) and other fundamentalists.

Jim Casy, a man the Joads take on as family on their trip west, is a good man and a former preacher, having decided that there's no real good or evil "... just stuff people do." Steinbeck makes Casy a better man for his deconversion, taking an active role in helping farm laborers get better pay, even though it costs him his freedom and his life.

Charity in the face of the crisis that so many face during the course of the story comes from some of their fellows, but none of it from anyone who identifies as strongly religious.

Research the roles played by representatives of the major religions present in the US during the Dust Bowl and write a scene of dialogue (one to two pages) between Jim Casy and a sympathetic Christian preacher, in which they debate their differences.



Activity Six

Hungry for Pleasure

"The migrant people, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement. Sometimes amusement lay in speech, and they climbed up their lives with jokes. And it came about... that the story teller grew into being...

...

"And perhaps a man balanced twenty cents between food and pleasure, and he went to a movie in Marysville or Tulare, in Ceres or Mountain View. And he came back to the ditch camp with his memory crowded. And he told how it was...

...

"And always, if he had a little money, a man could get drunk.

...

"... in the evening, harmonica and fiddle and guitar. Playing a reel and tapping out the tune, and the big deep strings of the guitar beating like a heart, and the harmonica's sharp chords and the skirl and squeal of the fiddle. People have to move close. They can't help it."

Steinbeck doesn't forget the need for pleasure and amusement among the migrant farm workers in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Music, dancing, movies, even getting drunk—not in spite of, but because of the hardness of the times, diversion and play are needed.

Pick a type—music, dancing, or movies—and research what was popular in that kind of entertainment during the 1930s in California. Find out how it changed as the decade progressed.

- What were the trends?
- What were the hits?
- Were some more popular with the poor people than the rich?
- Did the migrants favor the same things as the native Californians?

Find some examples of music, dancing, and movies from the 1930s — at least one from each year — and put a media album of them together. Decide for yourself, what theme the collection will have.