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1.0. Introduction

The 1930’s was a decade which brought dramatic turnabouts in most countries in the Western world. In America, the greatest stock market crash yet experienced was the beginning of a severe depression sweeping over the land, hitting the lower classes particularly hard. Drought and depression ruined the lives of thousands and forced especially tenant farmers and sharecroppers on the westward road to the Promised Land. The epic story of a family from the Midwestern state of Oklahoma, who in the 1930’s had to leave their beloved farm and move to California, is in every sense an important account of the lives of many American migrants.

_Grapes of Wrath_ (Grapes) is the absolute climax of John Steinbeck’s life as a writer. The empathetic style of writing has shaped the minds of most Americans in connection to their understanding of how life was for the migrants trying their luck and chance in the attractive Sunshine State

It has gained such recognition that it has been made mandatory reading in many educational institutions in America. It has won the Nobel Prize as well as the Pulitzer Prize.

As the novel of the Joad family is not an academic piece of literature we have found it interesting and relevant to investigate its trustworthiness as a narrative source of information. The impact and relevance of the _Grapes_ is still enormous and that has been yet another intriguing point of our research. Why is it so? Is it possible to use a best selling novel to get valuable historical insight? The cardinal question we will be answering is therefore the following:

- Can _The Grapes of Wrath_ be used as an historical source to knowledge about the Dust Bowl migration?

After reading and scrutinizing the book we have consulted one of the most respected scholars within the field of “Dust Bowl Migration”. James N, Gregory is the author of the academic pendant to _Grapes, The American Exodus, 1989 (Exodus)_.

Gregory analyzes the conditions as well as the life of the migrants - especially the ones coming from the

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1 Official nickname for California
Midwestern states. The very different nature of the two accounts serves as a significant parameter in understanding how the literary and academic approaches to history “work”. In this report we will examine where the two differ and where they agree; this will be treated in chapter 5. Further, we will analyze how real life was lived in the government camp of Arvin\(^2\), the only place in the novel described positively by Steinbeck (chapter 3). We will from a narrow point of departure present a discussion of how the work of Steinbeck represents an archetype Americanism and how it functions as a factor maintaining the American Dream and the urge for the frontier (chapter 4). As the novel is highly political we will make an attempt to integrate the political and societal context in which Steinbeck wrote (Chapter 2).

Finally we will sum up the results of our investigation and discuss some of the key elements in connection with the novel. We will juxtapose it to perspectives leading up to present time and discuss how and why a 66 year old American novel on domestic migration is still relevant for late modern Europeans.

Enjoy!!

1.1. A Reader’s Digest
Our intention with writing this project is to make a thorough evaluation of *Grapes*’ usefulness as a historical source. We primarily address our work to people already familiar with the contents of the novel. As we do not intend to make a thorough literary analysis of the story in *Grapes*, we do not find it relevant to provide a detailed overview of the events; we will only mention the points in the novel relevant to our investigation. As a help to the reader we instead enclose the lyrics of the song “Tom Joad” by Woody Guthrie, one of the post popular and representative poets of that time and theme. The lyric present highlights of the action of the novel, and provides a certain ambience we feel fits *Grapes* very well.

**TOM JOAD**
(Woody Guthrie)

Tom Joad got out of the old McAlester Pen  
There he got his parole

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\(^2\) In *Grapes of Wrath* the Arvin camp is called Weedpatch.
After four long years on a man killing charge
Tom Joad come a walking down the road, poor boy
Tom Joad come a walking down the road

Tom Joad he met a truck driving man
There he caught him a ride He said: "I just got loose from
McAlester's Pen On a charge called Homicide, A charge called
Homicide."

That truck rolled away in a cloud of dust,
Tommy turned his face toward home,
He met Preacher Casey and they had a little drink,
But they found that his family they was gone,
He found that his family they was gone.
He found his mother's old fashion shoe
Found his daddy's hat.
And he found little Muley and Muley said:
"They've been tractored out by the cats,
They've been tractored out by the cats."

Tom Joad walked down to the neighbors farm
Found his family.
They took Preacher Casey and loaded in a car
And his mother said "We got to git away."
His mother said 'We got to get away."

Now the twelve of the Joads made a mighty heavy load
But Grandpa Joad did cry.
He picked up a handful of land in his hand
Said: "I'm stayin' with the farm till I die.
Yes, I'm stayin' with my farm till I die."

They fed him short ribs and coffee and soothing syrup
And Grandpa Joad did die.
They buried Grandpa Joad by the side of the road,
Buried Grandma on the California side,
They buried Grandma on the California side.

They stood on a Mountain and they looked to the West And it
looked like the promised land. That bright green valley with a
river running through, There was work for every single hand, they
thought, There was work for every single hand.
The Joads rolled away to Jungle Camp, There they cooked a stew.
And the hungry little kids of the Jungle Camp Said: "We'd like to
have some too." Said: "We'd like to have some too."
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Now a Deputy Sheriff fired loose at a man
Shot a woman in the back.
Before he could take his aim again
Preacher Casey dropped him in his track.
Preacher Casey dropped him in his track.

They handcuffed Casey and they took him to Jail
And then he got away.
And he met Tom Joad on the old river bridge,
And these few words he did say, poor boy,
These few words he did say.

"I preached for the Lord a mighty long time
Preached about the rich and the poor.
Us workin' folks got to all get together,
Cause we ain't got a chance anymore.
We ain't got a chance anymore."

The Deputies come and Tom and Casey run
To the bridge where the water run down.
But the vigilante they hit Casey with a club,
They laid Preacher Casey on the ground.
They laid Preacher Casey on the ground.

Tom Joad he grabbed that Deputy's club
Hit him over the head.
Tom Joad took flight in the dark rainy night
A Deputy and a Preacher lying dead, two men,
A Deputy and a Preacher lying dead.

Tom run back where his mother was asleep
He woke her up out of bed.
Then he kissed goodbye to the mother that he loved
Said what Preacher Casey said, Tom Joad,
He said what Preacher Casey said.

"Ever'body might be just one big soul
Well it looks that a way to me.
Everywhere that you look in the day or night
That's where I'm gonna be, Ma,
That's where I'm gonna be.

Wherever little children are hungry and cry
Wherever people ain't free.
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights
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That's where I'm gonna be, Ma.
That's where I'm a gonna be.

1.2. Methodological Reflections

Creating a project on the basis of a novel with a historical perspective such as *Grapes* by John Steinbeck makes it absolutely necessary to consider a wide range of possible pitfalls.

A lot has been said, written and argued about this great novel from 1939. The importance of the themes dealt with in the novel is obvious and calls for some immediate reactions. The very setup in the late 1930’s and its great slump is in itself a theme of endless discussion.

It is very common that people (among them scholars and other academics) have a tendency to reflect on the novel as an accurate description of the living conditions among people from Oklahoma in the 1930’s. *Grapes* has become mandatory reading among high school students in most of the United States and is considered to be of such importance in American history that hardly anybody doubts its seriousness.

With this in mind, one would have to be very pedantic not to accept Steinbeck’s novel as a trustworthy historical document.

It seems, though, as if some basic problems occur if we dig a little deeper into the settings and schisms of the *realities* of the 1930’s.

Common sense and critical logic makes us wonder about the trustworthiness of America’s beloved writer.

Firstly, when dealing with fiction, it is always questionable whether objectivity and fairness are abandoned in order to establish enough drama to seduce an audience and to communicate a moral standpoint.

Secondly, the historical memory of most people tends to be limited. This causes the risk of accepting “easy” solutions and meanings; that is, when people seek to understand

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3 The assumption that the events of the novel are taking place in 1938 will be explained in the chapter “Steinbeck and Roosevelt”.
4 We are fully aware of the fact that the very term ”objectivity” is involved. In this sense it is used to understand the obvious difference between the personal (subjectivity) and the multiple oriented academic description and analysis of a given historical event.
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history some versions of it will be more appealing and easy to relate to than others. In our report we will look into how, and to what extent, this is the case with the *Grapes*. One might argue that *Grapes* serves as a convenient frame of a common historical memory in which Americans have shaped their self perception.

In the report we will discuss and analyze the possible errors in historical accuracy made by Steinbeck. By collocating the pieces of information by Steinbeck and other sources e.g. *Exodus* we will attempt to discover the “true” (hi)story of the Oklahoman migrants. By doing so we hope to obtain an answer to our cardinal question, and also a clear picture of Steinbeck’s motives and sympathies. Another source will be the material from a Weepatch organization\(^5\) in Bakersfield, California and records of the Arvin Camp from the National Archives. Because this material will give us an image of the place Steinbeck chose for the most positive experience for the Joads it will help us to discover Steinbeck’s societal and political preferences. Steinbeck is often referred to as being pro *New Deal*.\(^6\) Is it at all fair to argue that Steinbeck could be viewed as a spokesman of the New Deal policies, simply because of his positive attitude towards certain elements of government policy during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (FDR)?

In order to investigate these themes as thoroughly as possible we will use as many primary sources as we find appropriate. We have been consulting professionals within the field of American Studies and at the same time using formal information sources such as e.g. the National Archives, Library of Congress, FBI files\(^7\).

In addition to these sources we are also investigating other representations of the events of the 1930’s. The historical academic work *American Exodus* by scholar James N. Gregory serves as a comparative source of analysis to us, as we know that the very nature of this account is different from the fiction by Steinbeck\(^8\). We will use *Exodus* for two reasons; to learn how close Steinbeck stays to the “facts” and as a point of departure for our methodological discussion of the usefulness of the two different writing styles.

\(^5\) An organization established by relatives of the migrants who lived in the nearby government camp named Arvin Federal government Camp. The official homepage is http://www.weedpatchcamp.com/
\(^6\) The popular name of the policies of the FDR administration (1933-45)
\(^7\) these institutions are situated physically in Washington, DC
\(^8\) James N. Gregory is a professor of American Studies associated to the Berkeley university in California
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We will also include a completely different medium in our comparison, namely the pictures of photographer Dorothea Lange. With these we wish to shed light on another aspect of the story of the migrants – the “migrant experience” of the events. In opposition to *Grapes* the pictures by Lange are “non-fictional”, thus we find it interesting to compare this source to *Grapes* to judge how close it was to reality.

When dealing with photography as a source we are aware that there are pitfalls one must take into account. Firstly, as with any narrative, the “producer” has to make choices concerning what to include. Hence one will be presented with the photographer’s prioritization which might not be representative of the general situation. Another danger is the possible hidden agenda of the photographer, who can be just as misleading as the writer. Lastly one must keep in mind that the picture only shows a brief moment in time, an image very open and exposed to interpretation by the viewer. With this in mind we will evaluate *Grapes* comparatively using the visual presentations by Lange.

Further source criticism will be dealt with in the chapters when relevant.

To broaden the scope of investigation we are continuously consulting commonly accepted historical works (*A Peoples History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *Party of the People* by Jules Witcover and *The Age of Extremes* by Eric Hobsbawm). With these we wish to gain a better understanding of the historical framework for the migrants and Steinbeck – and the American people in general. We hope to thereby be able to understand the book better and also why it became – and remains - so popular. We will however be careful when using these works as both of them, as so many others, have a certain bias; in this case of the two authors are very frank about their being biased.

The working processes will take its point of departure in a classic source criticism and then develop into a broader analysis of the implications in history writing of the themes dealt with through out the report.

### 1.3 Delimitations

Since the focal areas of the material here mentioned and used in the report are within the field of *social* history it is arguable that psychological discussions should not be left out. However, we will only include psychology where it is absolutely necessary for
understanding the complexity of the given matters. The question of the relevance of this
will also serve as the starting point for our discussion of the role of history-writing.
As our interests lie specifically in investigating the usefulness of *Grapes* as a historical
source we will only discuss issues relevant to this; we will not go into a general
historiographical discussion concerning history writing.
We will not include Steinbeck’s own newspaper articles about the migration, as we wish
to investigate his novel on its own terms.
2.0. Steinbeck and Roosevelt

“I’m sure you will find that it is most appropriate to consider Steinbeck to be a New Deal Democrat.” (Doris Weddell, 4/1/2005)

Our understanding of history is often blurred by a widespread laziness that seems inherent in human nature. We tend to jump to easy conclusions fitting our present time discourse. The settings of things and events sometimes fit so well that it would be a death route to go into deeper explorations than highly necessary.

As we have seen in the chapter on methodological reflections the 1930’s were a decade of turbulence and widespread fear of the future. The economic slump and the climatic situation in most of the Middle West was of such a strong nature that a great number of people’s existence was threatened. At least this is what most history books on the period have taught us.

In this perspective the Grapes takes the reader on the perfect journey through misery while at the same time showing some hope for the future.

