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MYTHIC FIELDS OF PLENTY  
The Plight of Depression-Era Oklahoma  
Migrants in Arizona

by  
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THE DEPRESSION DECADE witnessed the westward migration of thousands of impoverished farm families from Oklahoma's cotton belt. Pushed off the land by a combination of environmental forces and changes in the agricultural economy, and drawn by mythic fields of plenty, tenant farmers pulled up stakes and headed for Arizona and California. Forming a fragmentary procession of jalopies, they trekked along Highway 66 across half a continent, their rattletraps laden with boxes of clothing, mattresses, tarpaulins, washtubs, stoves, a favorite rocking chair. In an epic migration, Oklahomans abandoned America's last farming frontier, a frontier that had failed them, and made their way across the desert to a land with promise.<sup>1</sup>

These migrants have come to symbolize the Great Depression in the national imagination, in part because of John Steinbeck's portrayal of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>2</sup> Like most of his contemporaries, Steinbeck assumed that the flow of migrants was destined for California, since the course of events ultimately deposited them there. Moreover, he accused the Associated Farmers of California of enticing uprooted farmers westward with an inflated demand for agricultural labor. *The Grapes of Wrath* helped stimulate two congressional investigations, one exploring the causes of the migration, the

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other exposing the exploitation of agricultural workers. But, the Senate's Civil Liberties Committee, which subpoenaed the files of the Associated Farmers of California, found little evidence to prove that agricultural businesses in California conspired to lure migrant workers from the depressed "drought states."<sup>3</sup> Enticing cheap labor westward was the province of Arizona's cotton industry.

The 1937-38 harvest stands out in the history of the cotton industry in Arizona. Since 1933, the Farm Labor Service, an agency funded by the ginners and growers of the Salt River and Casa Grande valleys, had recruited cotton pickers from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Each year as the cotton harvest ended, growers prodded the migrants across the border into California to follow the ripening crops. But 1938 was different. When floods in California's Central Valley prevented migrants from moving out of Arizona at the end of the harvest, the pernicious effects of the labor surplus, low wages, and substandard housing became apparent.

A boom in cotton production in 1937 precipitated this labor disaster. The previous year, the United States Supreme Court had declared the Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional, suspending mandatory production restrictions. Planters in every leading cotton state expanded their acreage, producing the largest crop in the nation's history. In Arizona, growers in the Salt River and Casa Grande valleys set new records, enlarging the short-staple cotton fields by nearly 65 percent to almost 280,000 acres.<sup>4</sup> The cotton industry thereby set the stage for the coming crisis in the cotton districts.

Growers feared that the demand for labor in Southern cotton fields would retard the migration of harvest workers to Arizona, creating an acute labor shortage at the peak of the season. Immigration restrictions prevented them from simply transporting trainloads of laborers from Mexico, as they had in the 1920s. So as the harvest drew near, Arthur Earl Taber of the Farm Labor Service launched his most ambitious recruiting campaign, aimed at the South Central states. He estimated that as many as 20,000 out-of-state cotton pickers would be needed to augment the local labor force.<sup>5</sup>

Taber made an extraordinary effort to spread word of the



Signs direct laborers to farms in the vicinity of Eloy, November 1940. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.

# Cotton Pickers

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## 5000 Families Wanted 240,000 Acres Cotton

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IN THE BIG COTTON DISTRICTS—NEAR

PHOENIX	SCOTTSDALE
BUCKEYE	GLENDALE
LITCHFIELD	PEORIA
AVONDALE	MARINETTE
GRIGGS	WADDELL
LAVEEN	QUEEN CREEK
TEMPE	COOLIDGE
MESA	CASA GRANDE
CHANDLER	FLORENCE
GILBERT	ELOY

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## Big Crop Heavy Picking

CABINS OR TENTS FREE—GOOD CAMPS  
SEVERAL MONTHS' WORK — WARM DRY WINTERS

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APPLY AT ANY GIN—OR AT  
**28 West Jefferson Street**  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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## Farm Labor Service

CO-OPERATING WITH  
UNITED STATES FARM PLACEMENT SERVICE

*The Farm Labor Service distributed handbills such as these in the southwestern part of Oklahoma's cotton belt and at Arizona's ports of entry.*

demand for labor and to direct the westward stream of unemployed workers toward the Salt River and Casa Grande valleys. At the beginning of the season, he traveled to Oklahoma, Texas, and southern New Mexico, urging employment services and relief agencies to encourage the jobless to look for work in Arizona. More significant, however, was the grapevine he established. Four labor scouts went to targeted states, spreading the rumor of work, stopping at pool halls, saloons, auto camps, and gas stations—anywhere that potential farm workers might congregate or pass through.<sup>6</sup>

Taber next sought to attract families already headed west. His workers posted placards along U.S. Highway 66 through northern Arizona and on U.S. 70 between Lordsburg and Phoenix. They distributed handbills at the inspection stations near the state's ports of entry, where labor scouts stood by to direct California-bound migrants to Arizona's cotton fields. Taber also ran newspaper advertisements in New Mexico aimed at gas-station operators and auto-court managers, on the assumption that they would pass the word to customers. This tactic proved quite successful. In Las Cruces, for example, attendants at filling stations, lunch stands, grocery stores, and tourist camps reported to researchers from the Works Progress Administration that good jobs could be had in the Arizona cotton fields for seventy-five cents to one dollar per 100 pounds of cotton, yet no one from the Farm Labor Service had actually visited the town.<sup>7</sup> This constant message that jobs lay just ahead raised the spirits of those Oklahomans, now on the road, who had seen a handbill or opened a newspaper to the classified ads and discovered that an employment bonanza awaited in the irrigated valleys of Arizona.

