

Task: Write a response to an issue in a classic story you have read.

Student name withheld.

Steinbeck J. 2008, *Of Mice and Men*, Penguin Books, Victoria.

Of Mice and Men

Migrant farm workers in America in the 1930s



One of the main issues in *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is the huge migrant workforce created by the Great Depression of 1930s in America. It shows how the two main protagonists, George and Lennie, travel to find work. "We're gonna work on a ranch like the one we came from up north." (p 6) They end up in California the main destination of most of the displaced population. 1.3 million Americans migrated to California during the 1930s.

The story was set in 1937 when the Great Depression was well underway, as was the seven year drought that began in 1931. This

and the dust storms the next year dried up the Great Plains and forced the occupants and farmers to move on. They made the long and difficult journey to California with their families hoping to find work and create a lifestyle for themselves. On top of all the American-born migrants who were mainly from Oklahoma (who were given the name 'Okies'), Texas, Arkansas and Missouri, there were also a lot of Latino and Asian migrants. These were mainly of Mexican and Filipino origin. California suffered the Great Depression badly. Local and state infrastructure was already under pressure and the massive influx of migrants was more than the state could bear. Many migrants, after traveling all that way to get a job, were turned away at the borders because the state was overflowing.

The living conditions were generally poor for migrant workers. In *Of Mice and Men*, the farm workers had a bunk house to live in which was described as a long rectangular building with white walls and bunks along the walls. It had windows on three of the walls. There were shelves nailed over each bunk with the occupants' belongings on it. There was a black cast iron stove with the stove-pipe going through the ceiling. There was also a square table in the middle of the room for

playing cards etc with boxes to sit on. This accommodation was very good compared to other migrant farm workers. Some even set up camps along irrigation ditches which had poor sanitary conditions and were a public health problem. Many of the shacks were patched together with different materials including burlap (a coarse material like hessian), canvas and palm branches.

The migrants' lives were transient, meaning they followed the harvest around the state. When the oranges were ready to be picked, for example, they moved to where the oranges were. They followed the crops around. Some crops being farmed in California were potatoes, oranges, cotton, lemons, peas, various grain crops and many more. The workers were willing to do any jobs on offer. George boasted that Lennie was "a good skinner. He can rassel grain bags, drive a cultivator. He can do anything. Just give him a try." (p 24)

Although many traveled in families, the young men were often sent off alone to find work as they were the most likely to get the jobs. In *Of Mice and Men*, however, Lennie and George travel together because George knew Lennie's Aunt Clara and he promised her that when she died he would look after her simple-minded nephew and so he did. Their friendship was commented upon by one of the other workers as unusual. "I hardly never see two guys travel together. You know how the hands are, they just come in and get their bunks and work a month, and then they quit and go out alone. Never seem to give a damn about nobody." (p 44)

Because a lot of the workers were young men living and working together there were often fights between them. The book gives an example of this when the boss's son takes on Lennie. "Then Curley's rage exploded. `Come on, ya big bastard. Get up on your feet. No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna to laugh at me. I'll show ya who's yella.'" (p 70) George also commented another time "I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time." (p 46)

As well as living roughly the workers were poorly paid. They were paid monthly and if they left early they'd get paid nothing. In 1928 agricultural workers could get 75 cents an hour for picking cantaloupes. Four years later it had dropped to 15 cents per hour. Other workers were paid 25 cents an hour to pick apricots. Of *Mice and Men* the men on the grain teams were paid \$50(US) a month.

George and Lennie had a dream that they would save up enough money to buy a property of their own. They had \$10 between them. Later they let another worker on the farm, Candy, in on it and he had \$350 saved up which was all he had. He wanted to join them because he would've been sacked because he was old and he had only one hand. In those days this was an unrealistic dream because no-one could save up enough money to pay for a house, let alone ten acres because they would've needed any money they earned to live.

Of Mice and Men describes what it was like to be a migrant worker in America in the Great Depression. The author John Steinbeck had worked on a farm so he had real experiences to write about. He also wrote another novel *Grapes of Wrath* published in 1940 about migrant workers.

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