On the back of the Danish translation of the novel is written:
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“The social aspects of the novel gave results in American politics and the novel has survived the time bound and still stands as a masterpiece, rich in people, sorrow and happiness”

This statement insinuates that the novel is important and should be taken seriously, and that the implications were of a larger scale than just within the literary genre of fiction. At first sight this would probably be accepted as a fair suggestion, since most people today in retrospect will consider the Grapes as an important contribution to American life.

This may be so, but one will have to acknowledge that the ordinary man’s retrospective perception is one thing; another is the actual and simultaneous policy making (on the federal level) at the time of the events.

This line of thought leads to the investigation of the date of the writings of the novel. Grapes was released in 1939, but we must dig deeper to find out whether the novel is dealing with the period 1930-33 (before Roosevelt was inaugurated as president) or if the action of novel takes place in the period in between 1933 and 1939. It makes a difference because of the agitations for change that are portrayed through both the main character Tom Joad and his fellow character Jim Casey.

From 1929-1933 Herbert Clark Hoover was the Republican president. During the election campaign Hoover was “full of optimism”

He suggested that: “We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land...” (Esman: 2001:250). Hoover might have been right in his premature analysis, but the Wall Street failure on the Black Tuesday, the 29th of October 1929 changed everything for Hoover and the rest of the world.

Political and philosophical labels are used to establish some sort of order in the chaos that is often the case when dealing with the creative arts. Musicians, authors, painters etc. are not necessarily working within the same frames of analytical and scientific setting as the academia. This factor makes it easy to interpret the displays of these groups of contributors and debaters on premises that do not exist in the narrow world of the artist.

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9 The Grapes of Wrath, Danish translation (own translation into English) (Vredens Druer), Gyldendals Tranebøger, printed 1986
10 Elected in 1932
11 Frank Esmann in American Presidents (Amerikanske Præsidenter), Det Historiske Hus & Aschehoug 2001
Steve Van Zandt, best known for his role as a guitarist in the E Street Band, explains this problem successfully in the lyrics of his song “I’m a Patriot”:

“I am a patriot, and I love my country, because my country is all I know.

Wanna be with my family,  
People who understand me.  
I got no place else to go.

And I ain’t no communist,  
And I ain’t no socialist,  
And I ain’t no capitalist,  
And I ain’t no imperialist,  
And I ain’t no Democrat,  
Sure ain’t no Republican either,  
I only know one party,  
And that is freedom”.

One might argue that *Grapes* and its gallery of people are operating within the American tradition of patriotism and Americanism that can hardly be labeled as belonging to a specific political party. Not that the standpoints and agitations in the novel are not political. They most certainly are. Political radicalism or anarchism might be more appropriate labels to suggest in the case of Steinbeck’s novel.

**2.1. A Hudson ‘25**

As mentioned above Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Democrat) was elected President of the United States of America in 1932 and inaugurated in 1933. This fact gives the first three years of the 1930’s to Hoover (Republican).

A very different basis applies to understanding *Grapes* if we are to suggest that the events are supposed to take place under the political leadership of Hoover or if we can conclude that Roosevelt was the leader in charge of the nation, which he was for 12 full years (1933-45)\(^{12}\).

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\(^{12}\) After his presidency the law was changed so that only 2 periods are now possible
Throughout the novel the leading characters are expressing their hopes and wishes for change. Casey and Joad are constantly having talks about the overall situation both politically and societal more generally. Casey suggests that: “…They’s gonna come a thing that’s gonna change the whole country”.

Casey could easily be considered as the leading ideologue and armchair politician while Tom Joad would be the agitator and practical leader.

A thoroughfare of the novel gives the impression that the overall discontentment among the sharecroppers is more overwhelming than one would think judging by the actual policies the administration in Washington, DC are suggesting.

The main figures in Steinbeck’s novel are all waiting for positive change.

As mentioned above, the approach and analysis of the novel takes a very different direction if we choose to believe that Hoover was still president at the time the plot takes place. To accept of Steinbeck as a “New Deal Democrat” is, in this sense a question of whether it was the one president or the other. The constant criticism of the “East-coast government” suggests at least some indignation about the actual policies made by the administration in power at the time.

There are two very strong indicators that the novel is taking place in 1938.

The first convincing indicator is the year of the vehicle that the Joad family bought. In chapter 7 we are told that Al Joad chose a 1925 Dodge. Later in the novel we are told that the vehicle needed to be fixed and that its capabilities are marked by its thirteen years on the road. Tom Joad says: “This buggy been on the road thirteen years”. Al and Tom went in search for auto supplies and at a garage they are asking for a ”con-rod” from 1925: “Got a wrecked ’25 Dodge? We need a con-rod”. The result of this little piece of math is that the specific event must have taken place in 1938.

Another historical fact that makes it fair to suggest 1938 as the year of the events is, that John Steinbeck went on a field trip in 1936 in order to collect data for his novel. Steinbeck went to the government camp in Weedpatch, officially named Arvin Federal Government Camp. In the Grapes of Wrath the camp is named “Weedpatch”. This fact is noted by the association “Dust Bowl Memories”, located in Bakersfield, California.

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13 Steinbeck: 1939, p. 181, chapter 16
14 Steinbeck: 1939, p. 179, chapter 16
15 Steinbeck: 1939, p. 185, chapter 16
Bakersfield is located less than 20 miles from the historical Arvin camp, just off highway 99.

### 2.2. Concluding Remarks

It seems obvious that the agitation in Steinbeck’s novel is of a more radical character, and therefore not in line with the actual policies of the Roosevelt administration.

On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that Steinbeck appreciates the establishing of the government camps, and that he views these camps as the absolutely most positive opportunity for the migrants, at the time of the events.

However, this single factor is not enough to suggest that Steinbeck is a Democrat. Better not to label Steinbeck as anything other than a socially mobilized writer without membership in any specific party, but with sympathies for the political left.

It is a well-known fact that Steinbeck was monitored by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), because of his wife’s connections to the American Communist Party. But since no hard evidence has been collected on Steinbeck and his connections with radicals and communists, it remains speculation as to whether or not his political activities were significant or just in line with the views common among intellectuals and artists.

It is also worth noticing that during the 1930’s the so called Western world experienced an economical crisis that largely spared the Soviet Union. The “socialistic experiment” was therefore appealing and somewhat attractive to Western intellectuals. It is arguable that the political flirtation with communism was of a cost-free character and thereby insignificant.

Finally, the political reality and discourse, that Steinbeck was a part of is depends on the approach to social issues and politics in general. Howard Zinn refers to Steinbeck in his chapter on the living conditions in the 1930’s and quotes the writers who were active

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16 “In 1936 a newspaper reporter named John Steinbeck became interested in the plight of the "Okies." He stayed near the "Weedpatch Camp" in the neighboring community of Weedpatch, California, and began gathering material for his controversial novel, "The Grapes of Wrath." Extract from the Dust Bowl Memories homepage.http://www.weedpatchcamp.com/history.htm
17 http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel99/foia9-30.htm
during this period. But most historians would not pay any attention to socialist writers and artist, even though their influence might have been of some significance. The manner of weighing the historical events, in other words, determines how the various contributors are evaluated in the overall picture of political history.

Another approach to the crisis of the 1930’s would be the classical analysis of economic structures and the political actions in the capital city.

This leads to mention the importance of historical method towards any given subject. In *A Peoples History of the United States* Zinn clearly places himself within a Marxist discourse, which colors the analysis of the political life in the US. Zinn would not be tempted to classify Jimmy Carter as a “true” liberal. Instead he suggests that Carter was just being a part of an American tradition of politics that since Jefferson and Jackson has been in favor of the corporate world.

### 2.3. The Acts

Another factor indicating that Steinbeck and Roosevelt did not share the same political observation are the political acts that was passed in the years from 1933 – 1940 (the time around Steinbeck’s research, writing and release).

In 1940 the United States Congress passed *The Alien Registration Act of 1940*[^18], also called the “*Smith Act*” because of its origin from Howard W. Smith, House of Representatives.

The Smith Act made it illegal to agitate for any revolutionary overthrowing of the US government[^19]. It was later used to abandon and split-up groups with socialistic intentions and motivations.

*The Smith Act* is in direct opposition to the thoughts expressed by Steinbeck and the main characters in *Grapes*. Steinbeck suggests several times throughout the novel that there is a potential for revolution if the migrants and poor workers would organize themselves.[^20]

[^18]: Appendix 10.13
[^19]: Ibid
[^20]: Steinbeck: 1939, p. 219
The Smith Act is the predecessor to the Communist hunt of the 1950’s under President Joseph McCarthy and was indeed not a helping hand to the American left. The formulations of the act are in dry letters harmless and logical. Political violence, and violence in general, is forbidden and is expected to be so in a democracy. The context, in which the act was passed, however, indicates that the Washington, DC administration wanted to assure its grip on the political events. The Socialists had been a strong factor on the Pacific Northwest since the late 18th century and the Great Depression had been an inspiration for radical groups throughout the country. Furthermore, the international situation in 1940 illuminated with clarity that radical forces were a serious factor. The Smith Act is an important example of a political intervention made after the release of Grapes that could be interpreted two ways: 1. The Smith Act is totally isolated from the release of Grapes. 2. The Smith Act is a direct response to the radical rhetoric of Grapes. The latter is unlikely, and indicates that the novel did not have any direct impact on the law making or the major political structures in general. At least it is not possible to conclude this by analyzing the literal text of the laws. What inspired lawmakers and politicians more generally is another discussion. This means that one might have to dismiss the assertion from the back cover of the Danish translation as mentioned in the chapter on Methodology. At least it will lead to some reorientation for those who believe that Steinbeck was a New Deal Democrat. Whether Steinbeck did or did not sympathize with the Party of the People (the Democrats) in private cannot be discerned by reading the novel. Nevertheless, John Steinbeck received national support under the WPA (Work Project Administration) program, which was established as a Social Security arrangement as part of the New Deal policy. Steinbeck received aid in the period from 1935-39 and may, for that reason alone have been tempted to support the more general policies of the Roosevelt administration. However, it is arguable that a great number of the initiatives taken by the Roosevelt administration did not create better living conditions for those in the countryside who needed it the most. Small farmers and sharecroppers were forced to produce less and were in many instances forced on the road due to the newly introduced machinery and the

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21 Howard Zinn, A Peoples History of The United States
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extended use of tractors. The technological development was not in the hands of the Roosevelt administration, but the AAA22 (Agricultural Adjustment Administration) program which forced the independent farmers and sharecroppers to produce less, was. The intention of the AAA was to reestablish or synchronize prices between the farming industry and the general industry. The program was to a great extent a success. But as seen so many times before, the weakest groups, the unorganized and the blacks did not profit from the arrangement23. One might argue that the AAA act was the forerunner of what was later to be known as the subsidizing of western agricultural industry. Its protectionist nature and consequences are essentially similar to those facing agricultural working conditions of today. Farmers still get paid for letting marginal farmland out of production. This was the direct cause leading to the migration, especially amongst sharecroppers from the Mid/Southwest and the South.

Some acts, however, worked directly serving as a supporting intervention for the working and unskilled classes.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) made it possible for workers to demand a minimum wage of $ 0,25 and with the simultaneous establishment of the Wage and Hour Division24, payment for overtime (more than 44 hours) was introduced25.

The FLSA was, as mentioned above, introduced one year before the release of Grapes (1938). During the research period Steinbeck could hardly have been aware of the upcoming act, since the description of the actual working conditions in the novel are less flattering than the content of the FLSA. The average wage for the unskilled California workers was 20 cents, but in reality these very workers were forced into a dog eat dog situation characterized by underbidding, in a struggle to get the limited number of jobs available. “Twicet now I’ve fell for that. Maybe he needs a thousan’ men. He’ll get five thousan’ there, an’ he’ll pay fifteen cents an hour. An’ you poor bastards’ll have to take it ‘cause you’ll be hungry” (Floyd to a waiting crowd of people in a Hooverville/California).26

22 The AAA came in three tempi, 1933, 1936 and 1938. Bradley and Temperly, 1981: 220 (Ralph Willett and John White from “The Twenties”)
23 Bjøl, 2002, p. 428
24 Established under the Department of Labor
26 Steinbeck: 1939, p. 275
2.4. Writers and Politics

It seems likely that a great number of the New Deal Acts were solutions made in order to reestablish the American society. As a secondary benefit it was serving as a bulwark against radicalism and communism. This situation created a propitious political platform for FDR, in which he could maintain power for a remarkably long time. The significantly different political situation in most of Europe during this period was obviously not a role model for Americans. Only Scandinavia, with Sweden as the leading country, established a similar system in order to face the economic challenges of the 1930’s. The Roosevelt administration launched a handful of very influential programs, and in the final analysis, we will sum up the most important of these in connection to the perspectives outlined in *Grapes*.