Advertisements began to appear in the Oklahoma City newspapers on Saturday, September 11, 1937. That day, the *Daily Oklahoman's* "Help Wanted—Male" column listed only fifteen openings, mostly in skilled trades, but a prominent notice at center advertised a far greater demand: "COTTON PICKERS—Several thousand wanted near Phoenix and Coolidge, Ariz. . . . several months work in ideal climate." The next Saturday, a new notice expanded on this theme, adding that good pickers could make good money, with "houses or

tents provided free.”<sup>8</sup>

The initial response to Taber’s media campaign fell short of expectations. Attributing the sluggish flow of workers into Arizona to the continued harvest in South Central states and to competition from California, Taber tried to make his ads more enticing still: “5,000 Pickers wanted near Phoenix and Coolidge, Ariz. . . . Growers paying 75¢ hundred. Good Pickers now getting 300 lbs. to 400 lbs. daily. Come soon for several months work. Picking lasts till February. Ideal climate, warm dry, sunshine Fall and Winter days. Houses or Tents provided free.”<sup>9</sup>

Advertising continued until the middle of November, when Taber reported to his executive committee that his campaign had met its goal. Indeed, an estimated 25,000 out-of-state cotton pickers arrived for the harvest. Most of them brought their families, swelling the migrant population to more than 40,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers with the WPA agreed with Taber’s assessment of the campaign’s success. In January and February of 1938, they interviewed more than 500 groups of migrants as part of a series of studies of agricultural laborers in the Southwest.<sup>11</sup> While it seemed unlikely that down-and-out farm workers would have been much exposed to newspapers, the study showed that almost 30 percent of the Oklahomans questioned cited advertising as a reason for going to Arizona. Another 20 percent had been persuaded by rumors of good wages in Arizona’s cotton fields—rumors spread by advertising and labor scouts—and 8 percent simply “knew of cotton.”<sup>12</sup> Classified advertisements and handbills had been taken quite seriously, the WPA found. In several of the cotton camps, groups of migrant families “had a single tattered but carefully preserved clipping among them. This bit of advertising, seen by one and shown to the others, had induced them all to come to Arizona.”<sup>13</sup>

Migration patterns reveal the importance of the recruiting campaign as an inducement for moving west. More than 60 percent of the migrants in the WPA study moved directly to Arizona without stopping to work en route. Only about 20 percent paused to pull cotton bolls on the high plains of Texas. Of those who left home after the campaign had been in full



*Pickers working near Eloy carry their tow sacks, laden with cotton, to the wagon where the sacks will be weighed. One hundred pounds of lint earned a picker 75 cents for a morning’s work. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.*

swing for two months, almost 90 percent headed straight for Arizona.<sup>14</sup>

Not all of the migrant farm workers were lured by the Farm Labor Service. Nearly 20 percent of the Oklahomans interviewed by the WPA had been encouraged to come to Arizona by friends or relatives already living in the state. Another 8 percent had previously visited Arizona themselves.<sup>15</sup> For others, like Marvin Montgomery, Arizona served merely as a way station as they struggled to move farther westward. Montgomery's 1929 Hudson consumed so much gas and oil that, as he observed, "I got to where I had to blindfold it to get it past a filling station." After two breakdowns, the Montgomery family was forced to stop at Eloy and pick cotton for five weeks to earn enough money to continue on to California's Central Valley. Some 10 percent of the Oklahomans were on their way to California when they stopped in Arizona's cotton fields.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Arizona's migrant farm laborers were not itinerant workers in the usual sense, perpetually following the crops. Nearly half had been on the road for only three months when

*An Oklahoma migrant headed for California stops at the plant-inspection station at Yuma, May 1937. Dorothea Lange photograph.*



they were interviewed in early 1938. This pattern was confirmed by a study of nearly 600 schoolchildren in the cotton districts of the Salt River Valley: 57 percent of the cotton-picker families had arrived in Arizona for the first time in 1937. Only 19 percent had traveled from state to state, from crop to crop.<sup>17</sup>

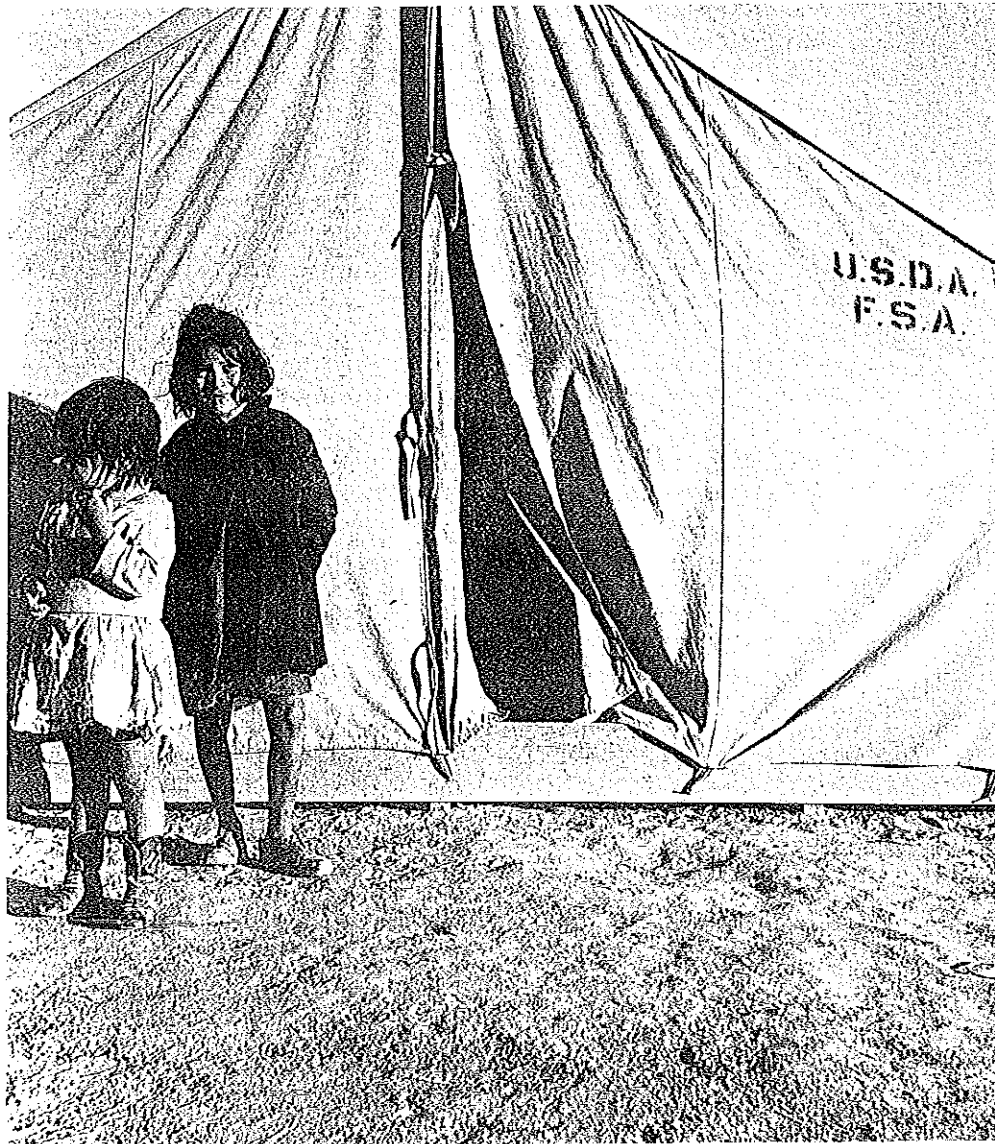
A majority of those who had recently taken to the road hailed from Oklahoma. The WPA found that 54 percent of the migrants came from the Sooner State, while another 17 percent arrived from Texas. Aside from Arkansas and Missouri, collectively home to 14 percent, no other state provided an appreciable number of migrant workers.<sup>18</sup>

