

“Oklatopia”: The Cultural Mission of California’s Migratory Labor Camps, 1935-1941

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April 2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the migratory labor camps established by the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in California during the 1930s in response to the migration of “Okies” to the state. These camps were meant as much more than just emergency solutions; rather, they were intended to “rehabilitate” the Okies, transform them into productive citizens, and assimilate them into California culture.

Many historians who write about New Deal programs, even those who focus on RA and FSA projects, deal with the migratory labor camp program only tangentially. Most of the research done on these camps has been isolated from a larger understanding of the New Deal. However, the camps are fascinating because they acted as magnets for various strains of New Deal thought and provided an experimental environment where these ideas could be tested.

This thesis delves into the ground-level dynamics of the camps. Although the national bureaucracy established a framework for the camps, the regional administrators and camp managers had enormous latitude in the program’s everyday operation. In California, issues of the social and cultural citizenship of the Okies and tensions between migrants and “native” Californians complicated a picture of rehabilitation. This thesis examines the specific cultural values the RA/FSA attempted to instill in the Okies; these cultural values composed a civic mission that animated the camp program.

In this thesis, I examine a variety of RA/FSA internal documents, including correspondence on both the national and regional levels. I focus on the camp managers’ reports, which were submitted to the regional office on a weekly basis and which now provide an invaluable perspective on the camps. I also review camp newsletters, which the migrants themselves wrote and produced. These newsletters reveal the everyday operation of the camps. Taken together, these sources provide a window into the civic mission behind the camps.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am incredibly fortunate to have had the help of so many supportive people, without whom I could not have written this thesis. The librarians and staff at Berkeley's Bancroft Library; the National Archives at College Park, Maryland; the Modesto (California) Public Library; and the Columbia University Library all helped guide me to sources that laid the groundwork for this project. Their knowledge and help have been invaluable.

I am grateful to have had the help and guidance of my thesis seminar group. Through their advice and constructive criticism, my fellow students made the experience of writing a thesis a collaborative effort. Our seminar leader, Professor Carlebach, was a wonderful resource. I am consistently amazed by how much care she devotes to reading and critiquing each of our theses. She has been a source of support and encouragement throughout this process.

I could not have asked for a better second reader. Professor Kessler-Harris has seen this thesis at every step of its development. Her insightful critiques have forced me to question, rethink, and constantly strive to improve my work. My discussions with her are always a source of inspiration.

Finally, I am thankful to have had my parents' unwavering support through this entire process. My dad has listened to me talk excitedly about FSA camps for hours on end, ordered books online to build my collection on Okies, and tirelessly edited my drafts. I can't imagine writing this thesis without his constant encouragement and enthusiasm.

INTRODUCTION

“We’re Joads. We don’t look up to nobody. Grampa’s grampa, he fit in the Revolution. We was farm people till the debt. And then—them people. They done somepin to us. Ever’ time they come seemed like they was a-whippin’ me—all of us. An’ in Needles, that police. He done somepin to me, made me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed. An’ now I ain’t ashamed. These folks is our folks—is our folks. An’ that manager, he come an’ set an’ drank coffee, an’ he says, ‘Mrs. Joad’ this, an’ ‘Mrs. Joad’ that—an’ ‘How you getting’ on, Mrs. Joad?’” She stopped and sighed. “Why, I feel like people again.”

-Ma Joad, reflecting on her experience in an FSA migratory labor camp, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*¹

In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, more than 300,000 migrants from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas flocked to California, driven by poverty and the hope for new opportunities.² This flood of migrants, collectively known as the Okies, included a wide cross-section of people—young and old, men and women, rural and urban.³ However, for many Americans, the fictional Joad family of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* has become synonymous with the Okie experience. To many, the Joad family represented the most visible and the most disturbing (if not necessarily the most typical) element of the Okie migration: a poor, rural family kicked off its farm in Oklahoma, staving off the threat of starvation by laboring as migrant workers in the fertile fields of California. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads’ luck begins to change when the family moves to a migratory labor camp established by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), where Ma Joad declares, “Why, I feel like people again.”⁴

¹ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936-1941*. (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1996), 537.

² James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15. Although the Okie migration to California is commonly attributed to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Gregory argues that this was largely a misunderstanding. Only 16,000 migrants were from the area most directly affected by dust storms; the rest were driven out by drought and a failing agricultural market. *Id.* at 11.

The Joad family may have been fictional, but the poverty and squalid living conditions that some Okies encountered in California were very real. Documented in Steinbeck’s fictions and memorialized in Dorothea Lange’s photographs, the Okies’ plight became the subject of national attention. Driven from their small farms because of circumstances beyond their control and forced to take jobs traditionally occupied by non-white “foreigners,” the Okies seemed to represent a crisis of the “American dream.”⁵ Seeing white migrants take up jobs previously occupied by minority groups not only gained national attention but also prompted a governmental response. In 1935, the Resettlement Administration (RA), and later the FSA, began to establish migratory labor camps to house the destitute migrants. Many migrants living in cars, tents, and shacks along “ditchbank” settlements (Figure 1) were attracted to the sanitary, newly constructed camps located along a 600-mile-long corridor through central California. (See Appendix A.) One of the first such camps constructed—the one at Shafter, California—is pictured in Figure 2.



Figure 1
Ditchbank settlements in California (1936)⁶

³ *Id.* at 9.

⁴ Steinbeck, 537.



Figure 2
**An aerial view of the FSA camp for
migrant workers at Shafter, California (1938)⁷**

⁵ For the most comprehensive description of the Okies, see Gregory, James N. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. For more on Californian agricultural labor, see Daniel, Cletus E. *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981; McWilliams, Carey. *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; Guerin-Gonzales, Camille. *Mexican Workers & American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994; Weber, Devra. *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

⁶ (Left Image) Dorothea Lange, “Migrant pea pickers camp in the rain.” FSA 8b38194. February 1936. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b38194>. (Right Image) Dorothea Lange, “Squatter camp.” FSA 8b29941. November 1936. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b29941>.

⁷ Dorothea Lange, “Farm Security Administration camp for migrant agricultural workers at Shafter, California.” FSA 8b32326. June 1938. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b32326>.

By 1941, the FSA was operating sixteen camps throughout California, most of which housed a few hundred families.⁸ These camps were meant as much more than just emergency solutions. In fact, the camps were intended to “rehabilitate” the Okies, transform them into productive citizens, and assimilate them into California culture. The camps were not merely physical spaces for shelter: they were complete operations imbued with a civic mission.

This thesis explores the underlying ideologies that motivated the migratory labor program in California. It seeks to explain how New Deal administrators on both the national and regional levels used the camps as vehicles for cultural values. RA/FSA officials grappled with a cultural conflict: officials hoped to convert the “backward” migrants into a population that would be more at home in California society, and this dynamic defined the Okie experience in the FSA camps. This civic mission permeated all aspects of camp life, from the governance of the camps to the educational and recreational programs they offered their occupants.⁹

Historians of the New Deal have long been divided over the cultural aspect of the diverse set of programs that FDR enacted in the 1930s: were New Deal programs solely economic measures, or did they include a cultural component? In his *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, Richard Hofstadter contends that New Deal liberalism marked a decisive break with the earlier Progressive tradition: while the Progressives had pushed for moral reform, New Dealers adopted strategies that focused solely on economic concerns, without reference to a greater moral program.¹⁰ Though this argument has been influential, more recent historians have challenged

⁸ See Appendix A.

⁹ The word “Oklatopia” used in the title of this thesis is drawn from *Oklatopia*, an unfinished novel by Thomas Collins, an FSA camp manager. See Jackson J. Benson, “‘To Tom, Who Lived It’: John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 2 (1976): 151-194.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1955).

Hofstadter's assumptions. Gary Gerstle, for example, pointed to what he perceived as an attitude of "moral fervor" among New Dealers, arguing that New Deal liberalism was as morally charged as the earlier Progressive movement had been.¹¹ While Gerstle and Hofstadter disagree over whether moral considerations were a major factor in the shaping of the New Deal, they both assert that New Dealers emphasized economic over cultural goals.

Gerstle's vision of New Deal liberalism partially explains a program such as the FSA migratory labor camps. The preoccupation with culture and the civic mission that these camps entailed seems to stretch the bounds of Gerstle's New Deal liberalism and suggests strains of Progressive thought. To understand, then, the intellectual underpinnings of the FSA program, it is helpful to look at a growing trend in New Deal historiography. Despite the coherence and unity that terms such as "New Deal liberalism" suggest, recent historians have challenged the assumption that any one philosophy motivated the New Deal. Alan Brinkley, for instance, has pointed to the conflicting philosophies at the heart of FDR's public policy. While historians such as Gerstle have attempted to draw a timeline of American liberalism and find the New Dealers' place in this intellectual heritage, Brinkley and others have focused on the experimental nature of the New Deal environment, which encouraged politicians and bureaucrats to test a variety of new ideas. In his book, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Daniel Rodgers suggests that crises such as the Great Depression encourage policy-makers to turn towards ideas previously formed but not yet tested: "One of the most important effects of crises, in consequence, is that they ratchet up the value of policy ideas that are waiting in the wings, already

¹¹ Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *The American Historical Review*. 99, no. 4 (Oct., 1994): 1044.

formed though not yet politically enactable.”¹² This conception of the New Deal—as a diverse set of programs rather than a coherent ideology—encourages historians to study New Deal programs on an individual basis rather than to locate them as part of a homogenous whole. This framework seems especially relevant to the migratory labor camps, which in many ways embodied earlier Progressive ideas, particularly in the way in which they sought to reform the cultural values of the migrants. Although they were born out of a desire to alleviate the migrants’ economic concerns, the camps became magnets for Progressive ideas about social planning. Experimental in nature, the camps provided a fertile opportunity for New Deal administrators—at both the national and regional levels—to bring their different ideas to the rehabilitation of the migrants.¹³

The migratory labor camp program, though it eventually extended nationwide, began in California, where it developed in direct response to the sudden influx of Okie migrants. This thesis focuses on the California camps, which established a precedent for the rest of the nation. When the Resettlement Administration was created in 1935¹⁴, it inherited a mixed assortment of resettlement projects, many of which had been initiated by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In fact, the beginnings of the labor camp program were relatively inauspicious. Administrators in relief agencies at both the federal and state levels had bandied about the idea of government-funded camps for several years. The squalid housing conditions of migrant laborers across the country gained government attention; in March 1935, Paul Taylor, Irving Wood, and Dorothea Lange conducted a survey of the housing conditions of agricultural

¹² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), 414.

¹³ For an analysis of New Deal ideologies and utopian thought, see Ekirch, Arthur. *Ideologies and Utopias: The Impact of the New Deal on American Thought*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969.

¹⁴ In 1935, the Emergency Relief Administration Act authorized funds for rural rehabilitation and relief. Following this appropriation, Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration with Executive Order 7027.

labor in California's Coachella Valley.¹⁵ They concluded that the current conditions were unsanitary and unacceptable, and they pushed for the creation of new camps to rectify the situation. While the need for camps was well established at this point, it was unclear whether the camps were the responsibility of the state or federal government. As late as March 1935, although California relief agencies had constructed some camps, the FERA still rejected a plan by Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist, for the establishment of 21 camps throughout California. A FERA official claimed that Taylor's project presented "only a partial approach to the problems" and "should not be approved."¹⁶ Because officials rejected these broader schemes, the camp program proceeded in a much more piecemeal manner. The initial funds for the program came to the RA largely by accident: in the regional office at Berkeley, Lowry Nelson, the Western Regional Representative for the Rural Rehabilitation Division of FERA, noticed that \$20,000 had been left unused after another program had been abandoned. He then alerted Frank Y. McLaughlin, the Administrator of the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) in California, who, in May 1935, wired Washington for approval to use the funds to construct a migratory labor camp.¹⁷ These telegrams between California and Washington are the only official approval of the labor camp program. In this way, the migratory labor camp program was able to circumvent Congressional approval until the Senate Hearing on the Work Relief and Public Works Appropriation Act of 1939, at which time Congress specifically authorized the program.

¹⁵ Harvey M. Coverley, "Investigation of Housing Conditions of Stable and Migratory Agricultural Labor," March 7, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. The Coachella Valley lies in Southern California, extending southeastward from Palm Springs to the Mexican border.

¹⁶ A.E. Gilman, "Memorandum: Habitation Funds for Rural Rehabilitation Camps for Migrant Families in California," March 28, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹⁷ Albert Croutch, *Housing Migratory Agricultural Workers in California, 1913-1948* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), 43.

This initial lack of Congressional approval had profound implications for the first few years of the labor camp program, insofar as the RA and FSA bureaucracies—not Congress—drove the political process that shaped the program.