The acts of FDR were the catalyst for the great transformation of the American society which now turned into a welfare state - a welfare state not to be compared with the Scandinavian on the bigger scale but with a farewell to Laissez Faire capitalism. America turned left in the Roosevelt decade and this was to be reflected in the literature of the time. Not only John Steinbeck was to be considered a “leftist”. According to Ralph Willett and John White, Fifty-three writers and artists were members of the Communist Party in 1932. This indicates that a tendency towards the left was present at the time, even though the number of prominent members seems insignificant when considering the size of the country in which they were operating.

To incorporate writers and artists in a political discourse is dangerous and somewhat pretentious, since these very writers and artist might well be unskilled in political science in the first place and secondly, the factor leading to their political criticism is not necessarily political. Instead, it is often an identification with *humanity* in a broad sense that is triggering the modes and actions of the artists and the writers. This factor creates methodological problems when historians and others in the academic field are analyzing the thoughts and

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27 Historians and essayists. A chapter "The Thirties” was collected by Bradley and Temperly in 1981 in “An Introduction to American Studies”
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worries of a sensitive writer or artist in the same manner as when we as professionals deal with direct political remnants (speeches, political programs etc.) and clear cut statistics in immediate relation to our field of investigation.

This, though, should not lead to academic fear of working with material in the sphere of prose and lyrics.
During their long and trying journey in their search for work, the Joads camp out in many different places. While searching for work they are forced to travel all day, standing up, pressed against each other in a small vehicle. Most of the places were they make camp are described by Steinbeck as being below human dignity. They do not have sufficient food, poor hygienic conditions, and they are constantly being used or put down by people above them in the social hierarchy.

However, there is one place which Steinbeck describes especially positively, one place where they are not pushed around. The Arvin Migratory Labor Camp, a government camp better known as the “Weedpatch” camp is the place where they regain their human dignity; as Ma puts it, upon settling in the camp they feel like people again. This type of camp was sponsored by the government as an alternative to the migrant “villages” that were spontaneously put up where the migrants gathered. The local police was not allowed inside the government camp, and for a weekly payment (one dollar a week in *Grapes*) migrants could put up their tent and live somewhat sheltered from the hardships of life on the road.

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28 *Grapes* p.322
3.1. Steinbeck’s Inspiration

In the book, the camp is run by a man named Jim Rawley; this character is based on a social worker, Thomas Collins, who ran the Arvin camp in 1936 when Steinbeck was researching in connection with the writing of his newspaper articles. In the book he is described in a very positive way, as “…a man with a thin, brown, lined face and merry eyes.” all dressed in white who helps out in the camp when it is needed. Prior to writing Grapes Steinbeck met with Collins and visited the Arvin camp while he was the manager there. Here he was inspired by the way the camp was run. Collins wrote weekly reports about the camp and in his report of October 24th Collins expresses his gratitude towards Steinbeck in connection with his articles.

In the following section we will be investigating to what extent Steinbeck’s government camp resembles the Arvin camp of Collins. We will do this in order to establish Steinbeck’s historical accuracy. We also seek to gain an impression of Steinbeck’s political and societal standpoints; this we will deduce from his description of his preferential societal arrangements. As we will show, one can find this in the microcosm of society which we believe “Weedpatch” represents.

When considering the trustworthiness of Thomas Collins’ writings, it is, of course, an important point that he is describing his job. He may have had an interest in making it appear to be running as smoothly as possible. But two points make this a fairly irrelevant issue. Firstly, government officials often visited the camp while Collins ran it and verified that it was very well functioning. Furthermore, Steinbeck visited the camp and saw how it was run. As his sympathies were obviously with the migrants he would have no interest in promoting a system which was not beneficial for them. In fact, Steinbeck went so far as to dedicate Grapes to Collins: “To Tom who lived it.”

29 Grapes p.318
30 Steinbeck wrote several articles concerning the Dust Bowl migration preceding Grapes, some of which we will include in our analysis
31 Appendix 10.1.
32 Appendix 10.2. and 10.3
33 Grapes, dedication, first page of the book
Finally, even if the information given by both Collins and Steinbeck were false, one can still deduce from the text what Steinbeck’s preferences were concerning society and politics.

### 3.2. Fiction and Facts

When the Joads set off on their journey the family consists of 12 members plus a preacher. This was an unusually large size for a migrant family. Collins notes in his reports that in his camp there was an average of 5 people in each family – in that particular report a total of 187 people in 35 families.\(^{34}\) It was not common for uncles and in-laws to travel along with the family. Collins writes that there are only a few families consisting of 7 members or more.

Apart from this aspect there are very few inconsistencies between Collins’ and Steinbeck’s descriptions of the camp.

Looking specifically at the small details one finds interesting concordances between the two sources.

The greatest number of the campers who came to the Weedpatch camp were Oklahoman migrants. Collins notes that the wages for farm labour was 20 cents/hour.\(^ {35}\) That is also the very low wage Steinbeck mentions the migrants complaining about.

Collins speaks of a police blockade on the border of Blythe which was eased up at around April 1936 allowing a large number of migrants to pass at one time.\(^ {36}\) The purpose of the blockade was to prevent the growing immigration. This situation can also be found in *Grapes* where the migrants are prevented from freely travelling and camping where they felt like.

\(^{34}\) Appendix, 10.11

\(^{35}\) Appendix, 10.12

\(^{36}\) Appendix, 10.10.
In his report Collins writes that the ultra religious people were generally causing trouble in the camp. In his report of 4/25/1936 Collins mentions a woman who has frequent brawls with the other campers. She is part of a very religious group of people who evangelize to the other campers, forsaking the weekly dances and other types of entertainment arranged in the camp. This is written in 1936, before Steinbeck immortalized her almost down to the last detail. As in Collins’ report she also starts out by acting very friendly, but ends up quarrelling with people quite often. Also the little quarrels of the women in the lavatory are something one can find in Collins’ reports. “…a good scrap is part of the migratory woman’s life.”

Also, the language used in Grapes can be found in Collins’ reports indicating that Steinbeck also got inspiration for this element from Collins. For example a migrant father, upon hearing that his newborn child is a girl, said: "Kaint be. Thar be a mi’take. It kaint be, no siree, it jest aint. Yer foolin’ aint yer?"

The camp had very good sanitary facilities compared to the other types of camps the Joads visit; there were showers with hot water, toilets and medical aid and a nursery, which made it possible for Collins to write e.g. in his report of 10/24/1936 that there were no cases of illnesses. The facilities were kept very clean by the campers. As mentioned several people employed by the government were impressed by the standards of the camp. There was help to get for women giving birth, for instance a nurse who made weekly visits. The camp also had a school from 1’st – 12’th grade.

The community found in the camp is far from a model of a typical welfare state. The people in the camp are reluctant to accept support, and agree that they should only do so in extreme situations. A situation is described where it is in the best interest of the camp that a family receives “the aid” but everyone sympathises with the family, understanding that it goes against their ideal of being independent. It feels disgraceful to them. “This ain’t charity...They ain’t no charity in this here camp. We won’t have no charity.”

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37 Appendix, 10.4.
38 Appendix, 10.6. and 10.8.
39 Grapes pp. 322-324 and pp.335-336
40 Appendix, 10.5 and 10.6
41 Appendix, 10.9.
42 Steinbeck, 1939, p.330
The conditions of the migrants get worse they are forced more and more often to accept help from other campers they meet on the way. This is, however, not as bad; it is more like an extension of the family. The people who are basically all the same stick together. They do not beg the state for help – only for work.

Also, when it comes to managing the camp, the inhabitants take care of everything. As Jim Rawley puts it, he has been worked out of his job.\(^43\) The camp is divided into sections, each of them functioning as a small community. In each section there are committees responsible for different areas of the life in the camp. According to Collins this is done “to permit representative government”\(^44\), allowing the migrants to ‘govern’ the camp in a manner that suited their needs. The head/chairman of the committees is replaced every week, ensuring an equal distribution of influence and responsibility. It is a division of power very much unlike what they experienced in the “real world”. According to Steinbeck e.g. in his article of 9/12/1936 it was also miles apart from a life where the upper class exploited and suppressed the migrants.\(^45\) Hence, for the migrants, the Weed Patch camp is a microcosm of a much more preferable society than the reality of the American society in the 1930’s. The concept of a government camp is, of course, created by the government, but the problems forcing the farmers off their land together with the societal structure dominated by capitalism and ‘Fordism’, which is part of the government, are the reasons why they are in need of help in the first place. According to *Grapes* it is not good for a man to be distanced too much from the land i.e. the primary source of food and life.

To avoid exploitation, the farmers should stick together, as the landowners try to put them up against each other.

“Here is the node, you who hate change and fear revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other....For here ”I lost my land” is changed...(to)”We lost our land”

\(^{43}\) *Grapes*, p.318

\(^{44}\) Appendix, 10.7.

\(^{45}\) Quotes from said article enclosed at the end of this chapter
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

...And from the first “we” there grows a still more dangerous thing...This is the beginning – from “I” to “we.”

3.3. The Message

Rawley says in Grapes:”They(the campers) have come in the same way...The committees are good in this camp because they do know(what it’s like to migrate)”.

The community is good because it is run for the people – by the people; by the same people who live in it, who know what they need and what they can expect from each other. Also they have the same perception of honor and dignity as mentioned briefly in the example concerning charity. They know what it does to people to be dependant of help from the government. Steinbeck points this out as being very important. The Joads are proud of being able to take care of themselves. This is also shown another place in the book when Ma offers food to hungry children of a camp. A mother scolds Ma for doing it – she would rather have her child being hungry than allowing him to accept food from others, thereby knowing that his own family could not provide for him.

If the state were to do anything for the people, it should be to provide the framework for them to live within, and govern themselves within. The character of Rawley illustrates this very well; he only interferes with the daily life of the camp when there are troubles the campers cannot solve themselves, for example when the women’s quarrels turn into physical fights. He also handles the administrative chores of the camp and collects the “rent”.

Steinbeck does not promote anarchy; on the contrary he shows how he does not think that that would be the consequence of the lack of centralized government. In this context one must consider whether the solidarity he describes so favourably only exists as a response to the situation of society at that time. As mentioned, and as Ma says, it is only when people get really desperate that they choose to live and work together and ask for help from each other. As with the rebellion of the mob in Marx’s communism it would only

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46 Steinbeck, 1939, pp.157-158
47 Steinbeck, 1939, p.319
48 Grapes, p.270
come when society was hard on the rabble. “When a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need”.49

The following two quotes are taken from John Steinbeck’s article, “Dubious Battle in California,” The Nation, September 12, 1936, 302-4.: 

“These two classes (small farmer vs. speculative farmer) have little or no common ground; while the small farmer is likely to belong to the grange, the speculative farmer belongs to some such organization as the Associated Farmers of California, which is closely tied to the state Chamber of Commerce. This group has as its major activity resistance to any attempt of farm labor to organize. Its avowed purpose has been the distribution of news reports and leaflets tending to show that every attempt to organize agricultural workers was the work of red agitators and that every organization was Communist inspired.”50

“It is fervently to be hoped that the great group of migrant workers so necessary to the harvesting of California’s crops may be given the right to live decently, that they may not be so badgered, tormented, and hurt that in the end they become avengers of the hundreds of thousands who have been tortured and starved before them.”51

So what was it that Steinbeck wanted? – Was he presenting a political “agenda” or did he merely express values embedded in American culture? In the following chapter we will look more closely at the elements of Grapes that are in line with and/or are reinforce the American myth of the Frontier. We will look at whether Steinbeck, in his book, brings to the reader’s attention the horror of the lives of the migrants, and the political implications thereof, or whether he draws a romanticised, mythical picture of the events.

49 Steinbeck, 1939, p.249
50 http://www.cerritos.edu/solver/Hist202/202primarysources/The%20Crisis%20in%20Agriculture.htm
51 Ibid
4.0. Myths of America

"The great dream of the highway makes us endeavor the everlasting journey" ⁵²

The Highway is alive tonight
Where it’s headed everybody knows
I’m sitting down here in the campfire light
Waitin’ on the ghost of Tom Joad”  "

(Chorus from “The Ghost of Tom Joad by Bruce Springsteen 1995)

The American frontier has been an object for scholars, filmmakers, writers and travelers, and a constant theme in the minds of ordinary men and women since the discovery of the country in 1492 ⁵³.

Also, the human desire for expansion is an uncontrollable force, which is still a factor in understanding the constant search for new “white spots on the map”.

