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Western Oklahoma Exodus

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By Ruth Tittle

There's an old saying that history repeats itself. The exodus of Oklahomans in search of a more prosperous part of the country causes fear that there may be some truth to the saying.

We see families leaving behind them empty houses where once a father waited, with a smile and two sharp knives, to carve the Christmas turkey. Now this father stands outside his pickup truck and trailer loaded with everything the family has. He closes his eyes and blinks himself back to the present--low crop prices, high farming costs, and bank foreclosures. It all seems like a scene directly from John Steinbeck's 1939 novel THE GRAPES OF WRATH with a modern-day setting and new characters.

To many young people today, the thought of graduation and facing the future seems more depressing than exciting.

If this is our modern-day version of the Depression, what must the future have looked like to the youth of the Thirties? To answer that question, it seemed logical to talk with someone who had been a youngster during the Depression.

Jewel and Leroy Bunch are a retired couple from Rocky. Jewel is a former elementary school teacher, and Leroy is a retired banker, having spent his entire career at the State Bank of Rocky. Now in their seventies, the Bunches were in their late teens during the Depression; therefore, they are excellent resources of the past.

"I was 17 and Leroy was 19 in 1931," said Mrs. Bunch. Mr. Bunch chuckles, "I was in college up at O.U. trying to live as cheaply as I could. My dad would sell a cow--the kind you would get \$200 for today--for \$30 to provide my college money. The money was always accompanied by a request for me to live cheaper."

"At the same time, my family was searching for work, and we weren't certain we would stay in Oklahoma.

My father heard there might be work in Arizona. We all wondered how we would move our things out there if Dad got the job. My sister told my mother not to worry, that her bed had

rollers on it, and we could put our things on her bed and attach it to the back of our car. It certainly would have changed the image of the Okie, wouldn't it?" laughed Mrs. Bunch.



Illustration by Tim Reynolds

I reminded them that there's a serious side to this reminiscing and asked, "How did this catastrophe begin?"

Mr. Bunch answered first. "This whole area used to be prairie grass. There wasn't any farming in the early days. When the settlers came in here, they began to plow up sections of the grass for farming. They didn't know how to protect their land yet, and this tilled-up land would be pounded up by rain, which caused these flat lands to become hard and crusted."

Continuing the agricultural causes of the Depression, Mr. Bunch commented, "There were a lot of lay crops in those days (fields that were left idle with no crops on them for one year to rest the soil); and when the wind blew across those fields it created dust and a lot of it."

Mrs. Bunch then offered insight into another cause of the Depression: "The crash of the stock market, the country's financial center, and the beginning of the daily storms of dust in Oklahoma seemed almost to occur simultaneously. The stock market seemed far away to us," Mrs. Bunch continued. "Our livelihoods and those of the people we knew then depended on the crops. We had little knowledge of a place where people invested money."

When asked to describe a dirt storm, Mr. Bunch replied, "Every day at noon, they would have to dismiss class. The dust was so bad the professors couldn't talk, and we couldn't breathe. You could see it coming out in the distance. The sky would become red with dirt, and

people would head for home or indoors somewhere. They would put handkerchiefs on their faces to cover their noses and mouths till they could get there and everybody hurried. It would blow till vision was nearly nil. Once people were inside, they would put wet blankets up over the windows to try to keep out the dirt, but to little avail. A man who farmed during those days farmed with a team and hand plow. He couldn't just go jump on a tractor and plow a few strips on the field to stop the dust. He and his animals would have strangled to death before he could have finished."

Many people who didn't make a living by farming did so by picking the crops; therefore, when the crops were destroyed, non-farmers were also affected. Those who had money saved in the banks for security, as a general rule, lost it. "When the market crashed," said Mr. Bunch, "everyone assumed that the banks would be next, and that was right. Fred, my brother, was in charge of the bank here in Rocky at the time. The government declared what they called a banking holiday, forcing all the banks to close their doors, in an effort to stop runs on the banks. We were one of only three banks in the state that was 100 percent liquid and the first to open our door again." However, statewide many banks never opened again, and many people were left out in the street, penniless.

Some had no family, or they just wanted to go where there was still a hint of work to be had. They were the ones tagged "Okies," people who were infamous for their system of moving. An Okie tied a mattress to

the top of his car, put a washtub on the back bumper, and put everything else he owned, including his chickens, in his home on wheels. The most popular destination was California. Back then, California wasn't associated with glitter, glamour, and Hollywood premiers—but with cultivating orange and grapefruit orchards, grape vineyards, and avocado fields, a job for which many felt well trained. Still others went to the coastal area seeking work in factories or in the shipping industry.

Even though masses left, many people remained. They struggled through, using every "alphabet soup" program available, such as WPA and CCC, that President Roosevelt and his "brain trust" could throw out to their desperate hands. Gradually, things did improve; and with the beginning of World War II, the people saw a twelve-year nightmare finally come to an end. The employed at last began to outnumber the unemployed.

As for our problems today, despite the "safety nets," as Mr. Bunch calls legislation passed in the thirties that keep us from total economic disaster today, we still have families facing financial ruin. "It's always a depression if you can't get a job," Mrs. Bunch indicated.

"Is there hope for a brighter future?" I asked them.

"These things come in cycles," Mr. Bunch replied. "Better times will be here again. It may take a while, but the cycle **will** turn upward." ■

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