The RA, and later the FSA, managed a broad array of programs, ranging from all-rural communities to subsistence homestead projects to industrial communities for workers. No single underlying ideology motivated the programs, but the driving ethos of the organization stemmed from the head of the RA, Rexford Tugwell. According to Sidney Baldwin, author of *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*, critics of the FSA claimed that the agency’s leaders had been “injected with the Tugwell virus.”¹⁸ Tugwell was responsible for building much of the RA’s bureaucracy, and he personally appointed all of its top-level Washington bureaucrats.¹⁹ A few of these administrators were especially loyal to Tugwell, and that group soon became known as “Tugwell’s Clique.”²⁰ The Clique included Grace Falke and C.B. Baldwin, Tugwell’s Executive Assistant and Assistant Administrator, respectively. Tugwell’s influence permeated this top level of bureaucracy. Although Tugwell resigned in 1936 and despite multiple later permutations of the agency, many of the RA’s original leaders remained, suggesting a larger underlying ideological consistency.²¹ For example, in 1940, Baldwin was promoted to Administrator of the FSA. In many ways, the FSA administration saw itself as carrying out the work that had begun in 1935.

¹⁸ Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 246.

¹⁹ For more on Tugwell’s philosophy, see Sternsher, Bernard. *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964.

²⁰ Baldwin, 109.

²¹ Tugwell resigned in 1936, at which point Executive Order 7530 transferred the RA to the USDA. In 1937, the RA became the Farm Security Administration, or the FSA.

CHAPTER 1

Rehabilitating the Migrant

At the national level, RA/FSA administrators primarily saw the migratory labor program in terms of the rehabilitation of the migrant. Baldwin argues that, although the RA initially focused on merely providing economic subsistence, it eventually broadened to a larger program with deeper goals. Baldwin points to Tugwell as the architect of this change and notes shifts in rhetoric from “resettlement” to “rehabilitation” under Tugwell’s administration. While resettlement denoted the physical relocation of laborers, rehabilitation implied a more complex transformation, one in which the migrant would shed his “backward” ways and gain the ability to reenter modern society. It also suggested that migrants had become estranged from society and required training to be accepted back into society’s fold.

For the RA, rehabilitation was a method of addressing the roots of the laborers’ plight. In this view, the inequalities that plagued the nation’s agricultural sector were deep issues that could not be solved by simply relocating migrants or increasing welfare funds. Instead, rehabilitating migrants required a more profound transformation of an entire sector of society. Lawrence I. Hewes, Jr., an administrative assistant in Tugwell’s Washington office who became director of FSA Region IX in San Francisco in 1940, described the ethos of the Tugwell office: “We held fingers in dikes of improvisation against bureaucratic tidal waves; rushed firemanlike from one catastrophic threat to another [...] But Tugwell took no pride in conducting a first-aid program; our real job was to cure the deeper malady.”²² This desire to “cure the deeper malady” was a major element of the RA ethos. Tugwell and other RA administrators were not interested in temporary economic solutions; rather, they hoped to engage with the underlying causes of this

²² Baldwin, 246.

inequality. The migratory labor camps fit neatly into to this goal: never intended as a “first-aid program,” the camps were meant as part of a larger effort to address the migratory labor problem.

The California labor program was initially envisioned by SERA, which proposed the camps as part of a much larger program. In April 1935, SERA published a document entitled, “Tentative Program of the Division of Rural Rehabilitation,” which laid out the philosophies and goals of a potential rural rehabilitation program.²³ To SERA officials, the camps were just one step in a comprehensive training program in which the migrant would be “rehabilitated” into modern life. Describing how the program would include training in home management and childrearing, the document stated, “Upon graduation from a period of training in one of these communities, laborers (or distressed farmers) can be placed selectively where their ultimate rehabilitation is assured.”²⁴ This sense of “graduation” implies the completion of a period of education: it also envisions the laborer shedding the migrant lifestyle and entering “modern” society.

Although SERA’s program focused on the migrants’ economic needs, it did not ignore other considerations. For example, the document argues for establishing laborers on a “self-sustaining basis, enabling them to provide for themselves not a minimum of subsistence but a decent subsistence.” In doing so, not only would the migrants become economically stable, but their “hope and morale” would also be restored. Though officials generally agreed on importance of re-establishing “hope and morale,” questions of economic subsistence were much more ambiguous. Administrators hoped that migrants would enter California society, but it was sometimes difficult to see what role they would play. Many California government officials

²³ “Tentative Program of the Division of Rural Rehabilitation, California ERA,” April 27, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

²⁴ *Id.*

hoped that the workers would eventually be able to shed their migratory lifestyles and own small farms of their own. For example, Jerry Voorhis, a U.S. Congressman representing a portion of Los Angeles County, wrote to FDR: “Something more permanent than migratory farm labor must be found for a large number of these displaced farmers. And every effort must be made to enable at least a considerable proportion of them to rehabilitate themselves on new lands.”²⁵ Voorhis hoped that migrants could establish family farms, where they could “settle down and become part of the community.”²⁶ During the early days of the RA, officials involved in the establishment of the camp program echoed this sentiment. In 1935, the regional RA office published a statement on the possibility of migratory labor camps, stating that such camps would be part of a “broader program of rehabilitation.”²⁷ The RA noted that the camps could serve “as reservoirs from which distressed farm people can be filtered upward and selectively re-established on part-time farms, as tenants, and even assisted back to the ranks of farm owners. Thus, for some, camps will constitute the first rung in a reconstructed agricultural ladder, which they can ascend in traditional American fashion according to their abilities.”²⁸ In this way, the early days of the RA were imbued with a heady optimism. Administrators who hoped to reconstruct agriculture on a meritocratic basis were largely ignoring the warnings of a tradition of Californian muckrakers who had drawn public attention to the fundamental inequalities of

²⁵ Jerry Voorhis, “Letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” August 22, 1937. pg. 4. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 11. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ “Statement of Regional Office of Resettlement Administration on Possible Establishment of Migrant Camps,” Nov. 18, 1935. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 11. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

²⁸ *Id.*

California's agricultural system.²⁹ Instead, their vision of the rehabilitation of the migrants involved a resurgence of the family farm.

The RA/FSA framed this attack on inequality as part of a larger program of restoring American democracy. For instance, an FSA report from a training conference for camp managers in 1939 posited that the migratory labor program, though it began as a “stop-gap improvisation,” was part of a more “general attack upon the causes and conditions which retard the realization of the American democratic ideal.”³⁰ The RA/FSA envisioned its goal in broad terms: by attacking inequality and realigning the various sectors of society, it could establish a more democratic basis for the entire nation.

The decisions and goals at the national level may first appear to be mostly rhetorical, but the framework developed in Washington shaped how regional administrators and managers conceived of the camps. Tugwell had posited the “rehabilitation” of the migrant as the ultimate goal, but it was the administrators at the local level who had to decide what rehabilitation would mean. If rehabilitation involved bringing the migrant worker back into society's fold, then it was the regional officials—the individuals who best understood the needs of their particular migrant population—who were ultimately charged with this responsibility.

²⁹ See Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³⁰ “Final Report: Training School for Camp Managers, Farm Security Administration,” Dec. 16, 1939. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 28. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

CHAPTER 2

The Operation of the Camps

The national directives established by Tugwell and others left a great deal of latitude and discretion to regional administrators. In California, issues of the social and cultural citizenship of Okies and tensions between the migrants and “native” Californians complicated a picture of rehabilitation. When the goal of rehabilitation conflicted with these tensions, the problems were ultimately worked out on the ground level in the day-to-day operation of the camps. By design, the camps encompassed a wide range of programs—educational, cultural, and recreational, thus forming a complete environment, *i.e.*, an environment whose every aspect was meant to shape and mold the migrants.

Operating as RA/FSA “Region IX,” California’s regional administration was initially headquartered in Berkeley but later moved to San Francisco. Region IX management consisted of bureaucrats operating out of this office, as well as camp managers, who lived at the camps and who were charged with the day-to-day minutiae of running the camps. The regional level was in frequent communication with national administrators, facilitating a flow of ideas, knowledge, and personnel between the groups.³¹

At the ground level, each camp was assigned a camp manager, who ran camp operations almost singlehandedly. Although they were required to follow guidelines established at the regional office, managers typically had a great deal of latitude in all aspects of camp life, and they corresponded with the regional office mostly through weekly written reports. Camp managers could determine which families to accept into the camps and which to turn away. They also had the

³¹ This exchange of personnel and ideas was typified by the appointment of Lawrence I. Hewes, a young assistant in the Washington office, as Region 9’s on-site director in 1940.

authority to establish rules of conduct and expel migrants who failed to follow the rules. Furthermore, although the regional level provided the funding, it was the camp managers who petitioned for funds to support the recreational and education programming of the camps and decided exactly how to use these funds. Given this degree of autonomy, camp managers—who were, according to objective standards, very low-level public officials—were able to apply their personal philosophies and motivations to manage camps in a manner that surpassed their official status. Recognition that camp managers had this *de facto* right to mold each camp to reflect their personal philosophies is key to understanding the camps’ operation and evolution.

In a 1935 confidential memo to camp managers, Irving Wood, a Region IX administrator, laid out the role of a camp manager, stressing the manager’s key role in determining the success of the camp program. In an attached, handwritten note, Wood added, “In this capacity as leader the Camp manager should strive to become the Camper’s guide, councilor and friend, placed there by the Administration to help workers help themselves.”³² By this statement, Wood succinctly captured the multifaceted role that camp managers played: camp managers were expected to handle the practical aspects of the camp, as well as to engage with the residents and establish a personal rapport with them. At the regional level, then, the success of the camp program was perceived not just in terms of policies but also by the personal relationships built between the “authorities” and the residents.

Because of the nature of a camp manager’s role, administrators who hired and trained managers judged them on a number of personal qualities. A 1939 report describing a training school for new camp managers portrays the ideal manager as “an individual with both broad and special training, with high intelligence, with executive ability, with disciplined social understanding

³² Irving Wood, “Confidential: Instructions to Camp Managers,” Handwritten Addendum. August 1, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

as well as basic human sympathy.”³³ As the sole link between the bureaucracy of the agency and the migrant residents of the camps, the camp manager had to act as a representative of the federal government. He had to earn the respect of the migrants while still maintaining his authority as a government official.

If “human sympathy” was a key characteristic of an effective camp manager, so was optimism. Administrators and managers constantly stressed the need for a faith in humanity and a belief in the possibility of change. After all, the belief at the core of the camp program—that changing the circumstances of a downtrodden people could “rehabilitate” them into society—was an ardently optimistic one. In an interview with a manager of a Florida FSA camp, the manager of the Visalia, California, camp described the ideal manager:

“Apparently the type often smilingly referred to as ‘the young idealist,’ who may be only two or three years out of college where he received a liberal rather than a specialized or technical training, makes the best camp manager. Enthusiasm for the work, a fiercely strong belief in its value, combativeness when it appears to be threatened from without [...] more than counterbalance the ‘young idealist’s’ defects.”³⁴

By favoring enthusiasm, flexibility, and interpersonal traits over technical knowledge, this description of a “young idealist” illuminates the idealistic impulses at the heart of the camp program’s mission. For the most part, camp managers were passionate about the program and fervently believed that rehabilitating the migrant population was both necessary and possible. At the ground level, managers enthusiastically devoted themselves to the everyday details of camp operation.

Not only did camp managers exert a great deal of influence over camp operations, but a few prominent camp managers were exceptionally dominant in shaping the way the entire

³³ “Final Report Training School for Camp Managers, Farm Security Administration,” Dec. 16, 1939. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 28. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

³⁴ John Beecher, “The Migratory Labor Problem in California,” February 1940. pg. 14. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

network of California migrant camps was run. For example, Thomas Collins, who managed the first camp set up in California—at Marysville—established precedents that were later followed at the majority, if not all, of California’s other camps.³⁵ After spending a year at Marysville, Collins was tasked with opening and operating California’s second camp, which was located at Arvin. By the early 1940s, Collins, having opened several camps, had become an expert-in-residence for the entire California program, earning the title “Community Manager At Large.” Although he rejected opportunities for promotion within the RA/FSA, Collins had an enormous impact in the way people both inside and outside the agency perceived the camps. In his biographical study of Collins, Jackson J. Benson argues that the precedents Collins established at the Marysville and Arvin camps shaped the entire camp program.³⁶ Furthermore, Collins’ friendship with Steinbeck provided the latter with much of the material for *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was the primary source of information many Americans had on Okies and the camps that housed them. Collins’ detailed, hands-on management style was also noted by famed Depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange, as shown in Figure 3.