The American frontier was officially closed in 1890, a year when the administration reckoned that the continent was settled. Before that, America had experienced a period of

⁵² Troels Gaihede, Copenhagen, March 25, 2005
⁵³ We have chosen not to consider whether the Vikings were the first to discover what has been called Wineland in some history books e.g. Erling Bjøl “ Gyldendals USA historie”. 
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tremendous exploration, expansion and evolution. The “Mayflower” ship landing in 1620 marked a new destiny for the American continent and became the forerunner for immigration unlike any other in human history. Christopher Columbus was not aware of the impact of his journey to what he thought was India, but the spirit of his traveling and adventurism lived on and became a condition of life itself for future generations.

As stated in the web encyclopedia Wikipedia.org:
“Eventually, the frontier by official definition of the census was a line west of which the population was less than 2 persons per section (one square mile)”\(^\text{54}\).

This definition still applies for some rural areas, like the American dessert in e.g. Nevada and California.

The Closing of the American frontier also meant that the “westward migration would no longer be tabulated”\(^\text{55}\).

This led, amongst other things, to the notion that American expansion must find new fields of interest. New markets must be available for the industry and this marked the beginning of what has been called the American imperialism\(^\text{56}\).

Decisions made by authorities and government officials comprise only a very limited parameter in our understanding of how influential the very notion of a frontier has been, and still is, for Americans and for observers of America.

In the following we will discuss how the myths, legends and stories have been told in various movies, novels and songs that have been provoking people through time.

4.1. Going West

The best known historian writing about the American Frontier was Frederick Jackson Turner who in 1893 published his phd. dissertation *Significance of the Frontier in American History.*

\(^{54}\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_frontier\#The_U.S._frontier


\(^{56}\) Howard Zinn: ” A People’s History” chapter 12
Jackson Turner was convinced that the American society was actually created on the very notion of the Frontier. He considered the Frontier and the Wilderness generally to be more important factors in establishing the democracy that we know today than treaties made by Eastcosters and theorists from Brittain. This perspective makes the idea of the Frontier not only a geographical and political one but just as much a philosophical and psychological one as well.

If we are to accept that the Frontier has been shaping the democratic development in a specific direction we would have to at least broaden the scope of meaning of the Frontier notion.

The assumption that the striving for new land and new possibilities had an ability to create positive political dynamics seems far fetched and needs further discussion. Within this assumption seems to be a wish for a story to constitute the American people, to unite the young nation and to establish a specific set of values in order to replace what people had left behind.

The constant westward expansion does not seem to have been random. It seems to be the natural premises for the people of the USA. Where else should people go? Back to the old territory (Europe) did not apply, and southbound expansion was far too difficult and demanding. And at the same time westward expansion went hand in hand with the adventurism that most commonly attracts people.

In *Grapes* we are told that the Southwesteners were convinced by posters that California was the land of plenty and that the possibilities were unlimited. Since California is the Westernmost state in the nation it is naturally expected to contain the multiple options and promises. The leading motivational factor for the hungry and the poor is the promise of food and housing. It is, however, arguable that the overall motivation is the curiosity and recklessness of the human spirit. The myths of the mighty and heroic *Okies* would probably not have seen the light of the day if the story had been about the families that stayed home and suffered or survived. The scope of the novel by Steinbeck is not considering the ones who went east to the cities of New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere. It is the openness and inherent sexuality of the Frontier that seems to attract most of us. The westward expansion and travel has become a specialized theme in the American selfunderstanding.
4.2. American Grain and Escapism

“I like it (Battlehymn ed.) because it’s a march and this book is a kind of march – because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning”.

In the introduction to the Grapes (Penguin edition of 1992) Robert DeMott, professor at the Ohio University, does more than suggest that Steinbeck wanted to write himself into the American history on several levels.

As DeMott argues:

“Steinbeck’s aggressive mixture of native philosophy, common-sense politics, blue-collar radicalism, working-class characters, folk wisdom, and home-spun literary form – all set to a nervous, raw dialogue – qualified the novel as the ‘American book’ he had set out to write”.

Not only does Grapes have the textual ingredients to constitute it, as the forerunner for the Road-novel (and later the Road-movie), but it is written in a juxtaposition style, that was later to be embraced by the Beat king, Jack Kerouac in, On the Road. In the universe of the Beats the juxtaposition was called “spontaneous prose”. This style of writing is often connected to the rhythmic flow in jazz which is a contributing factor in creating the right atmosphere of positive tension. Grapes is writing itself into a tradition of American escapism that might be an inherent feature or soul of the people. America was founded by people who left their old life behind. Only a few actually knew what they could expect from the new life across the Atlantic. The premises of a great number of the European migrants were escapism, in the sense that planning the arrival was not a possibility. It was escape itself that served as the main condition and goal, spiced up with some high hopes for a better but often undefined life on the new continent.

Not only Steinbeck and Kerouac can be mentioned as writers of escapism.

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57 Steinbeck sept. 10th 1938 to Elisabeth Otis, literary agent
58 DeMott,1992, p. 9
59 On the Road was published in 1957 and is considered the main novel in the literary genre that was to be known as “beat”.
A significant number of writers have been working with stories of human relations and destinies in a context of travel, escape and Americanism in the sense that the range of references to music, nature, psychology, education and dreams establishes an atmosphere of mightiness that would nothing but appeal to the instincts of man. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig is a brilliant example of a mythic novel in the tradition of so many other influential American escapists. It was and still is a highly recommended novel that was praised by the critics as: “The Book is like the invention of America”. Pirsig borrows some of the settings created by Steinbeck which once again proves the impact of Steinbeck historically.

As DeMott argues in the introduction to the novel “Grapes of Wrath has a homegrown quality.....part road novel, part transcendental gospel.......the timbre of Greek epics.........” Further he suggests that the “holistic structure” captures most people’s desirers and therefore establishes validity for its reader.

Even though it is arguable that it was not quite the intention in Steinbeck’s professional work to romanticize the classic idea of the American dream in its pure form of liberalism, he has become an important literary reference for writers, adventurers, musicians, filmmakers and others in search of the free life as an independent day worker, tenant and hobo of the railways. Others with more luxurious tendencies towards a duty less and bohemian lifestyle have in Grapes a perfect point of departure, because the inherent recklessness gives hope to most of the lonesome travelers without a specific goal in terms of job, home or career. The finding of these features corrupts the beauty of the struggling.

The uniqueness of the Grapes in its public appeal is well manifested in its multitude of appeals. It is fairly rare that leftwing agitation fits into the setting of the American notion of the frontier, liberty and values on a greater level. The use of the Battle Hymn might have helped the hard suggestions and agitations to be digested by Main Street, even though Steinbeck actually got himself into somewhat of a storm, and as mentioned above, under the investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI).

The banality of the various responses is almost glaring, since the most skeptical criticism came from rightwing politicians and scholars who even blamed Steinbeck for being wrong on important issues or sentimental in his characterization of the Oklahomans.\textsuperscript{61} Today hardly any American doubts the seriousness of \textit{Grapes} and it is therefore obvious to consider the novel as being a part of the greater understanding of the New Deal era. As Doris Weddell from the Weedpatch association argues in an email correspondence recently:

"I'm sure you will find that it is most appropriate to consider Steinbeck to be a New Deal Democrat. Whereas his political voting record is, of course, totally unknown and private, his actions speak volumes about his concern for poor farm workers and any other segment of society that was deprived. He firmly believed in helping those elements, and that is a primary tenet of the New Deal. Hoover believed in helping business, thereby having the benefit "trickle down" to the workers. Needless to say, it didn't work, and that is why the terrible shanty towns were called 'Hoovervilles'...Reagan brought up the trickle down concept again, and it still didn't work. That leads me to believe that the theory is fairly basic to Republican philosophy. The idea of direct aid to those who were actually without food and shelter, even in emergency situations, was only to come into its own under FDR, with all of his alphabet agencies."

This statement indicates the immediate line of thoughts that comes to mind when asked as to the significance of Steinbeck and his association with the New Deal era and its president, FDR. It is a set of thoughts that further indicates that the creation of myths is especially important in the borderline between literature, history and politics.

\textbf{4.3. Concluding Remarks}

The American myths are a field of investigation to be handled carefully. Its multiplicity demands a very thorough analysis. The attempt to see and understand \textit{Grapes} through the eyes of the broader scope of Americanism is unavoidably evident and at the same time

\textsuperscript{61} DeMott, 1992, p. 7
\textsuperscript{62} Doris Weddell: email, April 2005 to Troels Gaihede
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dangerous. A lifetime study could be made of the great number of references to all kinds of writers, discursive trendsetters and pop artists within the field of storytelling.

In this chapter we have suggested that Steinbeck placed himself in a certain tradition of escapism and maintenance of the American Dream. An American dream, though, that does not draw a blurry picture of perfection and endless possibilities but a dream about helpfulness, striving, solidarity, the beauty of traveling and the basic belief in human capacity. As DeMott argues “the timing was perfect”. Steinbeck released his novel at the right time to be connected with the general changes in American society in the 1930’s. The coincidences that shape a perfect myth or the right perceptual foundation are not to be underestimated. The randomness in history writing should be accepted as a premise that just spices up the conditions of Man. It should not be forced into a causality that is not present.

The ‘music of chance’ is what has shaped Steinbeck historically so that he is now considered the Great American Writer of all times.
5.0. The Facts and the Fiction

The good end happily and the bad unhappily; that is what fiction means.-Oscar Wilde.

Steinbeck has written a book that has captured the hearts of the Americans, but has he done this by distorting reality, and thereby gambled with the trustworthiness of his novel? In the following we will take a closer look at how Grapes relates to the facts concerning the great migration westward during the 1930’s. We will discuss whether or how a fictional text like Grapes can be used as an historical source. When doing so there are several aspects one must pay heed to.

Firstly, it is necessary to investigate whether the source is accurate with regard to the historical facts. The term “facts” indicates that there is one truth one can discover. One could argue that there are an infinite number of truths to each subject, as each person perceives the world differently.

We will return to the relevance of this later in this chapter, where we will also discuss the relevance of the different types of facts/truths; whether we actually learn more from Steinbeck than from chronological overviews and “dry numbers” or whether it is more

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63 When using the term here we mean official statistics and accounts of the migration and its extent.
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

informative to learn about the emotional aspect -and be emotionally affected by the historical material - than statistical overviews. This depends on the purpose of history writing.

In the case of *Grapes* we can speak of the truth one can find in records from the time when the event one is investigating took place. In this investigation we are using *Grapes* as a narrative source. We will compare it to Tom Collins’ camp records and pictures of the Oklahoman migrants. They give insight into how life was for the characters portrayed in *Grapes*. However, they are historical remnants and must be dealt with as such. We will go into further detail with this later in this chapter.

*Exodus* and official records (also to be found in *Exodus*) can give us an idea of how close *Grapes* is to realistically describing the living conditions of the migrants, the number of migrants who were involved, nature conditions etc. Also, by looking into political documents from that time period one can find explanations for some of these circumstances.

The records of Collins provide us with a different type of insight. Collins was a first hand witness to the migrants’ trials. One cannot know for certain how much of his statements are biased. However, one can learn how it looked from an “outsider” in close contact with the migrants; in this case Collins’ records are both narratives and remnants.

We can learn what Steinbeck’s sympathies and preferences were regarding values, society etc, and thereby shed more light on his credibility as source of information.

The pictures by Lange can give us an idea of how closely *Grapes* comes to describing the personal experience of the migrants.

It is possible that the “truths” one will get from the pictures are somewhat different from statistical overviews and records, both with regards to focus, emphasis and priorities of values. We will return to this later.

First, we will look closer at whether the account in *Grapes* tallies with the facts in *Exodus*.

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64 We have chosen to trust the statistics and figures listed *Exodus* as they refer to government records, and as Gregory is a Professor of American History at the University of Berkeley, making him scientifically responsible to his statements.
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5.1. The Facts

_Exodus_ provides us with a critical analysis of the Dust Bowl myth. In the following we will attempt to establish to what extent Steinbeck was accurate in his portrayal of the events in _Grapes_. In this section we will not go into detail with all the places where Steinbeck is being true to the facts, i.e. that there were low wages and some places no jobs at all. We will however note when Exodus’ criticism is uncalled for. Where we do not point anything out it may be understood that Steinbeck is being truthful or that his claims are inconsequential to history.