Although uncertain about their final destination, most of the migrants had left home for good, convinced that their prospects for survival were better in the West. Only about one in five migrants from the western cotton states said they would return home, and one-fourth hoped to stay in Arizona. Significantly, only a third said that they intended to move on to California. But as the cotton harvest neared completion, the migrants found they had no choice but to move on. There was no other work available. So in the early months of 1938, the cotton pickers crossed the border in record numbers.<sup>19</sup>

Floods in California drove many back to Arizona, where they joined thousands more who had yet to leave. Record rainfall in early 1938 caused the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers to breach their banks, flooding agricultural land, destroying homes, isolating towns, blocking roads, and halting trains. As January turned into February and February into March, water continued to inundate California, leaving large numbers of migrant families virtually trapped in the cotton districts around Phoenix.<sup>20</sup> Before long, the unemployed pickers grew desperate as their meager savings trickled away. By early March, Red Cross officials in Chandler, southeast of Phoenix, reported that conditions among the field workers were "very bad, with abject poverty and complete want an almost ordinary condition."<sup>21</sup>

On March 12, at least 100 cotton pickers congregated at the Arizona state capitol to plead for help from Governor Rawghlie C. Stanford. A picture of thousands of families stranded without food or money emerged as they described





*The children of a migratory cotton picker, Eloy, November 1940. Dorothea Lange photograph.*

their plight. Arthur Adams had traveled from Fort Smith, Arkansas, in answer to a newspaper advertisement. Now living in a cotton camp near Avondale, west of Phoenix, he had no money and his family was starving, subsisting on beet tops purloined from nearby fields. T. J. Hanse of Edinburg, Texas, living at Goodyear's Litchfield camp, told the governor, "I have five in my family. We came here last August. I now have \$1.50 and my two babies are sick. We are living exactly like hogs."<sup>22</sup>

Although the governor sympathized with the migrants, he felt nearly powerless to cope with the emergency. Red Cross monies were almost exhausted, and state and county relief funds severely depleted. Clarence Finch, secretary of the Maricopa County Board of Social Security and Welfare, advised the governor that his agency had provided all the relief it could; indeed, in his opinion, shortages in funds for the unemployed had reached the point that food could not be given to nonresident families "even if someone were dying."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the deputy commissioner at the Arizona Department of Social Security and Welfare, James R. McDougall, reminded Stanford that the state's three-year residency law prohibited the provision of relief to transients, adding that the agency had no funds to offer, even to emergency cases.<sup>24</sup>

Governor Stanford confirmed the picture of widespread misery. Visiting one of the largest cotton camps near Waddell, twenty-five miles northwest of Phoenix, he found disease and starvation. The state superintendent of public health, Colt I. Hughes, who accompanied the governor, reported typhoid fever, smallpox, measles, whooping cough, and infant diarrhea. "The camp is in a deplorable state," he concluded. "Most of the cotton pickers have sold everything they have, even their automobiles, and have eaten up the proceeds."<sup>25</sup>

Health workers agreed that poor housing underlay the migrants' health problems. The free housing touted by the cotton industry typically consisted of unfurnished, floorless, wooden shacks, or tents pitched in the desert. Living conditions at the cotton camps, unregulated by the state, varied with the whim of the grower. One camp comprised more than 200 closely built pine shacks with no floors, window glass, screens, or furnishings, but it did offer valued amenities such as running water;

cold showers, and enclosed, sex-segregated privies. In another camp, eighteen unscreened tents, sited between a highway and an irrigation ditch, provided shelter; an unenclosed, open-pit toilet served all eighteen households, and the only well was contaminated.<sup>26</sup> A lucky few escaped squalor in large camps with well-built cabins or tents on wooden platforms and adequate sanitation.

When camps owned by growers or labor contractors filled to capacity, the migrants created squatter camps along irrigation canals or roadways, and in the open desert. The Farm Security Administration found as many as fifty families assembled in one of these improvised camps. Although many migrants traveled with their own canvas tents, in some instances the only shelter available was the family automobile. Sanitation was absent. At a camp near Glendale, twelve families used an abandoned sedan body as a makeshift privy. At others, garbage and excrement littered the ground.<sup>27</sup>

Migrants who thought they had already hit bottom before leaving home found the filthy, overcrowded conditions unspeakably wretched. Maude Higgenbottom, living with her family in a tin duplex with a dirt floor at an Avondale camp, took a peek into the next room through a hole in the common wall. She was horrified to see "a woman picking lice off her children," said her husband, "so we loaded right away and got out as quick as we could get, and headed for [California]."<sup>28</sup>

Some farm workers avoided the labor camps altogether. About 20 percent of the migrants in the WPA study resided on the outskirts of the cotton towns in inexpensive auto courts and trailer camps, where they found somewhat better living conditions worth the rent.<sup>29</sup> The comforts of a tourist court, however, lay beyond the reach of the majority of migrants—former tenant farmers and day laborers who had set out for Arizona with only a few dollars in their pockets. Their median income before beginning their migration in the fall of 1937 had been only \$224, much of it not in cash.