³⁵ Appendix A contains a map showing the locations of FSA camps in California.

³⁶ Jackson J. Benson, “‘To Tom, Who Lived It’: John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 2 (1976): 163.



Figure 3

Tom Collins, manager of the Arvin FSA camp, with a drought refugee family (1936)³⁷

Part of Collins' influence stemmed from his willingness to speak extensively and eloquently about the goals and operation of the camp program. His weekly reports to regional administrators were significantly longer and more detailed than the average manager's, as he not only included camp demographics and labor updates, but also detailed his relationships with individual migrant families. Collins' weekly reports indicate that he perceived himself as both a paternalistic figure and an ethnographic observer. Though always sympathetic to their plight, Collins frequently described his interactions with Okies in terms of a parent/child relationship. For example, in one of his weekly reports from the Arvin camp, Collins wrote, "The campers take the greatest pride in

³⁷ Dorothea Lange, "Tom Collins, manager of Kern migrant camp, with drought refugee family. California," FSA 8b29855. Nov. 1936. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b29855>

the camp [...] Yet, unconsciously, they still, at times, revert to the primitive methods of squatter camp practices and we wonder whether we shall ever make much progress. We realize however that they do not willingly do these things, just force of habit.”³⁸ Collins also perceived himself as considerate and understanding, and he attempted to downplay his authority status in his interactions with the migrant residents. However, in doing so, he also evinced a paternalistic tone, depicting his conflicts with migrants as childish errors on their part.

Collins’ writing links his paternalistic attitude to an almost ethnographic perspective: a sense that the migrants were a separate people—simple, humble, and “folksy”—in contrast to the more cosmopolitan and jaded Californians. However, Collins also established himself as an objective observer—one who reported and recorded the migrants’ culture for a more “sophisticated” audience. Each of his weekly reports, for example, included a section titled “Bits of Migrant Wisdom,” in which he detailed camp incidents that he believed exposed the migrants’ ignorance or silly superstitions. His tone was not critical but amused; for example, in “The Human Side in the Operation of a Migrants Camp,” a 1935 address, Collins regaled his audience with stories of migrant superstitions, some of which—such as a story about a man who beat his wife for good luck—would clearly offend the modern sensibilities of his Californian audience. However, Collins concluded this segment of his speech with a mixture of amusement and concern: “These are very amusing to us as we hear them, but to those whom they affect they are problems of the biggest magnitude.”³⁹ This combination of paternalism, sympathy, and a kind of detached amusement was a trademark of Collins’ approach to the migrant residents of the camps. Although all camp managers had idiosyncrasies in their respective approaches to the camps, Collins’

³⁸ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending February 1, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

³⁹ Thomas Collins, “The Human Side in the Operation of a Migrants Camp,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

enormous influence allowed his attitudes to pervade the entire California camp program. These attitudes emerged at the ground level, among regional administrators who were acutely aware of the tensions between migrants and “native” Californians.

The civic mission of the California FSA camps was premised on the “otherness” of the Okies. The historian Toni Alexander has written about the Okies as migrants occupying a “liminal space” between citizen and foreigner.⁴⁰ Although the migrants were white Protestant Americans, many Californians believed that they would be unable to assimilate into Californian culture. FSA administrators adopted this idea of difference, but they rejected the notion that Okies were too backwards to adapt to Californian culture. Given this context, the idea that the environment of the camps could mold the migrants into future California citizens was a hopeful one. As the camp manager Robert Hardie succinctly stated, a successful camp manager “must believe in the educability of the common run of humanity.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Toni Alexander, “Citizenship Contested: The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience in California’s San Joaquin Valley,” *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 1 (2011): 199.

⁴¹ John Beecher, “The Migratory Labor Problem in California,” February 1940. pg. 13. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

CHAPTER 3

Training the Migrant

When regional attitudes about “Okies” combined with Tugwell’s ethos of rehabilitation, the camps assumed an aspect of training and education. Camp managers such as Thomas Collins portrayed the “Okies” as a simplistic, folksy people and viewed the camp program as a means to educate them in the ways of modern society. In addition to providing residents with shelter, the camps suggested a much more comprehensive civic mission, with camp managers and regional administrators striving to convert the “backward” migrants into a population that would be more at home in California society.

Other historians have acknowledged the significance of this cultural aspect of the camp program’s mission. The most comprehensive analysis to date is Walter J. Stein’s work, which suggests that these camps were meant to shape and mold their inhabitants into democratic citizens. In his 1973 book, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, Stein presents a thorough look at the migration from the Southwest and its impact on California.⁴² Stein’s vision of the FSA camps posits the camp managers as New Deal liberals who ran the camps as social experiments, hoping to reform the Okies and transform their “backward,” rural ways. Stein focuses on the camps’ system of participatory democracy, arguing that the very foundation of camp life was predicated on the idea that migrants needed to be educated in democracy. According to Stein, FSA officials were concerned that the Okies’ supposedly “individualistic” culture would not mesh with the requirements of a modern democracy. To rectify this situation, camp managers sought to instill a more cooperative culture in their residents. Stein explores one aspect of the

⁴² Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973) 167.

camp program's civic mission, but he stops short of fully integrating the camp's mission into the larger context of the New Deal. Instead, Stein focuses on the camps as a feature of the Okies' experience in California, rather than as outlets for various strains of New Deal thought.

If Stein introduces the idea of the camps' civic mission, Greg Hise demonstrates how FSA officials could enact this civic mission in a tangible way. In his 1995 article, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941," Hise argues that the camps were experiments in social planning.⁴³ Focusing on the layout of camp infrastructure, Hise claims that the FSA camps fit into a larger pattern of Progressive communities. Although he is primarily interested in the physical architecture of the camps, he argues that the FSA laid out the camps to facilitate the agency's cultural mission. Thus, although both Stein and Hise demonstrate a cultural aspect to the camp program's mission, neither explores how this mission evolved and emerged from the various philosophies and motivations that permeated the New Deal agencies.

This FSA's cultural program permeated the California camps. At the ground level, regional administrators and camp managers translated the national message of "rehabilitating" the migrant into concrete terms. Regional officials often compared the camps to a kind of training program. Eric Thomsen, a Region IX director, saw education of the migrants as one of the program's foremost goals. In a 1935 address to the San Francisco Public School Forum, which he titled "The Maverick University or How the Migrant Gets an Education," Thomsen presented a comprehensive vision of the camp program's educational mission. He claimed that the entire operation was geared towards giving migrants "a liberal education through understanding of

⁴³ Greg Hise, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941," *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. Eds. Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Certer L. Hudgins. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

what is happening to them in the modern world.”⁴⁴ Thomsen conceived of education in its broadest sense. A true education would imbue migrants with a deeper understanding of the modern world and of their place in it. According to Thomsen, the camp program rivaled the depth of the “liberal education” available in universities.

Within the camp program, talk of education was more than just rhetoric. In their capacity as activities directors, camp managers sought to provide migrants with speakers and programs to increase their awareness of social, political, and economic issues. Fred Ross, the camp manager at Arvin in 1939, encouraged campers to attend the talks he arranged, claiming that the discussions might help them understand their own situations. In an artificial vernacular tone, he wrote, “Some folks don’ know why they’re in the fix they’re in, nor what to do about it now they’re in it, an what’s worse, they ain’t aimin’ to find out. If they was, they shore wouldn’t stay home nights when we have speakers out here that kin really tell ‘em the facts about all those things an’ a heap more.”⁴⁵

Camp speakers covered a wide variety of topics. One of the most pressing issues was health, and camp managers encouraged local doctors and nurses to visit the camps, often on a weekly basis.⁴⁶ These health professionals focused on practical advice: topics might entail the prevention of communicable diseases, birth control, or even the benefits of good posture.⁴⁷

While the health programs focused on practical advice that migrants could immediately adopt and practice, other camp educational programs dealt with wider topics and current events.

⁴⁴ Eric H. Thomsen, “Maverick University or How the Migrant Gets an Education,” Jan. 29, 1937. Ralph W. Hollenberg Collection of Materials Relating to the Farm Security Administration, Region IX, 1924-1941. Carton 4. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁴⁵ Fred Ross, “As the Feller Sez,” *Tow-Sack Tattler*. Nov. 11, 1939.

⁴⁶ *The Weedpatch Cultivator*, September 2, 1938.

⁴⁷ *Woodville Community News*, July 30, 1942; *The Weedpatch Cultivator*, April 28, 1939; *The Migrant Weekly*, March 12, 1938.

At the Marysville camp, for example, Collins established and led a discussion group for campers interested in current events. Although some of the topics may have had immediate usefulness to the campers, most talks were designed to broaden the migrants' worldview and introduce them to contemporary debates. The camp newsletter, *The Migrant Weekly*, published summaries of these discussions, circulating the information throughout the camp community. The Marysville camp's discussion topics included, "The Income and Expenditures of the Federal Government" (a discussion which Collins apparently illustrated with pie charts), "America's Interests in Foreign Countries," and "Rights and Obligations under Contract."⁴⁸ Some of these discussions offered practical help to campers. For example, the talk on contracts—in which Collins addressed questions such as "Is a contract made by a minor valid?" and "Must a contract be written?"—would probably have been useful to an audience of laborers concerned about their work contracts. But it is also clear that these discussion exceeded practical advice. At one meeting that was attended by more than twenty campers, Collins "launched into an unscheduled topic, namely the history and growth of corporations and holding companies [...] In answer to a question from the group, he showed that it was important to the workingman to have the stock market and process of investment controlled, for it may be of assistance in preventing uncontrolled depressions."⁴⁹ Like Ross and Thomsen, Collins hoped that discussions of contemporary topics would help migrants understand the modern world.

Camp activities were one way in which camp managers sought to educate the migrants. The job of the camp manager, however, was also a personal one. Managers often cultivated relationships with the migrants, hoping to subtly and indirectly educate them through these personal ties. Collins established this approach in his time at the Marysville camp. Describing

⁴⁸ *The Migrant Weekly*, Feb. 26, 1938, March 5, 1938, March 26, 1938.

⁴⁹ *The Migrant Weekly*, Feb. 12, 1938.

his strategy, he explained: “One gets immediate response through ‘suggestions’ and personal contacts with the head of the family or group. When such groups are from Oklahoma, Arkansas or Texas, it requires, at times, several personal contacts. In such cases, final contact made with the wife or older daughter is necessary and usually brings the desired results.”⁵⁰ By taking advantage of family structure, Collins found that he could “suggest” changes in family behavior.

Camp managers often made personal visits to the campers’ tents. These visits were more than just friendly; managers saw them as an integral part of the general training of the migrants. After a new family arrived in camp, camp managers generally visited the family. In one instance, Collins found that the migrants’ dishes were poorly cleaned. To rectify the problem, Collins volunteered to wash the dishes after he ate dinner with the family. Collins claimed that, in doing so, he “hurt no one’s feelings but at the same time gave a practical demonstration on dish washing.”⁵¹

Together, a combination of official speakers, informal discussion groups, and personal visits created an environment of education. Camp managers conceived of the camps as a training ground for the modern world. Behind this jumble of camp activities and programs, camp managers were motivated by a clear desire to educate the migratory families. In a weekly report to Region IX director Irving Wood, Collins optimistically projected, “Although the families or groups are here for but a short time, nevertheless, I believe they profit, during their stay from what they learn about sanitation, personal hygiene, and community effort.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending August 4, 1935,” 2. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁵¹ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending March 14, 1936,” 31. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁵² Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending February 29, 1936,” 31. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

CHAPTER 4

Camp Democracy

Motivated by the camps' educational mission, FSA officials aimed to instill a set of “modern” cultural values in the migrants. Chief among these values was a sense of civic responsibility that entailed two separate components—democratic values and a culture of cooperation. To inculcate democratic values, for example, FSA officials embedded these values into the day-to-day operation of the camp, primarily by establishing a system of representative governance. While the tangible impact of this “democracy” is unclear, FSA administrators hoped that it would create a sort of training ground for democracy, permitting migrants to learn and adopt democratic habits that they could then transfer to the migrants' post-camp lives.

The FSA modeled camp governments on the American system of democracy. Meant to resemble microcosms of a larger democratic society, these governments consisted of an executive, legislative, and judicial branch. Moreover, FSA administrators established camp constitutions that echoed the language of the American Constitution. For example, the constitution for the Arvin camp was established in April 1939. The preamble stated:

We the people of the Arvin Migratory Labor Camp located near Arvin, California, in order to form a democratic self-government, establish justice, insure peaceful relations among ourselves and with others, promote the general welfare, and take part in the privileges and responsibilities given us by the Constitution of our country, the United States of America, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Camp.”⁵³

The rhetoric of the camp constitution, clearly derived from the Constitution of the United States, shows how FSA administrators hoped that American government would provide a model for the running of the camps. Camp democracies had a dual function. On one hand, the camp constitu-

⁵³ *The Weedpatch Cultivator*. April 1, 1939.

tions were inward-focused and emphasized creating a democratic basis for camp life. On the other, the entire system was meant to integrate the migrants into a larger democratic society. By establishing mini-democracies within the camps, administrators hoped to prepare migrants to exercise their democratic rights outside the camps.