- There has been much confusion concerning the events later referred to as the Dust Bowl (-migration). It is often referred to as a weather phenomenon which covered a large geographical area, and took place over a longer period of time. According to _Exodus_ people often make the mistake of confusing dust with drought. The 1930’s especially were rough years for American agriculture. Droughts, powerful storms, followed by heavy rain and frost made life for the small farmer trying. However, as _Exodus_ points out, “Dust Bowl” refers to very specific incidents which took place between 1933 and 1935 and which covered a very thinly populated area in the area where the 4 states Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado and Kansas meet. When Steinbeck describes this he does not mention specific areas or dates; he describes the incident very generally so that one cannot get a clear image of what the Dust Bowl was. Steinbeck does however make it clear that it is because of the dust (the droughts are mentioned along with the dust), and, for some, the ensuing inability to pay off debts to the banks that the farmers had to leave their homes.

It is correct that there was one particularly large rush of migration in 1936/37 which could fit the description by Steinbeck. So far Steinbeck is true to the facts. However, as we will show momentarily, this was not due by the dust alone.
It is interesting to note here that an important factor that causes the earth to erode, creating dust-storms, is the exhaustion of the soil. This is very much in line with Steinbeck’s criticism of the tractor in *Grapes*: the inhumane, mechanical beast ruins the people, their culture – and their land.

- Steinbeck writes that the ‘Okie-problem’ involved somewhere around 250,000-300,000 migrants; migrants who were moving to California because of the droughts and because the landowners banished them from their land. According to *Exodus* this is not an accurate description of the problem. First of all the number of migrants who were moving on account of the above mentioned causes was not that high. In fact less than 16,000 people were forced to move on account of the Dust Bowl. In reality the motives of many of the migrants were significantly different. In Steinbeck’s defence we note that he says that there were 300,000 migrants on the road, he does not specifically write 300,000 sharecroppers. Whether this was done on purpose by Steinbeck to manipulate the reader into thinking the ‘Okie-problem’ was bigger than it was we shall of course never know; it does however seem to be somewhat misleading. However, *Exodus* is jumping to conclusions when criticising Steinbeck on this particular subject.

- Moreover, it is refuted in Exodus that the group of people which Steinbeck writes about made up the largest portion of the migrants. In *Grapes* Steinbeck writes of a farmer family being forced off of their lands and that migration generally was primarily a problem for the “small farmer”. He describes how they have been on their land for generations and how they have no desire for moving. Both of these claims are questionable. *Exodus* explains how the largest number of migrants actually came from urban areas; hence their motivation for moving was quite different from that of the Joads. We shall return to this momentarily. *Exodus* also claims that it was in fact relatively few farmers who were directly forced to leave their land. Furthermore it was not an unfamiliar fate for a farmer in Oklahoma to

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move several times during a lifetime. It was in fact rather the rule than the
exception for most tenant farmers to move at least 2-3 times in their life in their
search for work.

• Concerning the difference between urban citizens and farmers going west, we
once more find *Grapes*’ version rather misleading. Out of all the migrants the
farmers constituted only 43%. The urban population moved West in the hope of
improving their lives. They were seeking their fortune in the Promised Land as so
many Americans had done before them, as mentioned in chapter 4. However,
most of the people, farmers as well as city folks, already knew people in
California when they left. Some of them even had jobs waiting for them when
they arrived.\(^{66}\) For the people of the city it was easier to find work than for
farmers. However, it was seldom that they managed to maintain their previous job
positions – white-collar workers became blue-collar workers, blue-collar workers
were likely to turn to farming etc.\(^ {67}\) All in all, according to Exodus, the situation
of the migrants was not as grim as Steinbeck made it out to be. The number of
people actually suffering a fate similar to the Joads “only” amounted to about
16000 people.

• Steinbeck’s and Collins’ characterization of the migrants is also worth a closer
look. *Exodus* accuses Steinbeck and Collins of being overly romantic in
describing the migrants. They described the migrants as plain people, close to
nature (they were cultivating the land, hence they were closer to “real life”); a
simple people but with real values. Collins often made room in his reports for a
section he referred to as “A little migrant wisdom”; in this section he would
recount situations where the migrants said something funny. It is often a comical
story in which the migrant appears simpleminded, but he often ends up “hitting
the nail on the head” concerning whatever aspect of life the situation involved.

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\(^{66}\) Exodus pp 26-27

\(^{67}\) Exodus p.61
According to *Exodus* this image is quite far from reality. The greater portion of migrants had been to school, at least up to 6th grade. Also, many of the city-people had blue-collar or even white-collar jobs. In fact, some of the migrants resented the way Steinbeck portrayed them. As his book gained recognition his image of the migrant settled in people’s minds, making it hard for the migrants to disprove. “I think the stigmatism of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* will always be with us…” and the woman continued that she had “spent a lot of years hating him”.68“The *Grapes of Wrath* crafted a portrait that many former Dust Bowl migrants have long regarded as demeaning” & “…Steinbeck kept his characters close to nature, close to the soil, so as to realize his critique of the machine and its civilization.”69 He also points to the way the migrants preferred to be seen in an example using the photographs of Lange. He juxtaposes an image of a down-at-heel mother in a tent and a mother who is posing with her children after having “had the chance to prepare for the photo” as Gregory puts it.70 Whether one can argue that this proves Steinbeck wrong is a matter of opinion.

After having read *Grapes* we do agree, however, to a certain extent with *Exodus*. Steinbeck and Collins do seem to portray the migrants in a caricature fashion. They are very rich in human wisdom (wisdom of life) yet they are very simple people with simple needs; they want to be able to work, own a peace of land in order to be independent, keep the family together etc. They do not seek education and they resort to violence when pressured. One could ask whether it is possible to avoid this caricature characterization when dealing with a fictional novel; also, it may not be a bad thing as it enhances the understanding of the reader. Furthermore, if one puts together all the traits of the Joad-family members one gets a very detailed impression of a multifaceted, resourceful migrant.

Furthermore, as *Exodus* also briefly mentions, one must take into account at what time *Grapes* was written. As *Exodus* states “(Steinbeck and)Collins was not being intentionally scornful”…”Compensating for the failures of modern economic systems, they(Collins et al) now looked for grounding in the traditions and lives of ordinary

68 Gregory,1991, p.111
69 Ibid
70 Exodus pp. 124-125
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Americans.”71 This goes for Steinbeck as well. In the 1930’s the US was a rather stratified, class society and the political correctness of today was not known at that time.

Another point to keep in mind when dealing with Exodus is that it was written in 1989; a time when the political correctness concerning how to speak about ethnic groups was prevalent. This may have made Gregory more sensitive to prejudice/racist statements. However, in the 1930’s this was not the case, and as Steinbeck is clearly socially indignant one cannot doubt that his sympathies were with the migrants.

This does not automatically mean that Steinbeck represented the migrants’ dreams or self-perception; in fact many of the migrants voted Republican at that time, an interesting fact considering that the New Deal program was a Democrat’s invention. Also, Steinbeck associated the migrant way of life with a very romantic set of values (as he saw it) – the simple life as we have described it above. However, the migrants did not always share this point of view. They were desperately seeking a way out of that lifestyle, and upwards in society. One could therefore suggest that if the migrants achieved what they wanted they would cease to be the object of Steinbeck’s admiration.

5.2. The Author and Contemporary Discourse

One must keep in mind that Steinbeck was writing his novel in a different time from ours. What is considered politically correct now was not the same back then. When reading his novels one must therefore be careful not to judge his books from a present day perspective. This becomes especially relevant when regarding his political standpoint and possible political agenda.

Also, in Exodus, Steinbeck is accused of being patronising towards the Oklahoman migrants. While Steinbeck’s sympathy clearly lies with the Okies, Exodus claims that he does not give them the “recognition” or respect they deserve.

“The Joads…are cast as uneducated dirt farmers bereft of many of the moral and social graces that sophisticated Americans of the period valued”72

71 Gregory, 1991, p.110
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Gregory acknowledges the fact that Steinbeck was not intentionally patronising the migrants, however he does not believe this excuses it. Many similar examples of this can be found in the past. One very obvious example is the idea of “The White Man’s Burden” of 19th Century British imperialistic way of thought. Back then it was common for the British to regard people from their colonies as backward and childish; the white man had to “raise” them as they could not get by properly without his assistance. Today that same thought is very politically incorrect. Instead of e.g. characterizing an entire nation as being racist, one must take a hermeneutical approach to the ideas of the past, putting the notions of our present time aside.

This opens up another problem; the reader will always be influenced by the surrounding society, hence we are also influenced by our time. Had we read *Grapes* when it was published our perception of it would naturally have been different, just as the perception of an American will differ from someone with a different origin. We shall return to this in chapter 6.

Lastly, one must take into account the fact that our access to information is greater than it was for Steinbeck, as our knowledge will also be outdated in the future. Therefore it is difficult to make a lasting evaluation of Steinbeck’s writing on the basis of what we know today.

So how does this affect the usefulness of *Grapes* as an historical source? According to the above we cannot rightfully claim that *Grapes* is an accurate account of the events it describes. How well then does it succeed in capturing the experience of the migrants?

### 5.3. The Migrant Experience

As we have written Steinbeck was representative of a left-wing political standpoint, something not necessarily typical for the migrants he describes. Their socialistic

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72 Gregory, 1991, p. 111
73 Exodus pp. 110-111
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

behaviour, if it even existed, was caused by need, not political conviction, as Steinbeck himself writes. As Gregory has hinted his portrayal of their lifestyle and personality may also have been biased and faulty. It is impossible to fully understand the situation of people in past times. Even in contemporary times it can be questioned as to whether it is possible to gain complete empathetic insight into the situation of others. However, Steinbeck’s novel seems aimed at doing just that – explaining how people felt and thought at that time, and giving the reader the possibility of understanding it as well. The reader gets insight into the mental experience of the Joads. Furthermore, the very explicit and vivid descriptions of their material condition give the reader an insight that numbers and statistics could never do.

Another source that can convey this very strongly and which has also been employed in the case of the Dust Bowl migration is the photograph. The pictures by Dorothea Lange became famous nationwide in the 1930’s as she travelled with her husband, taking pictures of migrants before departing from home, while travelling to and upon arriving in California. They show the living conditions of the migrants. Along with Grapes the pictures by Lange are one of the most frequently mentioned and used sources concerning these events e.g. in educational forums.74

In the following we will look at whether or how these two representations coincide.

Back home:
Although the Joads did not wish to leave their home, they left behind a tough life and rather poor living conditions. The images by Lange support this description; they give the viewer an impression of a very impoverished people

74 www.nationalarchives.gov & www.loc.gov
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who had had to work hard to survive back home, and who finally had no choice but to leave.

On the road:
Steinbeck’s description of a family on the road crammed in an old rickety car is very well illustrated by this picture. As Steinbeck describes, the journey towards the Promised Land of plenty was no less strenuous than the lives they left behind. It is known for a fact that there were many families moving in this manner. Though Lange may have singled this family out, searching for a motif like this, without it being representative of how all migrants moved, it does support Steinbeck’s description of their situation and how it must have affected them mentally.

Upon arriving in California:

The Government Camps:
These pictures show that, in comparison with the squatter camps, migrants were doing fairly well in the government camps. One recognises the well functioning sanitary camps which are in sharp contrast to the chaotic squatters-camps.
The Squatters Camps:
This is one of the subjects that have drawn most attention, largely due to the disturbing pictures by Lange. In numerous pictures Lange presents the hardships of the migrants living in squatter camps or other, random places. They show very clearly how the migrants’ existence was threatened, and that their future options were poor; one sees the hunger, the poverty, the cold, the heat, the water, the hard work and the despair in the migrants’ eyes. The tormented people Steinbeck describes are here presented to the reader through documentation which is hardly questionable.
**Three sides to every story:**

As mentioned there were two ways the migrants were described; most often it was the way they are presented in the above images; sometimes, in contrast to this, the outside world was shown them as they, themselves, wished to be seen. As Steinbeck describes in the scene where Ma wants to get ready and look presentable in the government camp for the ladies committee the migrants took pride in appearing with dignity, and class. However, as opposed to what Gregory emphasizes, one can argue that even though the pictures do not show how the migrants wished to be seen, they do show, as in *Grapes*, fragments of how living conditions were for the migrants.

We must reconcile ourselves with the notion that it is impossible to know exactly how the migrants experienced the migration and life afterwards in California. However, upon viewing the pictures of Lange we have confirmed our belief that Steinbeck is not as far from the facts in this respect as Gregory accuses him of being. He describes living conditions very similar to the ones Lange displays. The desperate situations in Lange’s pictures were reality to a certain number of migrants; this is a fact all sources agree on. Personally the pictures did not surprise us much after having read the book. They made a different kind of “immediate” impression than the book did, but did not replace the impressions we got from *Grapes*; rather, they reinforced it. The emotional understanding of the migrants we got from *Grapes* make the pictures linger in our memory. Whether it is a realistic image we shall perhaps never know. However, it is certain that the visual documentation of the events confirms the narrative of Steinbeck; the portrayal of migrant

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75 *Grapes* p.319
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

life and feelings of *Grapes* are in accord with Lange’s pictures, as well as the emotional appeal to the audience.