Once in the Arizona desert, the migrants found the promise of high wages to be just a mirage. Although advertisements claimed that good pickers could harvest 300 to 400 pounds per day, fewer than 3 percent could pick as much, even though

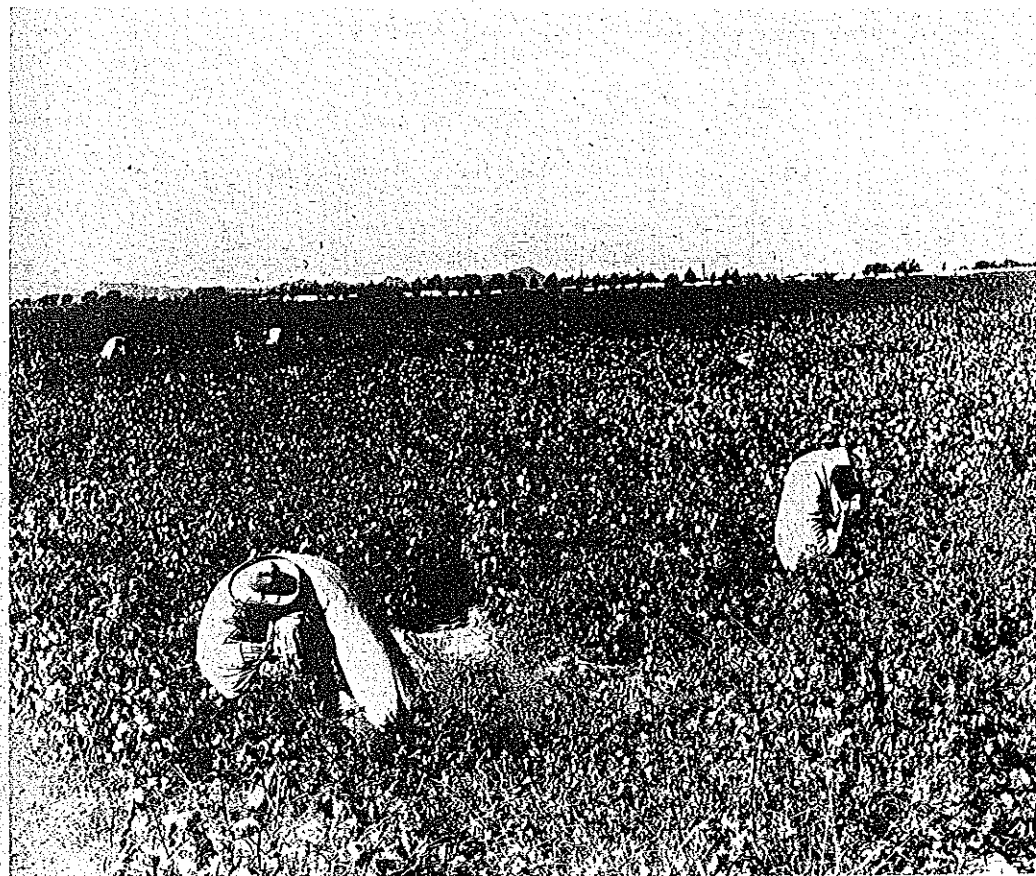
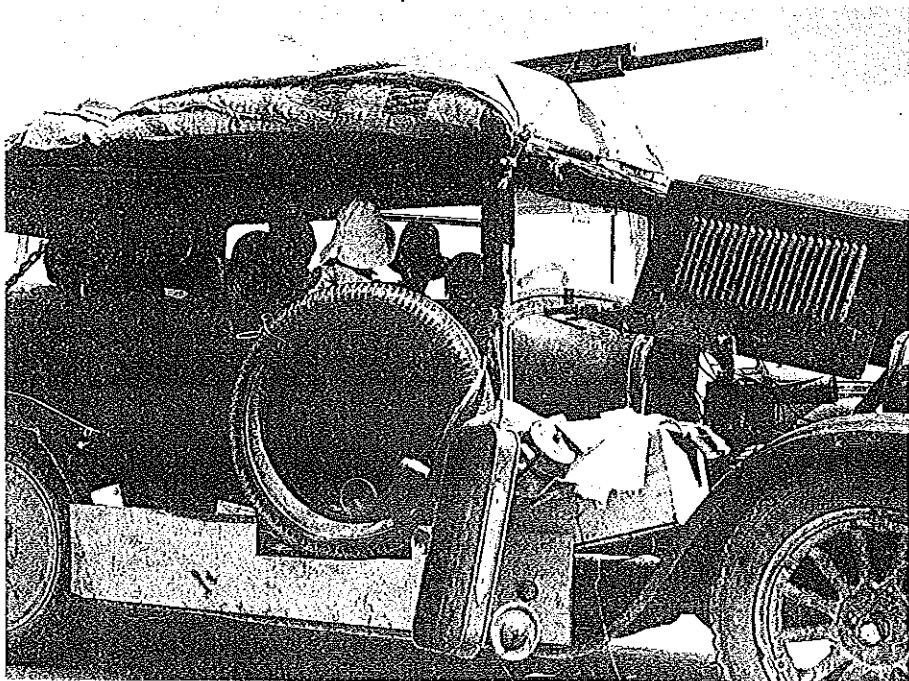