Camp government consisted of three branches. While the camp manager assumed both the executive and judicial roles, the legislative branch—the camp council—was the most democratic.⁵⁴ It was this branch that camp managers who expounded the benefits of camp democracy constantly cited. The camp council (sometimes also referred to as the “camp committee”) consisted of migrant residents who were elected by their peers in regular elections. According to the Arvin constitution, camp council members had to be at least thirty years old.⁵⁵ Camps were often divided into a few administrative units, with each unit electing one council member to represent it at the meetings. Administrators encouraged participation by offering tangible incentives to migrants. At the Arvin camp, for example, members were paid 75 cents for attending a camp meeting.⁵⁶ Camp council meetings were also frequently the subject of Dorothea Lange’s photographs, such the one in Figure 4, showing a meeting held in 1939 at the migrant camp in Farmersville, California.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*



Figure 4

**Meeting of the camp council at the
FSA camp in Farmersville, California (1939)⁵⁷**

Though camp representatives were elected from separate residential units, camp managers envisioned a council that would unite the entire camp. For example, the Woodville camp contained both metal cabins for more short-term residents and garden homes, which were generally considered longer-term residences. When tensions between these groups arose, some residents requested separate camp councils. However, the community manager, David Kinkead, condemned such a division. In an article entitled “United We Stand,” Kinkead expressed the risks of the conflict: “We Americans know what this kind of thinking can lead to on a big scale. It happened

⁵⁷ Lange, Dorothea. “Farm Security Administration (FSA) camp for migratory agricultural workers. Farmersville, California. Meeting of camp council,” FSA 8b33648. May 1939. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b33648>

to the whole country about 1860 [...] Ever since then Americans have worked together.”⁵⁸ Managers such as Kinkead saw the camps as microcosms of a larger nation and hoped the camp councils would provide some sort of unity among a diverse range of residents. In this sense, camp councils played a symbolic role in establishing a camp community.

Beyond this symbolic role, camp councils played an important part in running the camps, although the camp managers always retained final authority. During their weekly meetings, council members voted on everyday matters of camp operation. In the minutes of a camp council meeting at the Kern camp in 1936, Collins established the duties and responsibilities of the “governing body”: “It represents the campers in their relationship with the management and its direct contact between the campers and the management. All problems of discipline, law and order, disputes among individuals and groups, and all questions of a controversial nature, are handled by this committee.”⁵⁹ Minutes of that camp’s council meetings reflect Collins’ guidelines, showing council members debating a variety of issues, including misconduct at camp dances, a problem with missing toilet paper from the sanitary facilities, and disputes among camp residents.⁶⁰

The relationship between the council and the manager could be a source of tension. Managers hoped that the councils would act as training grounds for democracy, but their idealistic plans could be undermined when the decisions of the council conflicted with the manager’s wishes. In such circumstances, administrators had to play a balancing role. Though migrant residents controlled the camp council, the camp manager assumed the executive and

⁵⁸ David Kinkead, “United We Stand,” *Woodville Community News*. August 13, 1941. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

⁵⁹ “Kern Migrants Camp Committee: Minutes, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁶⁰ “Kern Migrants Camps Committee Minutes 3/16/1936,” “Minutes March 1936,” “Minutes May 1936.” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

judicial responsibilities. In practice, this stipulation meant that camp managers had complete freedom to veto any of the camp council's decisions. FSA administrators claimed that this was a logical necessity: if the migrant-run council approved a decision that ran counter to federal law, the camp manager would be required to step in and intervene.⁶¹ Camp managers, then, possessed ultimate control over camp operations.

Camp managers could always exercise their veto power, but they often deferred to the council's will. For instance, when the manager at the Arvin camp announced a visit from a representative of the Birth Control Federation of America, he felt compelled to add that such a visit would depend on the will of the camp council: "She has plans to meet with the Mothers Club Friday Evening and present her plan for an additional health program the first of next week, if the Mothers Club and the Camp Council approves of it."⁶² The manager praised the program as "worthwhile," but his announcement suggests that the council's approval of the program was also necessary.⁶³ In fact, requesting the council's approval for visitors constituted a quasi-official policy in the camp program. In his instructions to camp managers, Region IX director Irving Wood wrote, "In granting permission for meetings the Manager should be governed in part by the evident desire or opposition of the majority of the camp inhabitants to hear a speaker."⁶⁴

When camp managers deferred to the authority of the camp council, they tended to publicly announce that they were doing so. The appearance of democracy often superseded its actual practice. Emphasizing the role of representative government could have practical benefits: camp managers who wanted to encourage residents to abide by camp rules often claimed that the

⁶¹ *The Weedpatch Cultivator*. April 1, 1939.

⁶² *The Weedpatch Cultivator*. April 28, 1939.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Irving Wood, "Confidential: Instructions to Camp Managers," pg. 1. August 1, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

rules had been democratically decided. For example, when David Kinkead was faced with unruly behavior from children in the Woodville camp, he censured the behavior in camp newsletters, reminding the residents “that the rules made for the behavior of both children and older people in camp are made mostly by the community council of their own free will.”⁶⁵

The democracies created in the camps were decidedly mixed. Though they contained democratic elements, the authority of the camp manager always overshadowed the representative components. Such a contradiction, however, was irrelevant to most FSA officials. The goal of the camp democracies was not to establish real, functioning systems, but rather, to train the migrants for a wider world. Camp democracies were a learning process, not a final product.

Responding to what seemed like a superficial veneer of democracy, Walter Stein dubbed the camp governments “sandbox democracies”—opportunities for migrants to experiment with self-government cushioned from any serious consequences.⁶⁶ Stein argues that the camps experienced an initial burst participatory democracy, which then declined as migrants became disillusioned with the process’s limits. Stein claims that these experiments were largely failures because they did not provide migrants with any real responsibility in the camps. For many FSA officials, however, the distinction between real and imagined democracy was irrelevant. Since the camp government was primarily a tool for instilling a sense of civic responsibility in the migrants, the appearance of democracy could be just as effective as a “genuine” democracy if it meant that camp residents were learning democratic values.

Although camp managers and regional administrators agreed on the importance of inculcating the values of democracy, they could disagree on the best way of instilling these

⁶⁵ David Kinkead, “Manager’s Letter,” *Woodville Community News*. July 29, 1941. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

⁶⁶ Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, 179.

values. The most idealistic camp managers hoped that encouraging residents to partake in a democratic system would automatically allow the migrants' latent democratic values to flourish. Other camp managers, however, became disillusioned with the process and came to see the manager's intervention as a necessity.

These issues rose to the forefront of the debate at a 1940 conference of Region IX camp managers, and the conference transcript reveals key fundamental ideological differences. One of the most heated topics of debate was whether camp managers should be present at all camp council meetings. At issue was the central question of the legitimacy of the camps' democracy: could camp residents alone make and enforce decisions in the camp, or was the guidance and approval of the camp manager necessary? While some camp managers, such as Collins, argued that the migrants should be entrusted with the control of the camps, those more disillusioned with the process believed the presence of the camp managers was necessary.

Though they disagreed on the appropriate methodology, both sides shared a common mission, with all camp managers present at the conference apparently subscribing to a paternalistic notion that it was their duty to educate migrants in democracy. For instance, Robert Hardie, the manager of the Visalia camp, justified allowing the migrants more latitude in running the Camps: "Probably they do get in hot water when somebody isn't there, but there is nothing wrong with hot water. People grow from that."⁶⁷ In response, Fred Ross, the camp manager at Arvin, replied, "I believed that at first, but I changed my mind after a while. Something has to be done. You can't wait many years to overcome errors. You have a job to do and you have to get it done

⁶⁷ "Summary of Migratory Labor Conference May 6-8, 1940," Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 1. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

right away.”⁶⁸ While some managers believed that a hands-off approach would best educate the migrants in democracy, others feared the consequences of excessive freedom and claimed that democratic values could only be instilled through active enforcement. After this debate, participants voted on whether camp managers should be present at all camp meetings. Sixteen camp managers voted yes; only four voted no.⁶⁹ The picture that emerges from this debate is a rough consensus that democracy, although beneficial to the migrants, must be carefully guided. For the camp managers and administrators, camp democracy was a tool to instill the principles of democracy, rather than a mechanism to permit migrants free reign over camp operations.

Despite administrators’ praise of guided democracy as a tool for education, FSA officials were often vague about what these values entailed. Although all camp managers invoked the rhetoric of training and education, it was Collins, one of the foremost proponents of the camp democracies, who most clearly articulated what he envisioned as the ultimate goal of such a training process. Collins hoped that migrants who learned the advantages of democracy within the camps might be more inclined to exercise these same principles in the larger society. In one of his weekly reports, Collins illustrates how the camps’ elections might encourage the migrants to vote in other elections:

“After one highly contested election, a camper came running to the camp manager and blustered out—‘Gee that wuz a nar’r scape. I couldn’t see as how that fella culd be of use ter us on that commtee. He wuz feeted by one vut. MY VUT FEETED HIM.’ That awoke in this individual the power of the ballot. RESULT—THE NEXT AFTERNOON EVERY MAN IN CAMP ELIGIBLE TO REGISTER AND VOTE WENT EN MASSE TO ARVIN AND REGISTERED FOR THE COMING ELECTIONS.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending February 29, 1936,” 31. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Collins saw a direct relationship between the camp structure and the migrants' behavior outside the camps; he believed that migrants who experienced the advantages of democracy within the camps were more likely to exercise their votes outside the camps. Camp governments may never have approached a truly representative democracy, but for a manager like Collins, they were still a successful experiment. By instilling democratic values, Collins and other managers hoped to encourage the campers' political involvement in California. In doing so, they tried to move the migrants one step closer to full Californian citizenship and assimilation.

CHAPTER 5

A Culture of Cooperation

Democratic values were just one component of the civic responsibility that FSA administrators sought to inculcate in the camps' migrants. Along with democracy, FSA officials expounded the value of cooperation. Cooperative values had two functions. First, managers hoped that cooperation would act as a glue to reinforce the tenuous ties of the camp community. Second, on a larger scale, camp managers saw cooperation as a set of social values that would encourage migrants to work together to pursue shared interests. Just as they envisioned camp democracy as preparing the Okies for long-term political involvement, camp managers saw education in cooperative values as necessary preparation for a New Deal world that was coming to accept the value of cooperation.

While FSA officials usually used the word “cooperation” in the camps to denote a set of social values and a general spirit of “working together,” they also occasionally referenced the Consumer Co-op Movement of the 1930s. Whereas cooperation as a social value was a flexible term that could encompass a variety of pro-social behaviors, the Co-op Movement had well-defined political goals. This movement sought to established co-ops in which consumers owned and managed the retail outlets. According to New Deal historian Lizabeth Cohen, the Great Depression marked a peak of interest in a Co-op movement.⁷¹ This movement, which sought to give consumers increased authority in the economy, never constituted more than 1.5 percent of national retail sales.⁷² However, for many supportive New Dealers, it marked a wave of the future.

⁷¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar American* (New York: Random House, 2003), 23.

⁷² Cohen, 25.

Within the migrant context, some FSA administrators latched onto this particular strain of the cooperative movement and envisioned the Co-op Movement as a new form of economic democracy. For instance, F.C. Winningham, the manager of the cooperative store at the Woodville camp (shown in Figure 5), foresaw a nationwide Co-op Movement: “This movement aims to establish economic democracy in the nation. We now have political democracy, but very little control over the necessities of life. The distribution of these necessities under such an economic democracy would be such that everyone would enjoy a much higher standard of living than is possible today.”⁷³



Figure 5

**The cooperative store at the FSA
camp in Woodville, California (1942)⁷⁴**

⁷³ F.C. Winningham, “Our Cooperative Store and Its Aims,” *Woodville Community News*. July 11, 1941. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

⁷⁴ Russell Lee, “Tulare County, California. FSA (Farm Security Administration) farm workers’ camp. The cooperative store,” FSA 8c23799. Feb. 1942. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8c23799>

Such FSA administrators adopted a particular vision of a future cooperative society. They sought to introduce co-ops into the camps, mostly through camp cooperative stores, such as the one Fred Ross helped establish at the Arvin camp in 1939. The Arvin facility offered groceries to migrants at reduced prices. During the early days of the store, Ross was frustrated by its initial lack of success. Exhorting residents to patronize the store, Ross encouraged the migrants to change their mindset, “Ya know, they was a rumor runnin’ round Camp a while back that folks from the South West still believe that ole lie about how ‘you git what you pay for’ when yer buying groceries, so they all run down to the chain-store and buy up all the high-price stuff they kin lay their hands on, an’ think they’re savin money.”⁷⁵ In this case, talk of “cooperation” connoted a specific economic strategy.