**5.4. Remnant**

We have until now dealt with *Grapes* as a narrative. One can also choose to take a different approach to the source, namely to investigate its qualities as remnant. As this is not our objective we will only briefly touch upon the matter.

Naturally, as a document written in the past *Grapes* can be used to investigate the time around which it was written. In this case it can be used to gain insight into the very same period which it involves.

It tells us about the situation of the country, and how it was experienced by Steinbeck and perhaps others. It gives us an impression of the hierarchical societal structure, and also the racism that flourished. In particular one can learn much from looking at what it does not include; it does for instance not speak at all of poor people of other ethnic groups at all even though they were doing even worse than the *Okies*. As will be elaborated later on in chapter 7 this has not changed much to this day. It can also help us understand why Steinbeck had such a romantic (or distorted, as Gregory claims) view of the *Okies*; for instance, when regarding the state of the nation at that time, and socialism’s growing popularity in American society one can see the same values shining through in *Grapes*. However, this is subject to our interpretation. Therefore what one chooses to focus on and what one concludes will change over time.

It is very expressive that *Grapes* has been able to capture the attention of the nation to such a large degree; it has both contributed to existing myths and created new ones. It helps us understand the mentality of the population amongst whom it has been so popular, as the audience obviously relates to it positively. The shared societal references and moral convictions form the basis for this nationwide acceptance of this “truly

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76 A Peoples History, pp 397-398
77 A Peoples History, chap. 12, 13, 14
American book. It is, however, not only in America that *Grapes* has found popularity. It is a landmark within its genre in many countries, and has been during the different cultures and changing generations over the course of the last six decades. Therefore it must reach beyond more than just an American audience. We will return to this in chapter 7.

5.5. **Concluding Remarks**

Based on all of these results we can conclude that *Grapes* is not a particularly trustworthy source when it comes to learning the “dry facts” about the Dust Bowl events. It does not qualify, in the most objective sense of the term, as a narrative source. It does, however, serve to give a very powerful insight into the mentality of the migrant. One could argue that it is actually more useful in this fashion as it provides the reader with an understanding of the humanitarian consequences of people living like the Joads. As this is something we have seen all through history, it still serves this purpose, even today. So while we can only use the information of sources like e.g. *Exodus* or governmental records or statistics in relation to that specific issue, *Grapes* gives us a much broader understanding of historically influential factors and tendencies. Does this then count as a truth just as important and useful as the “factual” truth? When answering this, one must first decide what one wishes to learn from, and about history. Does a chronological account of the climate, the political decisions, the exact number of people involved in the incident etc give one an understanding of history? The facts are never perceived the same way by the individuals involved, as mentioned, and are they therefore useless? Does one need to know the mentality of the people, how they experienced the events etc. to understand the phenomenon? Should one use a hermeneutical approach to understanding the events described in *Grapes*? –Or are all of the above mentioned observations irrelevant as one can never fully understand history even if one attempted to?

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78 Steinbeck, interview in 1938, DeMott, 1992, introduction, p. ix,
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One could argue that it does not matter how the events really took place, or even how they were experienced at that time; all that matters is how they have influenced and are influencing our world today. If accepting this answer then Steinbeck’s novel is very much a relevant as well as unavoidable historical work, as it has shaped people’s perceptions about the events, and continues to do so, maybe more than any other historical source has achieved on that subject. For example there are libraries and a whole centre, the Steinbeck Research Centre in San Jose, dealing only with his work.
6.0. Final Discussion - The Use of Prose in History Writing

The general approach in this report is to sort out the problems in the field of historiography that occur when using *Grapes* as a source of information about specific events in connection with the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. To make a comparable analysis of a novel and a scholarly work (*Exodus*) leads to some problems due to the very different nature of the two. Whereas we could understand *Grapes* as being a *chronicle* – with all the history that this label embodies – *Exodus* is necessarily a member of another category. Since the Enlightenment has not only the perception of history changed; also the use and creation of texts about history has developed into the field of academia, where rules of how to solve and how to go about events and living more generally have been set up. This does not automatically lead to the conclusion that *Exodus* is more all-embracing or accurate than *Grapes* in its handling of the destinies of thousands of migrant families from the American Southwest in the 1930’s. As we have seen earlier in the report we must make a very clear distinction between the elements dealt with by the two authors (Steinbeck and Gregory).

The personal drama and the psychological developments of the migrants, portrayed in the people featured in *Grapes* are without a doubt more sufficiently and effectively described by Steinbeck. This is partly due to his style of writing, the communicative excellence and the emotional approach that seem so appealing. But also the very form of the novel allows for him to affect the reader on an emotional level which is difficult to obtain with neutral numbers and facts. *Exodus*, though, should be considered far more accurate in its treatment of numbers (of migrants etc.) and in its anthropological references as will be discussed later.

A clear distinction between what could be considered *chronicles* and *critical historical method* is hard to make. Not only is the border between the two approaches hazy, it is also, to some extent, filled with possible errors because of the interdisciplinary nature of History as a science. In *Exodus*, an otherwise strictly academic work, for instance we find that Gregory also includes the human drama; he elaborately describes the culture of the migrants and the personal tales of several of them.

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79 Kjeldstadli, 2002, p. 53
When the Norwegian historian Knut Kjeldstadli suggests that we can distinguish between the approaches and set up a timeline of where history became a professional discipline, he is working with a limited discourse of professionals about the nature of history and its development as an academic subject. The history of the common people is given another destiny. The minds of ordinary daily “users” of history contain various parameters of how “good history” is to be made and used, involving both reason and emotions. The creation of a national identity is shaped by numerous sources and events that are not lined up in an orderly fashion with a given sensibility. In other words one might argue that the causality of history is not present in people’s minds all the time. Causality is understood retrospectively and is therefore useless as a framework for understanding how people of that time experienced the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl in the Midwestern states of the USA. Incidents, coincidences and tendencies are important players in the games of life and should be analyzed thoroughly and without too much attention to schematized and segregated historiography. It is easy to find meanings and patterns in history if one seeks it, dangerously easy to invent erroneous causalities. This can also explain why so many people, erroneously, believe Steinbeck to be a New Deal-agitator. It is tempting to conclude this, as FDR has later become known as the great “welfare-politician”, and since Steinbeck was defending the lower class families they must have been of the same political conviction. The same, we suggest, happened first with Ronald Reagan and now recently the late pope John Paul II; they have both, in different periods and contexts, been praised for being responsible for the end of the Cold War – an honor initially ascribed to Mikhail Gorbachev (in e.g. the Western countries).

On this note, as can be seen often in matters of populist politics people are easily influenced by other issues than pragmatic concerns, even though we have a profound trust in our ability to reason and act objectively. We respond to emotional stimuli as well as to pragmatic reasoning.

Because of how we are constituted as human beings, the fusion between facts and fiction might be the closest we get to an acceptable understanding of what went on during the

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80 Kjeldstadli, 2002, p. 69
period of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Human beings within civilizations are acting upon a wide range of influences, meaning that we are not only dependent on our physiological conditions and our societal settings, but also on the metaphysical elements that constitutes the myths that we stick to as our personal, regional and national tales. So, when we are reconstructing the past we should always consider the predominating tales, sayings and mentalities of the people we are treating in our analysis. Conversely, if we are to optimize our understanding of past events, we need to get insight into both the physical, political and environmental conditions, but also the mentality of the people involved.

6.1. The Extent of the Drama

The philosophical undertones of the discussion of what happened are important and valid. Can we say for sure that Steinbeck was not right in his conclusion that people fled from poverty, as Gregory is arguing in *Exodus*? According to Gregory it was mainly middleclass people seeking a better life who went on the road westward to California.  

“Historically, people usually moved west not out of desperation but in response to the perceived attractions of opportunity-filled new settings. Symbolically, the West had always been the land of new beginnings..........”.  

However, we cannot ignore the settings in *Grapes*; Steinbeck is suggesting that America was a nation in despair during the crisis of the 1930’s, which will naturally lead to some frustration, a possible need for new settings, escapism and desperation not necessarily as a result of poverty but also as a result of the fear of poverty. Furthermore, Gregory argues that the bad conditions in America were not comparable with the conditions elsewhere.

“The Dust Bowl migration was a tragedy in the rather privileged white American sense of the term”.  

It is true that, relatively, tragedies of a worse kind are to be found elsewhere, but the relativity of tragedy is useless for the individual involved in the negative experiences.

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81 Gregory, 1989, p. 7  
82 Gregory, 1989, p. 7  
83 Gregory, 1989, p. 10
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Even though Steinbeck describes the living conditions, hopes, (desperate-) desires and toils of the migrants through the story of a specific family, it is arguable that he comes nearer to capturing the truth than a scholarly treatment of e.g. whether the number of migrant tenants from Oklahoma was 250.000 or just 16.000.

Until the release of *Grapes*, the issue of internal American migration was reduced to speculation about the extent of the matter. The popularity of the novel brought focus to bear on the problem, and had a strong effect on the way we perceive the issue today. Still, a faulty presentation of facts can make a significant difference, and one must be careful not to underestimate the effect it might have on politics and peoples actions in the future.

At the time of the release of *Grapes* (1939) the reception it was given was mixed, but it certainly caused more attention to be paid to the issue than most scholars have achieved in their accounts on the Dust Bowl issue, as is the case with *Exodus*.

We have shown that there is a natural tendency to empathy among the American audience due to the all-American themes of striving, traveling, voluntarily made community and references to the land and the urge for new frontiers. Preventing free citizens from exercising their constitutional right to attempt to achieve this will naturally arouse the readers’ sympathy.

As mentioned several times throughout this report the appealing and emotional character of the novel created an atmosphere of both empathy and sympathy. In order to shed light on these mechanisms of sympathy and empathy we can look at how the recent catastrophe in Asia was experienced; hundreds of thousands were killed due to a strong tsunami that hit the coasts of both Thailand and Indonesia (Sumatra). It is said that this catastrophe was perfect in the sense that it was politically neutral and not forced by humans in any way; the tsunami hit innocent people very hard making it easy for people across borders to unite in sympathy. This seems especially clear in contrast to wars which are always political with the constant of disagreement between the parties involved as well as their allies and supporters. The Dust Bowl (and the Great Depression) was much more complex. It is hard to blame the politicians for the disastrous natural conditions of that time. However, at the same time the issue was indeed political because of the simultaneous economic depression that hit the country, and the efforts made by the

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84 It can be done from a certain viewpoint however, as we mentioned in chapter 5
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

government to solve the problems.\textsuperscript{85} – Efforts which did not come near to creating a satisfactory solution. Social inequality and discrimination remained critical. Especially this fight against the upper class, and a system which was not on their side, we believe to have been important components in the audience’s reception of the novel. Not only farmers were used to terrible working and living standards in the 1930’s. The social inequalities were severe, creating mass demonstrations and strikes among the working classes – the same fact which motivated the large migration of workers: poverty or fear of poverty. The system did not favor the poor, even though New Deal did go further than previous policies had gone to help the poor. According to historian Howard Zinn the initiatives by FDR were actually launched in order to keep the public under the government’s control, giving just enough aid for it to seem as if the FDR administration was helping the underprivileged, thereby serving as a bulwark against public uprising.\textsuperscript{86} Whether this is correct or not, it is not hard to understand how Grapes could gain popularity in such a forum. How is it then that the book has gained worldwide popularity, regardless of class and culture? It is easy to sympathize with the Joad family, because of their immediate innocence and their frank way of approaching life. It fits very well into the cultural (and religious) values of our Western world. What is more, we suggest that these traits are inherent in most cultures and peoples, as is the tendency to neglect and oppress them (and the people). Therefore the themes of Grapes are recurring through time across national borders which might explain the international recognition of it. However, the spirit of escapism and the glorification of the Frontier etc are not omnipresent in all cultures – this is why, we argue, it appeals most especially to the American public. Of course one must also take into account that it is more relevant for Americans as it takes place in the USA.

6.2. Perception and Reception

As we have been arguing throughout the report, Grapes could be understood within the (very wide) framework of the American myth about the West and the Frontier. This goes

\textsuperscript{85} The New Deal initiatives launched during that period, as mentioned in chapter 2
\textsuperscript{86} A Peoples History p. 392
for both the content of the novel and the audience’s reception of it. *Grapes* won great recognition as it captured “the American spirit” (chapter 4). However it did not win the hearts of all Americans. The book was actually burned several places in California which shows that it did not only excite its readers positively; we mentioned above that some migrants were not happy with it later on, however it was not they who burned it. It was the people of Salinas (Steinbeck’s hometown) who did not appreciate Steinbeck’s lashing out at capitalist society in general, and at the landowners in particular. Thus we can make two possible conclusions. Firstly, the people suppressing the migrants did not wish to be put in a bad light in front of the whole(reading)world. And secondly, the book was misleading concerning certain facts of the migration, and people were angry with the faulty image they got from the book. In the end it was prohibited by law to burn the book. It is the “winner” who writes the history. The voice of the book burners has faded over time.