*Grower's camp for cotton pickers, outskirts of Eloy, November 1940. Dorothea Lange photograph.*

many of the migrants were experienced pickers. Indeed, families with *two* workers in the field twelve hours a day could rarely meet that standard. Arizona growers required pickers to remove the lint from the open bolls of Acala cotton, keeping the "trash," such as leaves, to a minimum. Pickers found "ginning in the field" slow work compared to the harvesting of closed-boll cotton in Texas and Oklahoma, where laborers snapped the entire boll off the plant. The average worker in Arizona could harvest only 140 to 175 pounds daily—much less if the cotton was sparse, as it inevitably was toward the end of the season.<sup>30</sup>

With such slim pickings, earnings fell far below expectations. At 85¢ per 100 pounds of seed cotton, most pickers' wages ranged from \$1.20 to \$1.50 per day, the amount an unskilled WPA worker could earn in four hours. Families with one or two members working the harvest—the vast majority—brought in an average of \$8.00 to \$12.00 per week. Although that represented a sizable income for many families, once the cotton harvest ended, their savings dwindled rapidly. The crisis in Arizona's cotton camps was particularly hard-felt by the

*Families of migrants stalled on the highway between Phoenix and Yuma became a familiar sight. May 1937. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.*



*Migrant workers pick cotton at Cortaro Farms near Marana, November 1940. Dorothea Lange photograph.*



many workers who had packed up for California only to be driven back by floods.<sup>31</sup>

On March 22, 1938, farm workers demanding food marched to the county relief warehouse. They had formed a new alliance with the CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). To avoid the union's threat of mob action, the governor negotiated with Maricopa County and state relief officials to provide food rations. Despite this success, the coalition between UCAPAWA and the cotton pickers proved to be ephemeral. The Farm Security Administration responded to the crisis with a program to provide subsistence grants of cash to aid distressed farm workers. With government assistance, pickers found no more use for unions.<sup>32</sup>

The overcrowded camps dispersed as families received the aid they needed to move on. The departure of the cotton pickers ended the acute crisis in the irrigated valleys of central Arizona, but public interest in the disaster continued. The magnitude of the migration from Oklahoma and the South Central states and the publicity the workers' plight produced had brought to light long-standing recruiting and employment practices. Growers now came under fire from all quarters. Most importantly, a series of federal investigations over a period of two years (1938 through 1940) revealed the exploitative nature of Arizona's cotton industry.

Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin directed the Civil Liberties Committee, a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, in examining civil-liberties violations throughout the nation, from 1936 through mid-1940. In January 1940, La Follette pointed an accusing finger at Taber and the Farm Labor Service when he convened his committee in Los Angeles to examine charges of labor exploitation. Labor expert Orin Cassmore, with the WPA, framed the central argument of La Follette's probe. After examining a multitude of economic factors and interviewing hundreds of migrant workers, Cassmore and his colleague, Malcolm Brown, concluded that the growers deliberately recruited an oversupply of labor to depress wage rates.<sup>33</sup>

Cassmore believed that the crop could have been picked



*In an act of desperation for cash, or perhaps frustration with a broken-down rattletrap, an Oklahoma migrant has put his car up for sale. The Arizona superintendent of health observed that many cotton pickers were forced to sell everything they had, even their automobiles, to survive. Dorothea Lange photograph.*

with about half as many workers. The harvest of 1937 had peaked in early December, with an estimated 37,000 cotton pickers in the fields. Cassmore argued that only 16,000 to 20,000 pickers would have been needed, if Arizona's growers had been less eager to harvest the crop quickly and had spread the picking evenly over the season using a constant supply of workers. Growers hired about half this number from the local labor force, and an estimated 13,750 additional workers would have come to Arizona without Taber's extensive recruiting campaign—a sufficient number to pick the crop. The presence of as many as 17,000 excess workers meant less work and lower wages for all and contributed to the misery at the end of the season, Cassmore contended.<sup>34</sup>

Cassmore gave little credence to the industry's point of view. Apprehension had shadowed the labor-recruiting campaign. At harvest time the demand for labor on Arizona's cotton farms could jump by almost 700 percent. The expansion of cotton acreage in 1937 had heightened growers' anxiety about a labor shortage. Indeed, the pace of the harvest lagged behind that of previous years. Furthermore, the harvest was not the leisurely undertaking that federal critics implied. The growers felt compelled to pick the cotton as quickly as possible to keep lint grades high and protect the market value of the crop in a year of rapidly falling commodity prices. Growers had increased their cotton acreage based on expectations of a stable price of twelve cents per pound of lint. By the beginning of the harvest, nationwide overproduction caused the price to crash to less than nine cents per pound.

By mid-November, however, the growers knew that sufficient labor would be available to harvest the crop. At that point, according to federal critics of the industry, the Farm Labor Service should have announced that no more workers were needed. Yet as jalopies full of migrant families continued to roll into the cotton districts, little was done to stop the influx. On Taber's advice, the federal and state employment services continued to refer all new arrivals to the fields.<sup>35</sup>

Taber's defense—that his campaign ended in mid-November—was disingenuous, or at least naive. It denied the inherent lag involved in the relocation of families. Moreover, the sus-

tained appeal for thousands of cotton pickers created an image of an infinite number of jobs, as it was calculated to do. Indeed, Taber had predicated the entire campaign on the idea that the need for pickers would be spread by rumor. It was a pipeline with no cut-off valve.<sup>36</sup> When the flow of migrants did not stop, Taber shifted the blame on the workers themselves. Much of the distress in the cotton fields, he told his superiors, was "caused by people coming in here too late in the picking season" and by the migrants' own "indolence and folly."<sup>37</sup>

Taber's critics maintained that low wages, not indolence, caused the migrants' distress. They pointed out that the oversupply of workers enabled growers to complete the harvest while offering lower wages than those paid in California, where pickers earned an average of ninety-five cents per 100 pounds, and even more during the second picking. Had the Farm Labor Service been unsuccessful in soliciting a large labor force, Cassmore argued, earnings would have risen.<sup>38</sup>