While talk of “cooperation” occasionally carried such connotations, camp managers tended to use the word in its broadest sense. How FSA administrators defined “cooperation” can be difficult to assess because the administrators themselves were often vague about the term, using it to describe a wide variety of social values. They inherited the term from a wider contemporary discourse during the New Deal about cooperation and collectivism. In his book, *Tomorrow A New World*, Paul Conkin examines a variety of New Deal community programs. In doing so, he highlights a move away from a tradition of individualism toward a new ideal of cooperation. Conkin defines cooperation broadly; at its core was a belief that “Governments of privilege had to be replaced, not by less government, but by governments of all the people—function, efficient governments, capable of regulating and controlling the economy in such a way as to insure a rewarded honesty for all men.”⁷⁶ For Conkin, cooperation was linked to democracy,

⁷⁵ Fred Ross. “As the Feller Sez,” *Tow-Sack Tattler*. October 28, 1939. Nov. 1, 1940.

⁷⁶ Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 3-4.

but it was also more expansive. Cooperation entailed groups of people identifying a common interest and working together to control their government and institutions. Institutions—both political and economic—would be in the hands of the people. Conkin’s definition is useful because of its flexibility. In the New Deal era, the rhetoric of cooperation was used to justify a wide spectrum of programs—from Marxist to interventionist.⁷⁷ When discussing cooperation in the camps, then, most FSA officials adopted a broad, flexible definition, envisioning cooperation as a civic value that would prepare migrants for a future, post-New Deal world.

Camp administrators who hoped for a more cooperative society were also concerned that Okies were unprepared for this new world. Like many other Californians, camp managers consistently portrayed Okies as an individualistic people. In some ways, this stereotype played into a romanticized notion of the Okies: native Californians perceived the Okies as descendants of hardy pioneer stock, a link to the country’s frontier past. New Deal administrators tended to claim that Okies, being an individualistic people accustomed to self-sufficiency, were reluctant to accept any form of relief. Sympathetic commentators used this depiction of migrants to justify the relief programs targeting this group: they assumed that those who resented relief were in fact the most deserving of assistance. In an October 1935 opinion column published in the *Appeal Democrat*, a Yuba City (California) newspaper supportive of the New Deal, Lou Eichler declared the Marysville camp a success because it was filled with hard-working, self-sufficient workers: “It was a camp of workers. There were no drones [...] There were no relief seekers in the camp during the summer. The mention of relief was, to most of them, an insult.”⁷⁸ In this

⁷⁷ Conkin, 4.

⁷⁸ Lou Eichler. “The Rambler,” *Appeal Democrat*. October 8, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

way, the stereotype of the Okie individualist could justify relief programs by assuring the public that the migrants would not become leeches on society.

While New Dealers praised these self-sufficient impulses, the stereotype of the Okies as individualists could also paint them as a backward group. As Walter Stein points out, many New Deal administrators feared the consequences of unbridled individualism. Rexford Tugwell, for instance, blamed the farming crisis of the 1930s on “rugged individualism.”⁷⁹ In this way, the migrants were both romanticized and blamed for their own desperate state.

The stereotype of the Okies as individualistic, combined with a belief that cooperation would define modern society, led many FSA officials to believe that migrants needed to be trained for a modern world. The camp program sought to correct these perceived shortcomings by replacing individualistic values with a culture of cooperation. In order to do this, camp managers attempted to create a community organized on cooperative principles.

In the simplest sense, camp managers hoped that this cooperative ethos would pervade the camps and restructure relationships among camp residents. In fact, managers often judged the success of the camp program based on the measure of cooperation between residents. For example, in a weekly report on the Marysville camp, Charles Eddy, the camp manager, described an incident in which a young male migrant who traveled to Thornton, California, for work found job openings for one hundred men at a cannery and immediately notified his fellow residents in Marysville. According to Eddy, “The above is a very good example of what this camp really means to these people. If it had not been for the cooperation and facilities of the camp the

⁷⁹ Walter Stein, "A New Deal Experiment with Guided Democracy: The FSA Migrant Camps in California," *Historical Papers* 5, no. 1 (1970): 133.

communication could not have been delivered in time.”⁸⁰ Eddy thus credits both the infrastructure of the camp and the cooperation that it had instilled among its residents. Without the residents’ cooperation, the camps would be a hollow structure; by binding the migrants together in a community, a cooperative ethos could be the first step in rehabilitating the migrants.

In order to promote these cooperative values, camp managers attempted to find ways to encourage this ethos of cooperation. Different camp managers experimented with a variety of ways to foster cooperation in the camps, from direct enforcement to more subtle encouragement.

On the enforcement side of the spectrum, camp managers often established rules and set up punishments and consequences in order to force residents to participate in a cooperative system. Fred Ross, who managed the camp at Arvin following Tom Collins’ departure, used his authority as camp manager to require residents to assist in cleaning and maintaining camp facilities. Ross assigned the migrants work by establishing a cleaning schedule in which each migrant worked for a few hours every week. In the summer of 1939, Ross wrote a series of articles in the camp newsletter exhorting the migrants to abide by these rules and fulfill these responsibilities. The articles reveal an increasingly frustrated tone as Ross struggled to enforce compliance:

Well, folks, I didn’t think it would ever come down to this. I sort of hoped that you could reason with people and show them that certain things just had to be done around [sic] Camp for the benefit of every one living in Camp, —and then everybody would go ahead and do these things sort of natural-like, that’s what I hoped [...] This is a Government Camp, as you know, and while we’re living on Government property, we’re subject to Government laws. Now, if we don’t want to live up to the laws respecting Government property, there’s one sure way of getting around them: just move off the property.⁸¹

Ross’ chastising of the migrants was more than just empty talk: Ross and other camp managers had real power at their discretion. When the migrant Hugh McNamee left the Arvin

⁸⁰ Charles Eddy, “Report for Week Ending March 21, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁸¹ Fred Ross, “As the Feller Sez,” *Tow-Sack Tattler*. August 24, 1939.

camp owing “100 hours on a Work Agreement and \$1.75 to the Camp Fund, which he refused to clear up,” Ross sent a letter to Lawrence Hewes, then the director of FSA Region IX in San Francisco.⁸² In the letter, which Ross printed in the camp newsletter as a warning to other campers, Ross requests that Hewes deny McNamee any more relief until he met these obligations.

Camp managers were the gatekeepers of government relief, and they could use this position to enforce cooperation among campers. In fact, some camp managers feared that these positions could become too authoritative. In a letter to R.W. Hollenberg, a Region IX administrator, William G. Wheeler, a camp manager, expressed concern that some camp managers were using their authority too recklessly. According to Wheeler, camp managers too frequently blacklisted campers from the FSA programs for offenses that did not require such an extreme measure. Wheeler specifically noted that managers blacklisted campers for a “lack of cooperation.”⁸³ For Wheeler, this represented a transgression of the migrants’ rights as citizens: “In many cases I believe such trouble is caused by the fact that the camp officials failed to recognize that the people they are dealing with are American citizens entitled to their full rights as such.”⁸⁴ Wheeler’s letter suggests an uneasiness among some of the managers to use their full authority to enforce cooperation. While blacklisting migrants and denying relief were tools at the managers’ disposal, many found these choices unsavory. Instead, they turned to more subtle methods.

Thomas Collins was one of the leading advocates of what he called the “Good Neighbor” approach. At the Marysville camp, in order to foster cooperation among the residents, Collins intervened in the camp’s social structure. Collins enlisted some of the “better men and women”

⁸² Fred Ross, “Untitled,” *Tow-Sack Tattler*. October 25, 1945.

⁸³ William G. Wheeler, “Letter to R.W. Hollenberg,” July 7, 1939. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 12. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁸⁴ William G. Wheeler, “Letter to R.W. Hollenberg,” July 7, 1939.

and then educated them in the general responsibilities and duties of camp residents, such as keeping the camp facilities clean.⁸⁵ He hoped that these campers could then become examples for the rest of the community, thus propagating a sense of cooperation throughout the entire camp. In a 1935 address, Collins described how this policy had worked in the case of the “Copia” family that had arrived at the Marysville camp. According to Collins, the Copia family was “a high type family, totally foreign to following the crops.”⁸⁶ Finding the mother unhappy and aloof, Collins enlisted her help to establish a camp nursery. Collins believed that the endeavor had been a success: “A little friendly counsel, the appeal of the idea of the ‘Good Neighbor,’ undammed the reservoir of good deeds and interest in her fellow women and enabled her to pass on something so well worthwhile to others downstream.”⁸⁷ For Collins, subtle encouragement, combined with an element of social engineering, could foster cooperation among the campers.

Although Collins pioneered the “Good Neighbor” approach at the Marysville camp, the policy quickly gained traction at the regional level. In a copy of his confidential instructions to camp managers, Irving Wood extolled the benefits of such a policy. In handwritten notes attached to these instructions, Wood wrote, “Through developing the spirit of “The Good Neighbor” a sense of civic pride and social responsibility can be engendered which will be reflected in the appearance, cleanliness, and heightened morale of the community.”⁸⁸ Growing out of Collins’ personal experiences and relationships with the migrants at the first camp, the “Good Neighbor” approach soon became a social policy of cooperation in the camp program.

⁸⁵ Thomas Collins, “The Human Side in the Operation of a Migrants Camp,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ Irving Wood, “Confidential: Instructions to Camp Managers,” August 1, 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Whether they subscribed to more direct or subtler methods of enforcing cooperation, most camp managers envisioned some larger purpose of educating the migrants in cooperative values. Cooperation could grease the wheels of camp operations: assigning a cleaning schedule for campers, for example, was a pragmatic choice that allowed the camps to function more easily. But camp managers also hoped that training migrants in cooperation would serve a larger social function, one that exceeded the camp boundaries. In the language of the FSA officials and camp managers, “cooperation” came to designate a specific kind of civic responsibility, one that had both political and economic aspects. Fred Ross’ conception of cooperation, for example, was consistently politically charged. Ross and other camp managers saw community organizing as an important part of their jobs. Later becoming a mentor to César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, Ross approached his responsibilities as camp manager with a keen awareness of the larger political situation. As camp manager, Ross wrote a weekly column, “As the Feller Sez,” for the Arvin camp’s weekly newspaper. In the column, Ross addressed the residents using deliberately colloquial language and encouraged them to band together to improve their situation. In the October 28, 1939 issue of the paper, Ross wrote, “As the feller sez, there’s one word ought to be heard a heap more around these camps than it is heard. Yep, all them Camp Conversation gems, like ‘lard’ an’ ‘Relief’ an’ ‘Commodities.’ That word is COOPERATION.”⁸⁹ For Ross, the only way for the migrants to improve their situation was to band together as a political unit. As camp manager, he saw the coordination of such cooperation as one of his foremost goals.

Thus, FSA officials sought to instill cooperative principles, such as democracy, through a combination of active enforcement and encouragement. These democratic and cooperative values were both integral parts of the administration’s motivating philosophy. While the

⁸⁹ Fred Ross, “As the Feller Sez,” *Tow-Sack Tattler*. October 28, 1939.

democratic element of the camp governed how residents interacted with the general camp structure, the cooperative ethos pertained more to the interpersonal relationships among the campers. To the architects of the camp program, both of these elements formed a coherent value set of civic responsibility: the democratic process was a necessary foundation for encouraging cooperation among the migrants.

These guiding values were essential ingredients in creating a camp community. Camp managers and administrators had faith in the power of the environment: by shaping the operation of the camps, they believed that they could instill the values of civic responsibility in individual residents. In this way, camp constitutions, committee meetings, cooperative stores, and the “Good Neighbor” policy were all parts of a larger vision; FSA officials attempted to fashion democratic individuals by first creating a democratic environment. In doing so, they believed they were pushing the migrants one step closer to their rehabilitation and eventual assimilation into modern California society.