### 6.3. The Grapes of Wrath as a Movie

The year after the release of the novel, director John Ford made it into a movie in a Hollywood production starring Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell. It received two Oscars. It was quite a success for a film based on a social indignation and was far from the feel-good musical so popular at the time. The ending of the movie was positive compared to the novel, which might be one factor explaining its popularity. Ford chose to leave out the controversial “breast feeding scene”, in which Rose of Sharon is helping a starving man. In every sense the movie gives one the impression that the American Dream is still alive and a true possibility even for the poor Joad family. The “edges” of the characters in the movie have been rounded off creating an image of the Joads as helpless victims of a diffuse problem, rather than being strong, stoic and passionate. The political critique is also less pronounced. One might argue that the main accomplishment with regards to the movie is the very fact that it was made. The content is of less interest as we have already received the information by reading the novel. The movie does not present the viewer with any new

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knowledge; instead, it illuminates the morale and possibility of expression present in the USA at the time of the events.

6.4. Narrative, Remnant and Political Propaganda

John Steinbeck was an agitator more than anything else. As a socially engaged writer with a wide range of interests, political as well as literary, he used his skills in the art of writing to illuminate the troublesome life of the unskilled working man. With a simultaneous career as a journalist, Steinbeck was in close contact with the events and dramas of his novels. *Grapes* was written after a long period of systematic research in the same fashion as a journalist would normally do. The point of departure in journalistic method and work procedure gives certain but not unstained credibility to the content of *Grapes*. The fact that he attempts to make it a narrative may be the very reason why it is so useful – its message is clear as well as its portrayal of the important factors in the book. However, this very agenda might also be what makes it dangerous to rely upon. Therefore one must have an eye to it as a remnant.
7.0. Perspectives and the Contemporary Conditions of the California Immigrants

One of the greatest reasons that *Grapes* is still important today, not only as an historical remnant, is that we are still facing enormous problems related to (im)migration. For more than a century, California has been attracting people from Latin America and especially Mexicans have arrived in great numbers to the southern borders of the USA. According to Doris Weddel from the Weedpatch association, Mexican workers live in government Labor Camps, similar to the ones described in *Grapes* and Exodus. Whereas the domestic migration troubled the inner structures of the Californian society and created fear among the possessive farmers, the immigration from the south has been handled differently. The main reason for that is that Mexican workers represented (and still do) cheap labor which has been attractive for the farming industry. However, they did not pose a threat, since it was quite easy to deport them, because of their lack of citizenship.

However, during the Great Depression more than 400,000 Mexican immigrants were illegally deported in order to preserve the possible jobs for the white majority of Californians and south westerners e.g. the (fictional) Joads.\(^88\) Even today where some portions of the Californian economy are based on cheap labor, the xenophobia and political hostility is getting still more and more explicit.

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\(^{88}\) American Textbook, page 90
Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington argues in his latest account on the current socio-political environment in the USA, *Who Are We*, that: “In the late twentieth century, developments occurred that, if continued (the Mexican immigration ed.), could change America into a culturally bifurcated Anglo-Hispanic society with two national languages” (Huntington, 2004:224).

Several attempts have been made to minimize the number of Mexican immigrants. In 1986 the Reagan administration launched the Immigration Reform and Control Act, by which the illegal immigrants were to have a fair chance of getting legal status, and at the same time it was to make it possible to put pressure on the labor/employer market.

Huntington is not the only scholar who fears for the American coherency (Anglo dominance). John Fonte from the Hudson think tank located in Washington, DC, argues in an interview, that America faces some “serious challenges with immigration”.

The main focal areas of the concern are the fact that the majority of the immigrants stem from one single country, which makes it difficult to start-up any assimilation. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the areas under significant Mexican “influx” are former Mexican dominions (California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Nevada). Mexico lost their territories after the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The

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89 Huntington, p.228
90 Interview in Washington, DC, October 2004 conducted by Troels Gaihede
American territory was doubled and ever since the war it is arguable that Mexicans have not forgotten about this loss of land as Huntington points out.

### 7.1 The American-European Debate on Immigration

The general critique set out by Huntington is that the American cultural elite has been neglecting the problems that arise in connection with a multicultural society. The current American debate is based on similar premises as the European in the sense that it is now the American conservative Right and the European Liberals\(^91\) who set the agenda and are dominating the various parliaments and administrations. The dominant Leftist discourse of the 1960’s and 1970’s, which is said to have influenced the political and cultural milieus in the 1980’s and 1990’s as well, is now challenged by a stream of conservative ideologies.

On a final note concerning Huntington and his Danish pendants, one might argue that the static view of culture and ethnicity presented by Huntington and e.g. Ralf Pittelkow\(^92\) is based on a limited account of the various aspects that constitute people, cultures and ethnicity. It seems that Huntington neglects the possibility for social change over time and that he at the same time suggests that the Mexican culture is more dominant and consistent than the American\(^93\).

It seems inevitable to include Huntington in the analysis of contemporary migration. He points to some important and immediate statistical data; for instance when he points to the fact that most babies born in the Los Angeles area have a Mexican and/or other Hispanic origin. Nevertheless, the result of such investigations and writings is often fear and anxiety, since a great number of the people involved will not have a chance to participate in the debate and respond to the knowledge provided by Huntington.

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\(^{91}\) European liberals are to be compared with American conservatives.  
\(^{92}\) Former communications director for the Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (1993-2001)  
\(^{93}\) Huntington, 2004: chapters 1 and 9
America’s foundation has been and to some extent still is, based on the forces of immigrants. The country has, since the Europeans first arrived there, always been influenced by migration. Why pretend differently by insisting on a fictive coherency? On the other hand, it may seem as if the United States has now entered what could be called a “preserving stage 2” in their nation’s history. The last frontier has been settled and the country is facing new challenges.

The US is presented with millions of refugees every year. Families come from the southern states of Mexico, Guatemala and the rest of the Latin American countries. Most of these families are striving for better economical conditions, which they seek in the US. But reality often shows its compound face. A great number of countries making up the Western world are becoming increasingly hostile towards the very notion of immigration. Not only on the federal/official level is the attitude towards immigration influenced by various fears, e.g. that immigrants will change the fundamental values of American society; a growing xenophobia which can also be found in the Danish debate on immigration. This is an obvious field of investigation for a new project report. The number of Mexican immigrants now living under similar conditions as the “Dust Bowlers” deserves a similar novel written in sympathy with these people.
Upon initiating our project we were enthralled by the captivating story of the Joad family’s struggle, the raw portrayal of the migrant’s lives in a country plagued by depression and a society torn between great ideals and pragmatic material concerns.

As we began scrutinizing the novel we quickly discovered its shortcomings with regards to historical correctness. This put the novel in a somewhat different light. However, after comparing *Grapes* to the different sources of Gregory and Lange we have found that these shortcomings do not dismiss the use of *Grapes* as a historical source.

In spite of the very different nature of their works, it would be appropriate to classify both Steinbeck and Gregory as historical contributors and investigators in the field of anthropology, social science and political agitation. Both must be considered essential sources for an investigation of the events that took place, and necessary to consult in order to understand how people think of them today.

The *Grapes of Wrath* has secured for itself a lasting role as point of departure for academics and others interested in investigating the Dust Bowl period, the lives of the migrants and other related issues. This, combined with its topicality described in the chapter on Perspectives, makes the relevance and inherent quality of the novel more than ordinarily significant.

Gregory builds on the material supplied by Steinbeck, and his entire approach is influenced by the discourse set by Steinbeck. This single factor gives Steinbeck an inevitability and role as a pre-historian in the subject of the Dust Bowl migration. Homer can be considered the predecessor for the Greek philosophy and we can consider the work of Steinbeck in the same way.

However, one should be conscious of the shortcomings of *Grapes* when it comes to historical accuracy. One cannot depend solely on the novel. This will always be the situation for the academic approach to a given matter and is not a special feature of the Dust Bowl period and the migration issue in American history.

The psychological side effects, that Steinbeck handles with perfection creates an atmosphere that in this context has served the purpose. The political agitation was to be done efficiently. The aim of Steinbeck’s work was clear: he wanted to illuminate the
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

piteful situation of the Oklahomans. Without pandering to the readers he insisted on including the controversial final scene in which Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man. This indicates that Steinbeck possessed an urge to present the Oklahoman family in an as strong and sympathetic a light as possible.

With the novel he succeeded in drawing a lot of attention to the topic – something that might not have been achieved without a novel, such as *Grapes*, which appealed to a wide audience. Furthermore, with its enthralling drama it did not take long for Hollywood to get interested in the bestseller – a fact that ensured the spreading of the message. However, one must pay attention to Steinbeck’s point of departure. He did not write *Grapes* as a reaction to the lack of sensibility in the academic sphere but because he did not find the method and style of Journalism sufficient for the agitating force he wanted to create. Sporadic articles in various magazines would soon turn into “Yesterday’s news” and wrappings for tomorrow’s garbage. Steinbeck left an indelible fingerprint on the history of the Oklahoman migrants.

It is hard to be certain about the political life of Steinbeck on a personal level. It is indeed arguable that Steinbeck flirted with socialism but it seems obvious that the agitating characters in the novel somehow represent the best of the iconographical elements of the communist wave at the time being.

*Grapes of Wrath* can be considered a masterpiece within its genre, and with regard to giving people an empathetic understanding of and insight into some of the key issues of (im)migration: the painful departure from the familiar settings of one’s previous “life”, the uncertainties of the journey towards unfamiliar territory and the problems with adjusting to, and being accepted into, new settings.

The personal drama of the Joads makes it impossible for the reader not to be affected emotionally and this is what is needed so desperately in the western world in connection with the ambiguity of immigration and flight. People should be regarded as more than figures and statistics. The more we can enter into the spirit of their lives the more likely we are to treat them with dignity and respect\(^\text{94}\). The living conditions of e.g. the Hispanics

\(^{94}\) According to the Human Rights Bill dignity is a notion inherent in all human beings, a notion almost all governments have accepted to act upon.
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

in California show that not much has been learned much from *Grapes*. It is however clear that emotional appeal is the most effective way to getting people’s attention, hence in our political system that is where to direct ones efforts.

The general historiographical discussion on how history writing should be approached and carried out has many possible directions. In this report we have limited the question to a specific case study of a single novel and its credibility. We have come to the conclusion that *Grapes* most certainly is a solid piece of historical workmanship that contains a great deal of insight as to the living conditions of the Oklahomans. Therefore, The Grapes of Wrath can indeed be used as an historical source to the Dust Bowl migration.
9.0. Communicating Our Report

In the early stages of working on this project/report, while still gathering information, we established contact with the organizer and contact person Weedpatch Organization, Doris Weddel, in California; an organisation dedicated to restore the old Arvin government camp sharing the name of the camp described so positively by Steinbeck in *Grapes*. Following some e-mail correspondence with Doris Weddel the organization became interested in our investigations and what results we will come to. We have agreed to send to them an edited version of our report which will be put on their official website. With this in mind we have gone over the report, and have decided to include most of the report, except from the introducing song, Methodology and Delimitations. We are in the process of creating another introduction specifically directed at the website.
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

10.0. Literature


Kjeldstadli, Knut: Fortiden er ikke hvad den har været – en indføring i historiefaget, Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2002


Esmann, Frank: Amerikanske Præsidenter, Det Historiske Hus & Aschehoug, 2001


Jones, Carole Bryan: Twentieth Century USA, Teach Yourself, Hodder Headline, 2005


Websites

www.wikipedia.com

www.answers.com

www.weedpatchcamp.com

www.fbi.gov

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www.loc.gov
11.0. Appendix

11.1.

Arvin Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending October 24, 1936

A Letter of Interest

The following letter was sent to Mr. John Steinbeck as a result of the title used on his articles for the San Francisco News and especially as a result of Mr. Steinbeck's letter (to the editor of the paper) same having appeared in the News for 10/20/36.

The spelling and punctuation as from the original.

Bakersfield
Oct 21—36

Dear Mr. Steinbeck

We saw your letter to the editor of the San Francisco News explaining why you used the word Gypsies.

We all understand just why you found it important to use that word, we know there are lots of people who know from seeing just how Gypsies live, but we also know that there are more people that don't know how farm workers live, and never would know if it had not been for your trying to explain and show them.