Cassmore had little evidence, however, to support his contention that depressing the wage rate had been the specific goal of the industry's recruiting campaign. At the beginning of the 1937 season, cotton growers throughout the Salt River Valley had met, as they customarily did, to establish a uniform wage, thus discouraging competition between growers. In setting the rate of seventy-five cents per hundred (the same rate as the previous year despite a 26 percent decrease in the price of cotton lint), the growers considered the lower profit margins of the smaller operations, as well as the prevailing wage in California. Yet labor supply did influence the rate of pay. Wages rose in October, when the supply lagged, as growers broke ranks from the "fixed" rate in competition for pickers. But once they established a higher rate of eighty-five cents, the growers did not lower it, even during the subsequent deluge of workers. The practice of bidding the price downward as workers competed for jobs—a practice reported in California—apparently did not take place in Arizona.<sup>39</sup>

More likely, the intent of recruiting surplus labor was to discourage unionization. Valley growers, fearing that a shortage of pickers could give labor the upper hand, kept an uneasy eye on the situation. In 1936 Taber had confided to John Phillips



*A Farm Security Administration camp for migratory workers, near Avondale, May 1940. Russell Lee photograph.*

of the Associated Farmers of California: "It has been very quiet here . . . as far as labor troubles go, but we are on our toes all the time looking for anything that might arise. Through undercover operatives who serve other interests here in this state, we keep constantly advised of the movements of Communist [CIO] leaders."<sup>40</sup>

Taber endeavored to withhold information regarding the labor shortage and wage differentials that could be used to provoke strikes. His diligence paid off. "So far as we know," he reported in December 1937, "there has not been any labor disturbance of consequence in the cotton camps. We have suppressed all newspaper publicity about picking conditions that has been requested from us, which we believe is the very best policy."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the continued influx of poor migrants from the South Central states would have undermined any effort by cotton pickers to protest their working conditions, even without media censorship. As the Mexican consul in Phoenix informed Carey McWilliams, one of California's chief labor activists, the growers constantly warned the local Mexicans: "Unless they toe the line, we'll bring in more Okies."<sup>42</sup>

### *Mythic Fields of Plenty*

The debate Cassmore created over the relationship between labor supply and wages obscured a crucial point. The profitability of cotton throughout the United States depended on low wages to compete on an international market with Asian crops. The sharecropping Southern states, which produced more than 90 percent of the nation's cotton, helped keep the wage scale low. In Arizona, harvest labor alone accounted for about 30 percent of the total cost of producing short-staple cotton. Any increase in wages had a three-fold effect on the cost of lint, since wages were based on the gross weight of seed cotton. Unable to lower their fixed costs of production, the growers protected their profit margins—in the face of plummeting prices—by paying labor as little as possible.<sup>43</sup>

However, Laurence Hewes, regional director of the Farm Security Administration, suggested to La Follette that low commodity prices were no excuse for exploiting workers. "Labor is one of the factors of production in industrialized agriculture, along with several other factors," he testified. "The proprietors of these other factors are not asked to subsidize the industry,

*A Saturday afternoon in Eloy during the cotton harvest, November 1940. Dorothea Lange photograph.*



and there seems to be no logical reason why agricultural labor should take up the slack. . . . The statement that the industry cannot pay higher wages cannot be accepted in good faith if labor is to be regarded as one of the real, permanent factors of production of this major industry."<sup>44</sup>

In his final report, La Follette censured Arizona's cotton industry, especially its recruiting practices, for exploiting migrant labor.<sup>45</sup> Although the investigation managed to illuminate a problem, it produced no solution. True, the Farm Security Administration continued to administer the welfare programs initiated in the wake of the crisis. But no legislation to redress the fundamental economic issues emerged. By the time La Follette issued his report in 1942, World War II had intervened, offering the migrants jobs in the munitions industry. Congress turned its attention to matters more pressing than the workaday world of cotton pickers. Age-old patterns remained unchanged.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A provocative interpretation of the failure of the farming frontier in eastern Oklahoma is found in John Thompson, *Closing the Frontier: Radical Response in Oklahoma, 1889-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986). The best study of the migration to California is offered by James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Also consult Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).

<sup>3</sup>Certainly Californians welcomed and exploited the surplus labor that streamed into their fertile valleys. In isolated incidents, California labor contractors and individual growers distributed circulars and ran newspaper advertisements in the western cotton belt.

<sup>4</sup>*United States v. Butler*, et al., *United States Reports*, vol. 297 (January 6, 1936), pp. 1-88. David Wayne Ganger, "The Impact of Mechanization and the New Deal's Acreage Reduction Programs on Cotton Farmers During the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 301-302. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Cotton Production and Distribution, Season of 1937-38*, Bulletin 175 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), pp. 4, 20. Arizona Department of Agriculture, Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, *Arizona Agricultural Statistics, 1867-1965* (Phoenix: N.p., 1966), pp. 12, 24, 30, 36. The 1937 harvest proved especially fruitful: production in Pinal County more than doubled, and that in Maricopa County increased by more than 75 percent over the previous year. Altogether, Arizona's cotton growers produced more than 300,000 bales of upland cotton.

<sup>5</sup>*Casa Grande Dispatch*, August 27, 1937; *Chandler Arizonan*, August 27, 1937; *Arizona Producer* (Phoenix), October 15, 1937. David R. Maciel, "Mexican Migrant Workers in

the United States," in James C. Foster, ed., *American Labor in the Southwest: The First One Hundred Years* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982), p. 190. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor: Hearings before a Subcommittee . . .*, Part 72, Supplementary Exhibits, 76 Congress, 3 Session, 1940, p. 26590, Exhibit 13338; p. 26593, Exhibit 13343; and p. 26603, Exhibit 13353-D. Hereinafter cited as La Follette Committee, *Hearings*.

<sup>6</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, Open Shop Activities, pp. 19565-66; p. 19729, Exhibit 8803; and p. 19730, Exhibit 8804. *Ibid.*, Part 72, pp. 26588-89, Exhibit 13336. Malcolm Brown and Orin Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers in Arizona* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), pp. 71, 73. The WPA found that Oklahoma relief agencies had encouraged few people who arrived for the cotton harvest to make the trip.

<sup>7</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19563-65; p. 19728, Exhibit 8801. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 71, 73-74.