CHAPTER 6

Religion in the Camps

Camp administrators saw much of their mission as introducing the Okies to the modern world. Managers such as Thomas Collins saw the Okies as a backward, folksy people who needed training before they could be assimilated into a cosmopolitan Californian culture. While much of the difference between Okies and “native” Californians was constructed and exaggerated, there were significant regional differences in background that distinguished the Okies—namely in the area of religion. The vast majority of the migrants who came to California were Protestant, but their denominational background set them apart from the older residents of the state. Religion played a major role in Californians’ stereotype of the Okies. FSA administrators, subscribing to contemporary stereotype of the migrants, saw it as their mission to rid the migrants of their evangelical tendencies, which they believed to be a hindrance to the Okies’ assimilation into California culture.

James Gregory’s book, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, offers one of the most comprehensive analyses of the social background of the Okies. Gregory shows that, while California offered a variety of churches, Okie migrants struggled to find churches that fit their needs. In the 1930s, Oklahoma and other southwestern states were heavily evangelical, and their denominations were part of the revivalist-fundamentalist tradition. According to the 1936 Census of Religious Bodies, 91 percent of the church members in Oklahoma identified as Protestants, of whom 35 percent were Baptists and 23 percent were Methodists.⁹⁰ The remaining individuals consisted of a mix of smaller evangelical denominations, primarily Adventists, Church of Christ, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians.

⁹⁰ Gregory, 192.

Upon their arrival in California, these migrants found it difficult to locate compatible religious institutions. Although a large number of Oklahomans identified as Baptist or Methodist, both of these denominations were fractured along geographic and ideological lines in the 1930s. For example, California Baptist churches were largely Northern Baptist, while Oklahoma's were Southern Baptist.⁹¹ Similarly, the Methodist church was split along Northern and Southern lines. Although there were some Southern Methodist churches in California during the 1930s, the church was attempting to merge these two sects. As a result, migrants had difficulty locating churches with which they were familiar. However, the north/south division was more than just geographic: over time, these different sects had developed different traditions. While Californian churches were generally more socially and religiously liberal, many migrants were accustomed to evangelical enthusiasm and revivalism. Migrants not only had difficulty relating to the customs of the new churches, but they also often felt unwelcome in the more mainstream Protestant churches. Class and social divisions alienated the Okies from these institutions.

Alienation from more mainstream churches drove many migrants to find other religious options. In California in the 1930s, Holiness and Pentecostal sects stood ready to absorb some of this new influx. Less than five percent of church members in Oklahoma had belonged to these sects. In California, however, organizations such as the Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, and Pentecostal Holiness became increasingly attractive options for migrants uncomfortable with California's major denominations. Thus, not only did migrants come from different religious backgrounds than did many Californians but, upon arriving in California, they tended to increase their isolation by joining more unorthodox groups. These Pentecostal and Holiness groups were

⁹¹ Gregory, 196.

more emotional and enthusiastic than the southern evangelical churches, whose services often included crying and shouting, as well as speaking in tongues.

Differences in religious background shaped Californians' perception of the "otherness" of the Okies. Many Californians saw the Okie migration to the state as a clash between the old and the new. To native Californians, the state represented the modern, the liberal, and the cosmopolitan, and the migrant population seemed like relics of an older time, whose enthusiastic, emotional approach to religion was the most visible sign of their supposed inability to enter modern society. Most Californians did not realize that this stereotype of the migrants was based on fairly recent developments. In their narrative of the old and the new, they associated the Okies with unorthodox, emotional forms of religion and positioned them as an irrational, even childish counterpart to a more sophisticated, secularized society.⁹² Californians failed to realize that what they saw as an inherent characteristic of the migrants was in fact a more recent change in religious habits. For many Californians, the migrants' association with these denominations only underscored their alienation from modern society, which they perceived in mostly secular terms.

FSA regional administrators appear to have subscribed to these stereotypes, and many expressed concern over migrants' religious affiliations, believing that they only hindered them from fully participating in modern California society. For example, the camp manager of the Visalia camp in February 1940, Robert Hardie, believed that these religious practices were an inherent characteristic of the Okies: "The migrants, being largely rural southwesterners, are historically addicted to 'shouting' religion. Whatever value this sort of worship may have as an outlet for starved emotions or as a compensatory mechanism for the exploited, it is productive of fanaticisms

⁹² Gregory, 210.

and irrationalities which can seriously disturb the general social equilibrium.”⁹³ For camp managers such as Hardie, the issue of religion was central to the civic mission of the Camps: they regarded the migrants’ unorthodox beliefs as flaws that the camps needed to actively combat.

Thomas Collins was particularly preoccupied with this problem, and his weekly reports to the Region IX headquarters set the tone for how camp managers dealt with religion in the camps. During his time at the Arvin camp, Collins wrote, “Care is essential to prevent interfering with the individual or group privilege of freedom of thought and worship. There is probably no more delicate situation to handle than the religious problem.”⁹⁴ Collins’ dilemma highlights one of the central problems facing the camp administrators: as representatives of the federal government, they were entrusted with ensuring Constitutional rights such as the freedom of religion. At the same time, however, they sought to replace what they saw as the migrants’ irrational beliefs with more secular values.

In the eyes of many New Deal administrators, these religious beliefs posed a very real threat. Administrators particularly feared the practice of “faith healing,” where migrants used prayer and religious songs to aid the sick in their recovery. At his post in Arvin, Collins

⁹³ Beecher, John. “The Migratory Labor Problem in California: Report of John Beecher, Supervisor, Florida Migratory Labor Camps,” Feb. 1940. Ralph W. Hollenberg Collection of Materials Relating to the Farm Security Administration, Region IX, 1924-1941. Carton 4. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. The interview with the Visalia camp manager in February 1940 does not specifically mention his name, but the evidence indicating that Hardie was being interviewed is convincing. For example, a list of camp managers shows that Hardie was camp manager in November 1939, four months before the interview. Furthermore, the interviewee’s opinions align with those expressed by Hardie during a conference of camp managers in May 1940. Hence, although it is possible that Hardie had switched camps between November 1939 and February 1940, it seems exceedingly likely that Hardie was the camp manager interviewed. “Summary of Migratory Labor Conference May 6-8, 1940.” and “Migratory Labor Camps and Labor Homes, Managers and Addresses. 10-23-1939.” Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 1, 11. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁹⁴ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending January 25, 1936,” 5. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

consistently attempted to root out this practice, and his reports to the regional office paint an almost absurd picture of his thwarted attempts. In one instance, upon hearing the “droll” singing that suggested a faith healing, Collins and other staff members attempted to locate the source:

Yet when we reached the tent we would find no one abed although many would be found sitting on the bed. It seems a lookout is on the job to warn of the approach of anyone be it man or devil, and since they seldom take off their clothing when they go to bed, the management has consistently failed to locate the person or persons ill. On a still night, this class of service sounds very much like a dog on a distant hill baying a mournful ritual at the full moon.⁹⁵

Collins’ report posits a clash between the migrants and the camp managers: New Deal administrators not only were uncomfortable with the migrants’ religious practices, but they also perceived them as threats and sought to suppress them. On one hand, these fears were based in very practical concerns: the managers worried that migrants who relied on faith healings would forgo visits to the physician or nurse (which the camp provided). Collins, for example, reported it as a success when a camper approached him and informed him that he planned to use both prayer and the camp physician from that point on.⁹⁶ On the other hand, these reports suggest a deeper concern about migrants’ ability to adapt to a modern society.

Thwarted in their attempts to locate the faith healings at night, Collins and his fellow staff members found other ways to combat the migrants’ religious practices. For example, during a measles outbreak at the Arvin camp in May 1936, Collins was particularly concerned about the practice of faith healing. Faced with female residents who congregated in the tents of the sick, Collins sought to divert their attention rather than simply ban the practice. Hoping to provide the residents with an alternative activity, he staked out garden plots for the women. According to

⁹⁵ *Id.*

⁹⁶ *Id.*

Collins, the plan was successful: “That kept them occupied and interested. Also, it made an outlet for their pent up feelings and emotions.”⁹⁷

To many camp managers, faith healings represented the most extreme religious practice. However, the managers were also concerned with more everyday religious expression, such as church services. Robert Hardie, for instance, was reluctant to allow any church services: “While the management does not wish to banish God from the camp, I believe that it would be heartily glad if it could keep out the Churches, letting the people attend the ones of their choice in town.”⁹⁸ Although some migrant residents did attend churches outside the camps, most camps offered some sort of religious service at least weekly. These services usually took place at the camp community center and involved a visiting preacher. At each camp, camp managers had to decide what church services to allow. Although all camp managers seem to have allowed some kind of service, they drew a sharp distinction between regular services and visiting evangelicals.

Preachers were regular visitors to the camps, and many camp managers feared that these preachers posed a challenge to their authority. The FSA had no official policy on how camp managers should handle these visitors, so individual managers each adopted their own approaches. At Marysville, for example, camp manager Charles Eddy imposed an outright ban on this category of visitors in 1936. While he allowed religious services, he had no patience for traveling evangelists who included the Marysville camp on a circuit of stops. In a matter-of-fact statement in one of his reports, Eddy described how he turned away a group of three women who requested

⁹⁷ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending May 9, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

⁹⁸ Beecher, John. “The Migratory Labor Problem in California: Report of John Beecher, Supervisor, Florida Migratory Labor Camps,” Feb. 1940.

entrance to the camp: “They are traveling evangelists, and requested permission to camp and hold open air revival meetings in the grove. Their request was denied.”⁹⁹

While Eddy issued an authoritarian ban on these visits, Robert Hardie, who tended to be one of the more democratic camp managers, took a different approach. In an interview, Hardie described how he dealt with a Jehovah’s Witness who “want[ed] to give the camp a good working over”¹⁰⁰:

“One of the saints comes to me and requests permission. I could tell him no and get rid of him in ten seconds, but that might make a martyr out of the guy and he could sneak the word into camp that I was a dictator or an agent of Antichrist who was keeping the truth from the people. So I make a date for the guy with the Council. He gets off to a pretty good start but they ask him a bunch of questions and he gets wild and begins sounding off about the government and the churches and how their minds are totally misled [...] They finally see through the racket and unanimously tell him they don’t allow peddlers in their camp. It takes an hour instead of ten seconds to say no, but it’s the kind of no that stays said.”¹⁰¹

Hardie clearly saw the Jehovah’s Witness as a threat: he worried that the visitor could, with a rumor, undermine his authority as manager. Although he hoped to suppress the visitor’s religious teachings, he believed that the best way to do this was to allow the camp council to vote on the issue. Hardie’s use of the camp’s democratic structure was politically calculated. When the interviewer, John Beecher, asked what Hardie would do if the campers had voted to allow the Jehovah’s Witness to preach, Hardie replied that he would have allowed it but hoped that the migrants would eventually learn their mistake: “We can’t force these people to be any more intelligent than they really are.”¹⁰² Hardie’s democratic approach, then, was founded not on a faith in the migrants’ decision-

⁹⁹ Charles Eddy, “Report for Week Ending April 18, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹⁰⁰ John Beecher. “The Migratory Labor Problem in California: Report of John Beecher, Supervisor, Florida Migratory Labor Camps,” Feb. 1940.

¹⁰¹ Beecher, 4-5.

¹⁰² Beecher, 5.

making abilities but, rather, on practical considerations: he believed that the council's rejection of the visiting preacher would work better than if he were to reject the preacher himself.

Thomas Collins used a similar approach when he managed the FSA facility at Arvin. Describing an incident with a visiting preacher, Collins wrote, "He was amazed to learn that they [the migrants] have governed themselves—and that he would have to have their approval to hold 'services' at camp."¹⁰³ However, Collins combined this faith in the democratic system with concern about the vulnerability of migrants. Collins portrayed the visiting preachers as predators, referring to them as "birds of prey (rather than pray)."¹⁰⁴ He worried that the migrants' poverty made them more vulnerable to visiting preachers. For Collins, the susceptibility of the migrants to these forms of evangelical religion was closely linked to the migrants' status. The more desperate the migrants' situation, the more likely they were to turn to the visiting preachers: "When we first opened the camp the campers were in semi-destitute circumstances and looked for these roving evangelists. They give them wide berth now and prefer the village churches."¹⁰⁵ According to Collins, as campers moved away from these "roving evangelists," they increasingly turned to the local churches, which were generally more "mainstream." This shift, then, allowed the migrants to become more integrated into their surrounding communities, an important step for their ultimate assimilation. While Hardie described the practical benefits of allowing the migrants themselves to reject the visiting preachers, for Collins, this democratic approach was philosophical as well as practical: Collins suggests that the campers' rejection of the visiting evangelists was a symbol of their rehabilitation.

¹⁰³ Thomas Collins, "Report for Week Ending June 27, 1936," 6. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *Id.*

While camp managers discouraged visiting preachers, they generally allowed for some form of regular church service. Although some migrants did visit the local churches, most camps offered some sort of religious services within the camps themselves. Unlike Collins' "roving evangelists," who only visited sporadically, local church figures would preach on a weekly basis. Decisions on how to regulate these services were left to the camp managers. Although the managers' discussions about faith healings and traveling evangelists sometimes render the migrants a homogenous block, vulnerable to the irrationalities of religion, discussions over regular church services reveal the diversity of religion within the camps. Almost all the migrants were Protestant, and yet the divisions between their different denominations could be fierce. Collins, for instance, claimed that two religious groups, the "Free Methodists" and the "Full Gospelites" were in constant tension during the early days of the Arvin camp. According to Collins, one of the reasons why the camp was initially slow to fill with migrants was the division between these groups:

It seems the 'Full Gospel' followers (Holy Rollers) had the impression the camp would be overrun with 'Full Gospelites.' The 'Free Methodists' were under the impression the camp would be overrun with 'Full Gospelites.' There is some breach between the two. Both factions wanted to know if it would be possible to be off to one section of one of the sanitary units away from the other.¹⁰⁶

At the Arvin camp, then, this religious difference warranted Collins' concern: religious difference had divided the campers to the point that they requested segregated housing facilities. Although this seems to be an extreme instance of religious division, camp managers clearly worried about how dissension could threaten the harmony of the camps. When they approached the question of allowing regular church services, they knew they were entering a controversial minefield.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Collins, "Report for Week Ending December 28, 1936," BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Camp space, too, could be a subject of religious-based contention. Space was limited, and the camp community building was usually the only suitable place to hold a church service. As such, debates over which denomination would have the privilege of Sunday service could be heated, and camp managers had to find ways to negotiate these differences. As in the situations with traveling evangelists, most of these decisions were left to the discretion of the camp managers.

As the first camp manager, Thomas Collins was the first to face the issue of church services, and his early days at the Marysville camp reveal how he struggled to find a compromise between the different religious groups. A camper first raised the question of church services in August 1935, when he approached Collins and requested permission to use the camp space to hold church services. The issue seems to have undergone a process of formal petition, with Collins reporting that “two thirds of [the] camp population turned out and joined in the signing. They requested approval for Sunday eve services. Granted.”¹⁰⁷ Faced with popular pressure from the migrants, then, Collins allowed church services. However, just two weeks later, Collins was overwhelmed by the demand for services at the camp: “If you have wondered where all the ‘old time religion’ enthusiasts have been all these years you might be relieved to know they are at Yuba City and Marysville. If we permitted them all to come to camp we would have services three times a day every day in the week.”¹⁰⁸ By this point, Collins had begun to see the religious diversity of the migrants as a liability: because they fractured into so many different sects, the sheer variety of different religious groups could overwhelm the camp with their church services. In order to address this situation, Collins decided to put the issue up for a vote: “It was left to the

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending August 31, 1935,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending September 7, 1935,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

campers to decide which denomination they preferred. Pentecostals were chosen. Probably because they have a full orchestra with two drums plus the added attraction of a ‘musical saw.’”¹⁰⁹ Although Collins questioned the reasoning behind the migrants’ choice, he respected the democratic process and allowed them to choose their denomination. He also hoped to simplify the religious situation within the camp by consolidating church services under a single denomination.

By 1937, however, Collins had replaced the Pentecostal church at Marysville with a nondenominational one.¹¹⁰ Available sources offer little explanation for this shift, but, by this point, Collins had become more disillusioned by the migrants’ evangelical religion, especially during his time at Arvin. The nondenominational church began as an experiment. In 1937, the editor of *The Migrant Weekly*, the Marysville camp newsletter, wrote, “The camp non-denominational church is now growing beyond its initial stage as an experiment.”¹¹¹ Although it is unclear how many campers ever attended these services, many residents considered the program a success.

In order to maintain the nonsectarian nature of the services, Collins relied on outside associations. For example, when the Marysville camp founded its non-denominational church under Collins’ management, the Minister’s Association of Yuba, Sutter, and South Butte counties ran church services, including the Sunday school.¹¹² By delegating responsibility for church services to an organization that included preachers of several denominations, Collins ensured that a

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

¹¹⁰ The sources indicate that Collins returned to the Marysville camp after leaving to open the Arvin camp in 1936. Collins seems to have returned sometime in 1937 and remained until Milan Dempster replaced him in 1938.

¹¹¹ “Rev. Fisher Preaches Sunday,” *The Migrant Weekly*. August 20, 1937. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

¹¹² “Sunday School Meets in New Nursery Room if Weather Cold,” *The Migrant Weekly*. October 2, 1937. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

variety of denominations were represented. It is also likely that Collins hoped that partnering with a local minister's association would enhance the influence of the mainstream denominations, which tended to be more heavily represented in such interfaith organizations. A scan of the camp newsletters reveals visits by Presbyterian and Episcopalian ministers and reverends during 1937, but no mention is made of the smaller, more evangelical sects that so concerned Collins.¹¹³ Although Collins never explicitly stated the reasons for the move from the Pentecostal to the nondenominational church, the shift ultimately favored the mainstream denominations.

By 1940, when Robert Hardie was manager at the Visalia camp, the trend of nondenominational camp churches had become the norm. Like Collins, Hardie envisioned the nondenominational church as a sort of compromise between the different religious groups. In an interview, he stated, "At Visalia the present working compromise is to put the preachers on a panel basis. On successive Sundays each denomination represented in the Pastor's Union takes over the community building."¹¹⁴ It is not clear that the denominations of the Pastor's Union aligned with the migrants' denominations, and this distinction does not seem to have concerned Hardie. It is likely that, as at Marysville, the nondenominational church services emphasized mainstream churches over the evangelical sects. In this way, the nondenominational church acted as a stabilizing institution in the camps. The rotating panel of preachers provided a way for camp managers to navigate the migrants' religious preferences without becoming embroiled in controversy.

In addition to regulating which services were allowed in the camps, camp managers sometimes intervened in the structure of church services. For example, camp managers sometimes banned preachers from taking up collections during their services. In doing so, they saw themselves

¹¹³ "The Revernd [*sic*] Mr. Freeland will preach this Sunday," *The Migrant Weekly*. June 11, 1937. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

¹¹⁴ Beecher, 11.

as protecting migrants from predatory religious sects. At the Marysville camp, for instance, Collins prevented Pentecostals from taking up collections, although he did not ban voluntary contributions.¹¹⁵

Regulating acceptable church services was one way by which camp managers could grapple with the denominational differences that divided the campers. However, these religious differences posed a number of other issues for the Camps: many camp controversies originated from differences in religious intensity as well as differences in denomination. These differences could erupt into fights over moral issues, and camp managers often became involved in negotiating such disputes.

While these differences presented challenges for camp managers, they also presented opportunities for them to wield their own influence. Camp managers were especially concerned about the ability of the most fervently religious—dubbed the “ultrareligious”¹¹⁶ by Collins—to assimilate into camp life and into the broader social atmosphere of California. These migrants found themselves at odds with many of the programs offered at the camps, and many everyday aspects of camp operations were a source of tension between them and the rest of the campers, as well as the camp staff. One of the major subjects for debate, for example, was the issue of camp-sponsored dances. Migratory camps often held dances as social events to foster a sense of

¹¹⁵ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending September 7, 1935,” 6. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

In his book, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, Walter Stein uses this camp report as evidence that Collins was “attempting to dissuade Pentecostal preachers from visiting the installation by refusing to permit them to take up collections.” However, a reading of the report reveals that Collins had already allowed the Pentecostals to hold services at the camps. While Stein considers this to be an example of the manager’s tension with visiting evangelists, it actually concerns the regulation of regular, weekly services. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, 169.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending February 22, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

community among the campers. A minority of the residents opposed these dances for moral and religious reasons, and this difference in opinion seems to have initiated a divide among some campers. For example, Collins related the following anecdote from Arvin:

Last Sunday the campers selected a ‘Full Gospelite’ preacher for their Sunday school. He represents a sect opposed to dancing. Sunday school is held on the social center platform. He turned out to be a ‘good sport’ and chose from his selection a chapter from Isaaih [*sic*] in which dancing is approved. We watched the faces of two or three women opposed to dancing. As the preacher finished, a woman camper who approves dancing stuck her tongue out at a woman opposed to dancing.¹¹⁷

The question of whether the camps should host dances, then, was a lightning rod for moral debate. Migrants who expressed disapproval of dancing not only refrained from attending the dances but also opposed the very notion that the camps should host such dances. Given this context, by choosing to host dances, camp managers were engaging with a moral debate about the nature of the camps and siding and promoting a specific vision of a secular social life.

Camp managers were well aware of the religious tensions: by siding with the less religious side of the moral debates, they ultimately hoped to reduce the fervor of the “ultrareligious.” For example, Collins described how some campers avoided the stage and platform because of religious reasons:

Many of the campers are ultrareligious, so much so that they have given the stage and the platform a wide berth. They even keep a watchful eye out to prevent their children WALKING on the platform. We are gradually breaking this condition [...] We believe we shall win a victory this week for we have two of the mothers who so strongly object to the platform (account of the dancing) coaching 12 girls in a short playlet which we shall produce very shortly [...] A few moment [*sic*] ago one of the mothers told me they were coaching the kids to sing three songs on the day we present our first community play. That interests us immensely—SONGS—and not HYMNS.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending March 14, 1936,” 16. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Collins, “Report for Week Ending February 22, 1936,” BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Collins, then, saw it as his duty to discourage the religious intensity of the migrants, and he considered it a “victory” when migrants chose secular over religious activities. For Collins, this issue was closely linked to involvement in the camp. He encouraged residents to become involved in camp activities, and he perceived the migrants’ religion as an obstacle to this involvement. Thus, even seemingly innocuous decisions about hosting a dance or a play at the camp could be morally charged. By promoting secular activities, camp managers sought to reduce the influence of religion. In doing so, they often exploited the religious differences that divided the campers.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: “Outposts of an Advancing People”

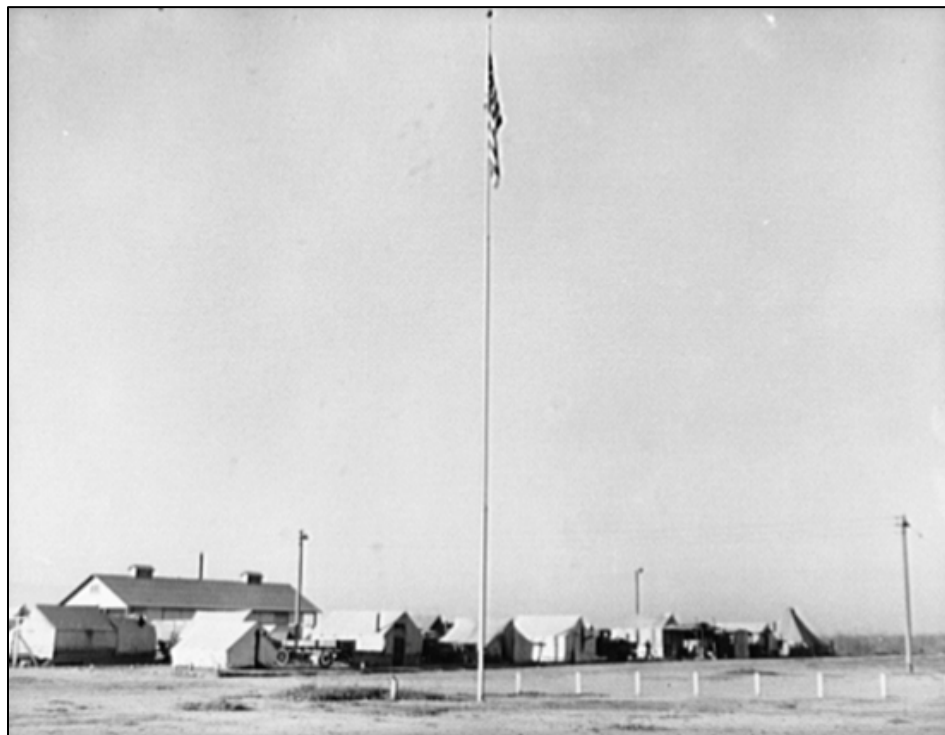


Figure 6

View of the FSA camp in Kern County, California (1936)¹¹⁹

By 1941, the FSA was operating eighteen camps throughout California.¹²⁰ (See Appendix A.) In 1942, however, the camps underwent a major shift with the escalation of the war effort.¹²¹ In the nationwide spirit of mobilizing food production, the camps were renamed Farm Labor Supply Centers, and their focus shifted markedly. Rather than rehabilitating migrants, the FSA

¹¹⁹ Dorothea Lange, “General view of Kern migrant camp, California,” FSA 8b38514. Nov. 1936. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8b38514>

¹²⁰ Albert Croutch, *Housing Migratory Agricultural Workers in California, 1913-1948* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), 54.