<sup>8</sup>*Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), September 11 and 18, 1937. Similar notices appeared in newspapers in towns along the migratory routes through northern Arizona and New Mexico, and in Arkansas, Colorado, Texas, and Utah. A summary of the advertising campaign is in La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19722-25, Exhibit 8797.

<sup>9</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19730, Exhibit 8804. *Daily Oklahoman*, September 23, 1937. Later advertisements reported earnings of eighty-five cents per 100 pounds of cotton. In Texas, Taber advertised a need for 7,000 cotton pickers.

<sup>10</sup>Bureau of the Census, *Cotton Production and Distribution*, p. 12. *Arizona Producer*, October 15, 1937; *Chandler Arizonan*, October 15, November 10 and 12, 1937; *Daily Oklahoman*, November 10, 1937. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19566 and 19574-75; pp. 19723-24, Exhibit 8797; p. 19731, Exhibit 8805; p. 19773, Exhibit 8824. Paul S. Taylor and Edward J. Rowell, "Refugee Labor Migration to California, 1937," *Monthly Labor Review*, vol. 47 (August, 1938), p. 241. E. D. Tetreau, *Arizona's Farm Laborers*, Agricultural Extension Bulletin 163 (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1939), p. 334. Estimates of the migrant population ranged from 20,000-22,000 (Taber and Tetreau) to 30,000 (U.S. Department of Labor). The WPA derived the estimate of 25,000 from daily ginning figures and the assumption that it took ten workers to pick a bale of cotton per day.

<sup>11</sup>The WPA selected a sample of 518 household units from thirty "representative camps." Only those migrants who had left their states of origin in 1937 were included in the sample. Through interviews and questionnaires, researchers from the WPA and the University of Arizona created personal histories of each group for the period between January 1 and December 31, 1937. See Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. xii, 103-104.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 71, 74. "Migratory Cotton-Pickers in Arizona, 1937," March 15, 1938, pp. 24-25, draft manuscript, General File, Arizona Records, Records of the Farmers Home Administration (FHA), Record Group (RG) 96, National Archives (NA). Hereinafter cited as WPA Draft Report. *Phoenix Gazette*, March 23, 1940 (blue streak ed. cited, unless otherwise indicated). LaRue McCormick to Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 17, 1938, R. C. Stanford Papers, Arizona Department of Library, Archives, and Public Records (ADLAPR), Phoenix. In the WPA study, 498 groups reported their reasons for coming to Arizona; of these, 211 hailed from Oklahoma. Those who gave advertising as a reason referred to newspapers, radio, and handbills. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19730, Exhibit 8804.

<sup>13</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99. These percentages refer only to the 371 migrant groups included in the study who started their migration in 1937.

<sup>15</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. 29.



<sup>16</sup>U.S. Congress, House, Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, *Interstate Migration*, Part 7, Los Angeles Hearings, 76 Cong., 3 Sess., 1940, pp. 2904-5. Hereinafter cited as Tolan Committee, *Hearings*. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 21-22, 98. School authorities in the Dysart and Liberty school districts in Maricopa County provided this information to WPA researchers.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23. These figures refer to the 371 migrant groups included in the study who had left their states of origin in 1937. Specific information on the origins of the 147 groups who began following the crops earlier is not available.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 45-47, 100. Seymour J. Janow and William Gilmartin, "Labor and Agricultural Migration to California, 1935-40," *Monthly Labor Review*, vol. 53 (July, 1941), p. 24. These figures refer to migrants residing in one of the western cotton states in January 1937. When those already on the road at the first of the year were counted, only one-quarter of the respondents intended to go on to California. This difference indicates that a higher percentage of those who had already been to California did not know where they would go next. Only one in seven of the Oklahomans (including those who had left home more than a year before the survey) planned to return to the Sooner State. Some migrants, however, may have asserted a desire to remain in Arizona in order to establish a claim of residency, however tenuous.

<sup>20</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. xi. *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), February 12, 1938; *Yuma Daily Sun and Arizona Sentinel* (Yuma), February 11, 14, March 3, 1938; *Daily Oklahoman*, February 13 and 14, 1938.

<sup>21</sup>*Chandler Arizonan*, March 11, 1938.

<sup>22</sup>*Arizona Republic and Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), March 13, 1938.

<sup>23</sup>*Chandler Arizonan*, March 11, 1938; *Arizona Republic*, October 31, 1937, and March 13, 1938. In October 1937, county relief agencies throughout the state appealed for emergency funds for unemployment relief. Maricopa County reported a \$22,000 shortage in funds for the unemployed, and a Pinal County official observed that many relief clients were in debt to merchants due to insufficient funding.

<sup>24</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19569.

<sup>25</sup>*Phoenix Gazette*, March 21, 1938. See also, *Arizona Daily Star*, March 22, 1938.

<sup>26</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 5-7. Mercer G. Evans, "Housing for Migratory Agricultural Workers," *Public Welfare News*, vol. 6 (June, 1939), p. 2. Farm Labor Housing Surveys File, Box 53: Correspondence—Flood Control, Records of the Arizona State Representative 1937-42, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, RG 83, NA. Carey McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1942), p. 86. In 1939, nearly 70 percent of the migrants lived in one of nearly 200 grower-owned cotton camps or in camps established by labor contractors.

<sup>27</sup>McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 87. During 1939, at least 10 percent of the migrants lived in squatter camps. In Maricopa and Pinal counties, the Farm Security Administration identified 716 squatter camps, home to more than 3,000 migrants. Additional migrants probably lived in squatter camps that the FSA never located.

<sup>28</sup>Tolan Committee, *Hearings*, Part 7, p. 2820.

<sup>29</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 5-6; McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 86-88. Some motor courts were just a step above the average cotton camp. Thomas Higgenbottom remembered an Eloy tourist camp was "mighty filthy," despite the eight to ten dollars per month rent. Tolan Committee, *Hearings*, Part 7, p. 2818.

<sup>30</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 2-3, 15, 26, 95-96. In areas of Oklahoma where cotton averaged one-fourth to one-half a bale an acre, workers reportedly averaged about 350 pounds per day. Oklahoma growers of open-boll vari-

eties paid more for picking lint: from sixty-five cents to one dollar per 100 pounds. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19593-94. *Daily Oklahoman*, October 7, 1937.