¹²¹ Croutch, 54.

sought to organize agricultural labor to maximize efficiency. By 1943, the FSA was transferred to the War Food Administration (WFA), more explicitly linking its goals to the war effort.¹²² In 1946, the Farmers Home Administration Act abolished the FSA and ended the migratory labor camp program.

The war effort transformed the lives of the migrants and acted as a catalyst for their assimilation into California society. The wartime economy opened up jobs in California, and most migrants shed their transient lifestyles and obtained blue-collar jobs, becoming part of a growing American working class.¹²³ As they settled into permanent homes, they found themselves increasingly accepted into California society.¹²⁴ In 1942, the *bracero* program began to import Mexican agricultural workers to fill some of the agricultural jobs left open by the upwardly mobile Okies.¹²⁵

FSA administrators had hoped for the migrants' rehabilitation, but the war effort shifted the nature of this discussion of citizenship. The Okies' assimilation did not occur the way that many FSA officials had imagined. In the early days of the RA/FSA, many administrators envisioned the migrants establishing themselves on family farms. However, the jobs that the war created were mostly in the industrial sectors. Okies assimilated into California culture, but as blue-collar workers rather than romanticized, independent farmers.

Camp administrators had not predicted the momentous changes that the war would bring, but they were able to use the camp program to meet the challenges of the new era. Camp

¹²² Veronica Martinez-Matsuda, "Making the Modern Migrant: Work, Community, and Struggle in the Federal Migratory Labor Camp Program, 1935-1947" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2009).

¹²³ Gregory, 246.

¹²⁴ Stein, 280.

¹²⁵ Stein, 281.

managers built on the infrastructure of democracy and cooperation they had established and used it to rally behind the war effort. Talk of cooperation, for example, transformed into a larger sense of patriotic unity. Camp managers who had extolled the benefits of cooperation now directed that cooperation to a larger, national good. The camp council of the Woodville Camp, for example, voted to establish a community garden to produce food for the war effort.¹²⁶ The camp manager, David Kinkead, backed the effort, claiming that the migrants were well positioned to aid the national effort: “We have 60 to 70 acres of good farm land. We have two irrigation wells. We have a tractor to work the ground. We have about 1200 people here who can do the work in their spare time [...] Let’s do our part toward growing the food that will win the war and write the peace.”¹²⁷ Through gardens, Kinkead hoped to harness the abilities of the migrants and direct them toward a nationwide project. Similarly, at the Arvin camp, the manager, Marshall Huffaker, maintained that camp gardens offered a perfect opportunity for migrants who wanted to help the patriotic cause: “Most of us are farm workers so our best attack is to help supply food for ourselves and every man and woman for which production is based. Our gardens, the best in the country, will be our way of saying—‘To hell with the Axis, we will ‘whoop’ them.’”¹²⁸ The war effort thus opened new opportunities for the migrants to define their citizenship. By participating in a national, patriotic effort, Okies were able to redefine their social and economic roles. In the face of a labor and production shortage, migrants evolved from a burden to a boon for the California economy.

¹²⁶ David Kinkead, “Untitled,” *Woodville Community News*. January 10, 1942. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

¹²⁷ *Id.*

¹²⁸ Marshall Huffaker, “Untitled,” *The Weedpatch Cultivator*. February 5, 1942. Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

Historians such as James Gregory have studied how the Okies' subculture became woven into the culture of California. According to Gregory, the group brought a mix of lower-middle-class conservatism, evangelical religion, and country music to their new state, and these trends remained part of California for decades afterward.¹²⁹ Although they retained aspects of this subculture, as they moved out of farm labor work, the migrants lost some of their distinctiveness as a group. As Okies assimilated into California culture, the rehabilitation program of the earlier migratory camps grew obsolete.

FSA officials had always intended the camps to be temporary solutions rather than long-term fixtures. In February 1940, John Beecher, who had recently graduated from an FSA training program, visited the Visalia camp before heading to Florida to serve as a camp manager at an FSA camp there. Deeply impressed by the work and inspired by the program's goal of rehabilitation, Beecher wrote that the camps were indicative of the Okies' progress in California.

Such a migratory labor camp as Visalia does not pretend to be a finished community. It is only a way-station. It is a great improvement over the ditchbank. It is better than the tent platforms which constituted the first FSA camps. But one-room tin cabins are assuredly not permanently satisfactory abiding places for American families. Should the process of raising the living and general social standards of the migrants level off at this point, the camps might easily become stagnant centers of repression and discontent rather than the *outposts of an advancing people* which they so deeply impressed this visitor as being.¹³⁰

This optimism permeated the entire camp program. At the national level, the program was the product of New Deal reformers hoping to resolve the fundamental inequalities of California's agricultural system. At the regional level, the camps attracted a wide variety of young, idealistic liberals concerned about the plight of the migrants. At a time when many

¹²⁹ Gregory, 247. For more on Okie subculture, see La Chapelle, Peter. *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

¹³⁰ John Beecher, "The Migratory Labor Problem in California," February 1940. pg. 18-19. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

Californians saw the new migrants as a burden, FSA officials saw them as future California citizens.

Initial plans for the camp program had envisioned a much broader, wide-ranging scheme than what ultimately developed; the eighteen camps seem paltry in comparison to the four hundred that some planners initially envisioned.¹³¹ Their numbers, however, belie their extraordinary political and symbolic significance. Though the camps may not have been as numerous as initially hoped, as they evolved, they took on a much wider range of responsibilities. While other charities and government programs sought to alleviate the migrants' destitution, the FSA camp program was unique in that it fully envisioned these migrants as California citizens and sought to establish them as such. As a result, the camps represent a key intervention by the federal government. In a 1937 letter to President Roosevelt, Congressman Jerry Voorhis wrote, "Californians must give up their old idea of looking upon poor people who migrate to the State as 'undesirable.' [...] The overwhelming majority [of the migrants] will and probably must remain in the State and make it their home."¹³² Voorhis was prescient. The camp program constituted a brief interlude between the Okies' arrival in California and their ultimate absorption during World War II. By defining what it meant to be a California citizen, the program established a framework for the migrants' assimilation. Though flawed, the camps were optimistic, hopeful experiments in the construction of a new California citizenry.

¹³¹ "Housing for the Migrant Worker," *The Architect and Engineer*. December 1935. BANC MSS 77/111c. Box 1. Irving Wood Papers. Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

¹³² Jerry Voorhis, "Letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt," August 22, 1937. pg. 4. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 11. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

APPENDIX A

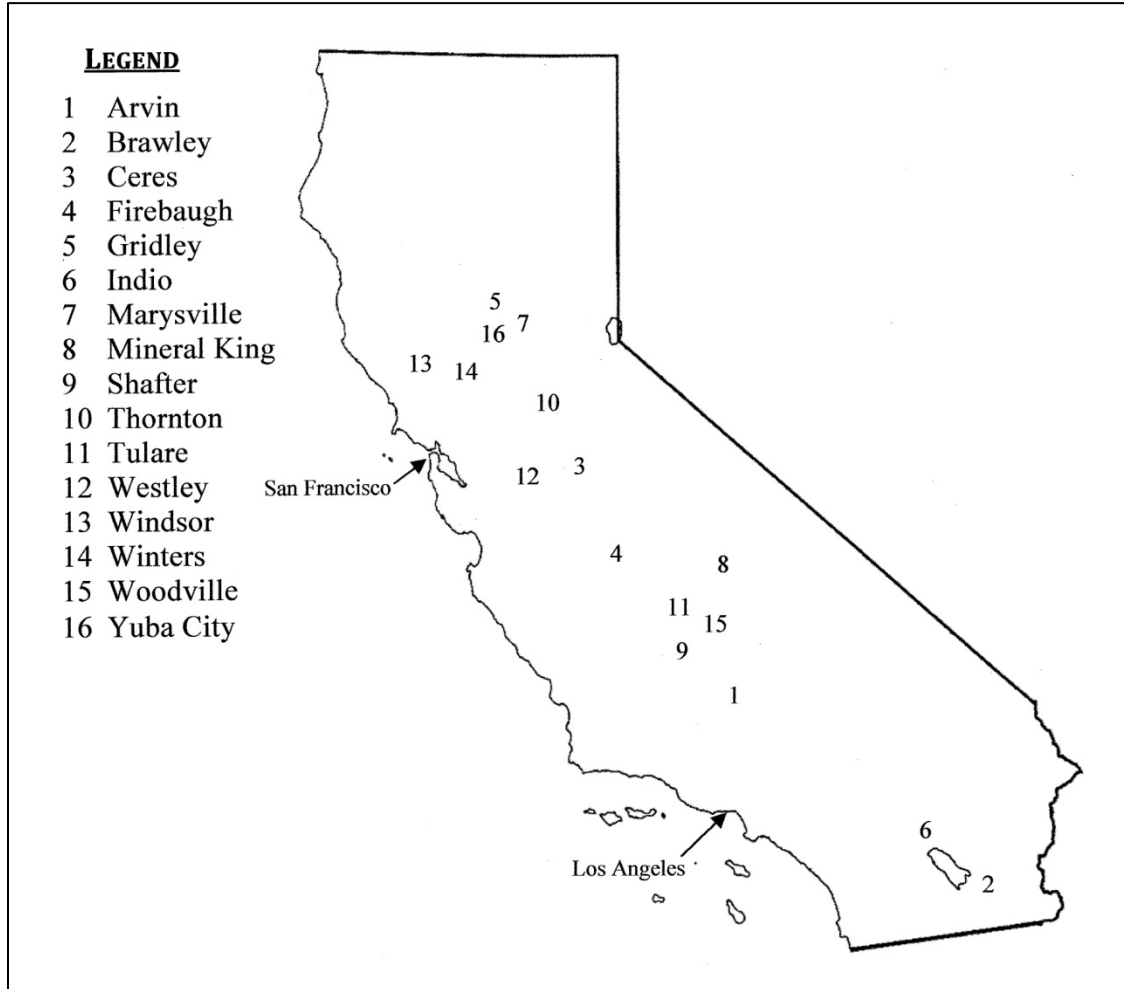
Data on Migratory Labor Camps in California

The number of migratory labor camps that were built and operated by the FSA in California is subject to debate. Primary FSA sources show widely varying numbers of camps, while secondary sources generally report the number to be between thirteen and eighteen. This discrepancy can be attributed to a number of factors, including whether mobile camps and camps under construction are counted. Table 1 presents the FSA camps that were *in operation* in 1941. The locations of the camps are then shown in Figure 7.

Table 1
Data on Operational FSA Labor Camps in California (1941)¹³³

| Location (Town and County) | Number of Homes | Land Area (acres) | Camp Manager ¹³⁴ |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Arvin (Kern) | 271 | 103 | Fred Ross |
| Brawley (Imperial) | 75 | 39 | John Brunton |
| Ceres (Stanislaus) | 50 | 60 | — |
| Firebaugh (Fresno) | 345 | 384 | Francis T. McSherry |
| Gridley (Butte) | 221 | 151 | Raymond Bentley |
| Indio (Riverside) | 225 | 160 | Guy Griset |
| Marysville (Yuba) | 185 | 53 | — |
| Mineral King (Tulare) | 18 | 529 | — |
| Shafter (Kern) | 283 | 77 | John Spencer |
| Thornton (San Joaquin) | 135 | 348 | Milen C. Dempster |
| Tulare (Tulare) | 448 | 76 | Michael P. Bruick |
| Westley (Stanislaus) | 254 | 101 | Marshall E. Huffaker |
| Windsor (Sonoma) | 131 | 66 | — |
| Winters (Yolo) | 196 | 107 | Tom Collins |
| Woodville (Tulare) | 281 | 160 | David Kinkead |
| Yuba City (Sutter) | 352 | 271 | Frank Iusi |
| Total | 3,470 | 2,685 | |

Figure 7
Locations of Operational FSA
Labor Camps in California (1941)



¹³³ The information used to construct this table was derived from the following sources: Crutch, Albert. *Housing Migratory Agricultural Workers in California, 1913-1948*. San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975; "Farm Workers Camp and Labor Homes: District Supervisors, Managers, and Addresses." March 20, 1941. Correspondence Concerning Migratory Labor Camps, Compiled 1935-1943. Record Group 96. PI-118 14. Box 3. National Archives, College Park, Maryland; Woodville Community News 1941-1942. Doe Library, UC Berkeley. The table does not include mobile camps or camps that were not in operation in 1941.

¹³⁴ Camp managers often transferred to different camps during their careers with the FSA. This column lists camp managers as of March 20, 1941.

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