<sup>31</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 1-3, 14-16, 94-95. WPA Draft Report, pp. 29-32. W. J. Jamieson to R. C. Stanford, January 20, 1937, pp. 2-3, Folder 3, Box 11, Stanford Papers, ADLAPR. Tolan Committee, *Hearings*, Part 7, p. 2905. As 1937 drew to a close, those who had entered the migration stream that year had earned an average of only \$156 in the cotton fields, raising their average total earnings to \$424.

<sup>32</sup>Reports of the size of the crowd at the capitol ranged from sixty to 200 men, the latter figure given in sworn testimony by James R. McDougall. *Arizona Republic*, March 23, 24, and April 10, 1938; *Arizona Daily Star*, March 23, 24, and 27, 1938; *Phoenix Gazette*, March 23, 24, and 26, 1938. *Arizona Labor Journal* (Phoenix), March 24, 1938. Telegrams and letters to the governor sent by the UCAPAWA, the Los Angeles Industrial Union Council, the San Francisco District Industrial Union Council, and the West Coast Regional Office of the CIO are located in Stanford Papers, Folder 2, Box 8, ADLAPR. Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 836 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), pp. 200-202. The FSA required grant recipients to be former farm owners, tenants, or sharecroppers who had labored in Arizona's agricultural fields. Inevitably, indigents who did not meet these requirements managed to slip through, inflating the apparent number of distressed cotton pickers remaining in Arizona. Laurence I. Hewes, Jr., to C. B. Baldwin, January 24, 1940, p. 1, and "Arizona Grant Program" attachment, Grants File, Box 11: General Correspondence 1934-43, Region 9, Records of the FHA, RG 96, NA. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 72, p. 26587, Exhibit 13335.

<sup>33</sup>Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. xxi, 63, 78; and their "Earnings of Migratory Cotton Pickers in Arizona," *Labor Information Bulletin*, vol. 6 (November, 1939), pp. 10-12. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19574-75. A good analysis of the committee's work is in Jerold S. Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966).

<sup>34</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19573-75; p. 19773, Exhibit 8824; and Part 72, p. 26603, Exhibit 13353-D. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. xiii, 29, 61, 93. Peak employment may have been closer to 30,000 persons based on Taber's estimate of an average of 175 pounds of cotton picked per worker in December. Taber estimated the number of local cotton pickers at 5,000 to 10,000 persons; the WPA estimate was 7,000 to 10,000. The WPA figured that about 55 percent of the migrants would have come to Arizona without the recruiting campaign.

<sup>35</sup>In November, Taber did inform those who wrote inquiring about the harvest that it was too late to come for the 1937 season. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 53-55. E. D. Tetreau, *Hired Labor Requirements on Arizona Irrigated Farms*, Agricultural Extension Bulletin 160 (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1938), p. 199. Bureau of the Census, *Cotton Production and Distribution*, pp. 12, 15. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19566; p. 19576; p. 19731, Exhibit 8805; p. 19770, Exhibit 8817. On the changing price of cotton, see *Arizona Republic*, March 14, 1937; *Chandler Arizonan*, September 17, 1937; and *Daily Oklahoman*, October 9, 1937.

<sup>36</sup>Taber's labor scouts told their contacts to arrive by the first of November, and the last several newspaper advertisements specified a need for pickers by the latter part of the month. However, ads placed earlier in the season had noted that the harvest would last until February. La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19564-65; p. 19728, Exhibit 8801; p. 19723-25, Exhibit 8798; p. 19732, Exhibit 8806; and Part 72, p. 26588, Exhibit 13336. *Daily Oklahoman*, September 23, 1937.

<sup>37</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19732, Exhibit 8806.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 19574-75. Cassmore, like many New Dealers in the WPA and the FSA, advocated the development of a more efficiently organized labor market, one in which

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supply was more carefully matched with actual demand, so that the classical principle of a wage equilibrium would provide a better standard of living for agricultural workers. A good example of this type of argument is found in U.S. Congress, House, Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, *Interstate Migration, Report of the Select Committee . . .*, House Report 369, 77 Cong., 1 Sess., 1941 (Serial Set 10559), pp. 364-65.

<sup>39</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 53, p. 19590, Exhibit 8826; p. 19719, Exhibit 8790; p. 19731, Exhibit 8805; and Part 72, p. 26608, Exhibit 13353-1. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. 59. Maricopa County Farm Bureau, Tempe, Board of Directors Minutes, October 12, 1937, and July 6, August 3, 1938. *Casa Grande Dispatch*, August 27, 1937; *Arizona Republic*, November 2, 1937. Bureau of the Census, *Cotton Production and Distribution*, p. 15. The boom in cotton production drove the average price for Arizona lint down from about 12.43 cents per pound in 1936 to only 9.2 cents per pound in 1937.

<sup>40</sup>La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 72, p. 26598, Exhibit 13351-A.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, Part 53, p. 19731, Exhibit 8805. One limited strike, led by UCAPAWA organizers, occurred early in the season at Higley, southeast of Phoenix. The targeted grower responded by raising the picking rate to one dollar per 100 pounds of cotton. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup>McWilliams, *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 81.

<sup>43</sup>Harry Bates Brown and Jacob Osborn Ware, *Cotton*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), p. 545. Bureau of the Census, *Cotton Production and Distribution*, pp. 20, 41. *An Economic Survey of Pinal County Agriculture*, Agricultural Extension Service Circular 64 (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1931), p. 22. Brown and Cassmore, *Migratory Cotton Pickers*, pp. 56-57. Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 179.

<sup>44</sup>"California Agricultural Background: California's Migrant Problem," La Follette Committee, *Hearings*, Part 59, p. 21791.

<sup>45</sup>La Follette Committee, *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor*, Senate Report 1150, 77 Cong., 2 Sess., 1942 (Serial Set 10660), pp. 319-20, 533-37; and *Hearings*, Part 53, pp. 19566, 19580-81.

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