We think you did a fine job for us and we thank you. This is a big battle which cannot be won by ourselves, we need friends like you to help us get decent camp places and after that we can handle the farmers ourselves by working together as we have learned to do at this camp.

Your Friends
Camp Central Committee

Thomas Collins
Arrin Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending July 25, 1936.
Report for week ending August 1, 1936

Our Guest Book

Among our guests this week were:-

Randolph May RA
Chas Clark RA
E J Beamly, RA
R C Williams RA
Helen Horn RA
L P Stark RA
V DeLara RA
Clarence Glacken RA
Mrs Armstrong, Washington DC
Mrs Blairsdell, Washington DC
Dr Cifford Kern Hospital & staff members

Mrs Armstrong and Mrs Blairsdell arrived one evening about 5. It had been a sizzling hot day. Most of the employable mothers were at work in the packing sheds. The unemployable mothers were playing the part of the good neighbor by looking after the children of those employed.

To permit those women to prepare supper for the men of their families, we took 11 of the most irritable kids to the dry irrigation ditch in front of the camp grounds. Down in the sandy bottom of the ditch we played the game "Woof, woof". We were the "Woof woof" and the kids were the little "faxes". After a half hours play, we looked up to find Mrs Blairsdell and Mrs Armstrong at the top of the ditch. Queried they; "Can you tell us where we can find Mr. Collins?"

A little female throat from the ditch bottom answered: "Go way, go way he aint here, we got a woof, woof". With that we all woofed and went about our play. A good neighbor took the women in charge and seated them on our porch. When the game was over, i.e. when the mothers returned to camp, we went to our guests and introduced ourselves. The women took the situation with good humor and roared. At their suggestion we looked in the mirror. What a woof we were. We conducted them through the camp with all our woof dirt.

The women were here to study our program with the women and children. They were quite pleased with their visit.
11.3.

Kern Migrants Camp
Report for week ending February 5, 1936

General Comments, continued...
Mr. Irving H. Wood's letter 2/2/36

Part of the furnishings for the manager's house arrived Friday. These items were most welcomed. It has been most difficult these past 11 weeks to find any comfort. The chairs and table certainly are more comfortable than boxes, and the electric plate more suitable for cooking than the uncertain top of a heating stove. Many thanks. We are informed by the vendor that balance of furnishings will be delivered within the next ten days or two weeks.

Our Visitors' Log

This week the sixty-six number of visitors broke all records, and almost equaled the peak at Marysville Camp. This upset our schedules somewhat and made us realize how useful another set of arms and legs etc would be.

Charles Naugman  Kern County Health Inspector
John Yore

Mr. Bliss, U. S. Public Health Service.

Mr. Bliss informed us he was asked by the Board of Supervisors of Stanislaus County and a number of growers, to visit us and make a study of the general set up of the camp. He stated that the supervisors and the growers had gotten together for the purpose of erecting a camp for migratory agricultural workers, rather than have one established by the Resettlement Administration. He further stated— that legal counsel for Stanislaus County had found a statute passed by the 1925 California legislature permitting growers to organize a "camp district for laborers" and operate the district similar to that of an irrigation district. The supervisors and a large number of growers of Stanislaus County have decided to take advantage of that law and build a camp in the center of the agriculture districts of the county under their plans the general tax fund would support the camp. He stated, further, that the growers felt they would have absolute control of the camp under the plan. However, "they thought they might be able to get some government funds to build the camp", commented Mr. Bliss.

Mrs. Cowart, State Relief Administration "visitor".
Mrs. Ball, neighbor farmer.
Miss Udyke, Kern County nurse.
Mr. Nyfield, Kern County Probation officer.
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

11.4.

Arvin Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending October 24, 1936

who tired of his numerous trips to the house, demanded permission to strip and examine the child. He found no evidence of mistreatment. He checked the parents story with a physician and was convinced of its truthfulness. He returned to the home and suggested that a child's heiny required upholstering from time to time and probably the parents should try that idea. However, the parents were forced to move from the neighborhood account of the complaints of the neighbors.

Well, that divided the campers here into two factions—i.e., neighbors of this family group. Two men insisted they could hear the whippings—no one ever saw the children being whipped. Their suggestion was that the parents be reported to the camp committee with a recommendation they be dismissed from the camp.

The other faction disagreed by following our usual custom of asking questions: "What's the use of shipping them out of camp?" "Where will they go?" "If you're so damn sure they DO whip the kids ain't it better to have them where someone can keep an eye on them and protect the kids?" "Ain't there a clinic tomorrow where the kid can go? Maybe there is something wrong with the kid's health and the doctor can find out. Ain't it possible some of our women, maybe our own ole women, have it in for the mother?"

Needless to state, the faction which wanted the family dismissed from camp is composed of the ultra religious group.

So in their own way and in the manner of their own system of justice they finally suggested the family be moved to another unit, away from their present neighbors, and close to the day nursery where constant watch can be kept by the attendant.

And this was done. Level heads, clear thinking, and simple justice.

Commented an old fellow: "The law allows as how a parent can daceip-lim his kids from the heiny to their keelos. Seems to me as how some grown folks should'n be daceip-limmed from their heads to their heinys". We said AMEN to that.

Thomas Collins
Kern Migratory Labor Camp

Report for week ending April 25, 1936

Newspaper Clippings:
We attach a number of clippings, all duly marked for source and dates.

Note:
We are not able to give more details for this report this week, as we are very busy.
However, the camp is doing nicely; the morale of the campers is very good, there is no sickness or destitution in camp, all are happy and the program continues to progress. It is still early, too early, to expect a large influx of campers as the chief industry in the section is cotton. Whenever time permits, we are busily engaged preparing a well rounded program for the children, as schools close the latter part of next month.

Migrant War Strategy
(substituting for our usual
Bits of Migrant Wisdom).

A migrant camp would not be a very "happy" place without its female "factions". Right out of a clear blue sky, one woman declares war on another. Here is the typical migratory woman method of warfare:

Invariably the fracas begins as a result of gossip. "War gossip" is based on some morals accusation against a woman or her daughter. We have yet to find next door neighbors engaged in the war games. Usually the women live across the street but in the same unit.

The woman against whom the gossip has been attached stands at the test flap hiding from sight, but keeping a watchful eye on the "enemy".

Then the "enemy" comes in the open across the street and pops the offensive. Usually a foul remark is hurled across the breach. Soon the belligerents are hurling verbal grenades with the rapidity of a machine gun. They scream the grenades and keep at it until they get a little too close. As their voices fail they get closer and closer. Near the whispering point they maneuver for the garbage cans.

Up to this point we do not interfere, as a good scrap is part of the migratory woman's life. It gives her a chance to exorcise her ego. When they
Kern Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending April 25, 1936

Daughters of Mars, continued
take up their positions at the garbage can, re
get into action because we know they have shot
t heir last; round or verbal ammunition and that
hand to hand fighting is about to follow. As
soon as the one of the belligerents removes the
garbage can cover we are usually on our way in
that direction. We seemingly ignore them and
from all appearances have business in a nearby
tent. One or the other sees us coming, and one
or both begin to pick up from around the garbage
can some imaginary particles of garbage drippings
pretending, for our benefit, they are cleaning
up the premises. We linger some time in the
neighboring tent until we are assured the war
is over—Despite the many battles we have yet
to be late getting within view. Probably some
day we shall be late and then—well the belli-
gerents will have much garbage to clean up.

The next hour or two finds both combatants
happy and nonchalant as if nothing happened.

We have one woman in camp who must have a good
fast verbal scrap three times a week. Yet, she
gives the appearance of a quiet, lovable being.
She causes better than any male driver, yet
disapproves of dancing and card and checker
playing. She is a terrific gossiper, yet the
most religious woman in the community.

During the "migrant woman wars" the men get a
safe distance, light their pipes and watch
the or rather listen to the fuss. Always you
hear them yell—"me-ow" "look" "sic em"—
"ain't them two the best fighters?" The dogs,
property of the contestants sit within safe
distance, wagging their tails, whine and carry
on as if poised in readiness to start running
down the camp street in case their owners take
to the highway. They think it's all good fun.

This afternoon we found two women, who engaged
in a very fine battle last night, eating dinner
together. They blushed when we entered the tent,
and one finally said "Mr. Collins her and me
sure done had a gran tim' las' nite".

So, to them, "that's life"—always a battle.
Report for week ending February 22, 1936

Camp Government, continued:

To permit representative government at camp, we divide the camp in three districts if there are three sanitary units at camp, four, five or more districts according to the number of sanitary units. At Kern Camp and the Marysville Camp we have but three sanitary units. Representatives to the various camp governing committees is by vote. All committees have a representative from each unit. They hold office until recalled by the people camping at the unit. Each unit or district has 32 families.

Campers Committee:

This is the campers governing body. It represents the campers in their relationship with the management. All problems of law and order are the responsibility of this governing committee. The committee meets at regular intervals. It meets with the camp management once each week. This committee is also the camp coordinating council for employment. It has been very successful in directing campers to jobs throughout the county.

This committee is also the camp "Farm Bureau". All decisions of the Campers Committee, its findings and its recommendations are referred to the camp management before final action.

The Campers Committee:

Mr. Jess Stephens, representing Unit #1
Mr. Walter Collins, representing Unit #2
Mr. L. S. Easton, representing Unit #3

Kern Migratory Labor Camp
page 21 of 38 pages

Thomas Collins
Kern Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending February 29, 1936

Child Welfare Committee, Kern Migratory Labor Camp
Mrs. Walter Collins, representing Unit #2
Mrs. J. E. Pace, representing Unit #1
Mrs. D. D. McCullough, representing Unit #3

An overflow group of mothers and children awaiting their "turn" at the better babies and Better Children Clinics. This clinic is under the direction of the Child Welfare Committee and the supervision of the visiting physician and nurses. It is one of our successful projects, and has taken the interest of all mothers and women in the camp. Through it we have overcome parents objections to smallpox and diphtheria immunization and correction of defects in children. It grows in popularity monthly, so much so that mothers in the vicinity of the camp, i.e., wives of farmers and others, have requested permission to have their children enrolled in the clinic.

Fire Department and Planning Committee:
This department or committee responds to the fire call. It holds fire drill at regular intervals. To effectively carry out the regulations applying to this committee we urgently request that approval be granted for construction of necessary fire racks for fire hose and other fire fighting equipment.

This committee is also the Planning Committee. It has complete responsibility for and jurisdiction over the camp streets and roads, trees, shrubs and the care of same.

Fire Committee and Planning Committee.
Mrs. T. F. Pearson, representing Unit #2
Mrs. J. E. Pace, representing Unit #1
Mrs. W. L. Ridge, representing Unit #3

The care and repair of camp streets and roads is a function of the Planning Committee. Street scene Kern Migratory Labor Camp.

Recreational Committee- Adult.
This committee has full jurisdiction and supervision over the adult athletic field, and all adult recreational and athletic activities. It is responsible for the safe keeping of all playground equipment. The camp base ball league is managed by the committee. It has supervision over the camp orchestra and arranges the weekly camp dances, plans adult entertainment programs and conducts the "Community Center" for adults.

Note: The balance of this report is amplified with pictures, which are not available for these copies. Therefore, while the original report covered 52 pages, including statistical data, copies have been condensed to a lesser number of pages.

Page 23
A Birth, continued

When the hospital phoned us the news we passed the information on to the pappy.

It's a boy, aint it?

Nope, they fooled you that time, it's a girl.

Kaint be, Ther be a mistake. It kaint be, no sires, it jest aint. Ter foolin' aint yer!

Nope, unless the doctor made a mistake.

He did, he shore did. It kaint be a gal. Why the womin' o' mine be suffer for four days mighty bad. So it kaint be a gal. If it be a gal she aint suffer more two days. I nose cause it aint the fire kid we has.

The poor fellow just sat on the bed and cried. He had planned for a son. Instead of going to town to see the new heir he moped around for several hours. When we saw him driving through the gate we thought he was headed for the hospital. He returned within an hour.

About five in the evening we noticed an unusual waving of the sun flowers in the irrigation ditch to the west of the camp property. We investigated. There was pappy rolling about in the dry ditch. Beside him was an empty bottle of gin—a quart bottle. He went off the property, and alone, to drown his disappointment. We appreciated the fact he left camp to have his big, short of liquor, rather than break the camp regulations.

About 10 p.m. he hobabbled back to camp and with the assistance of neighbors prepared for the journey to the hospital.

We saw him the next morning. His head ached so badly he didn't care whether it was a boy or a girl at the hospital. This morning he was wreathed in smiles as he drove off to work, so no doubt he has accepted nature's latest gift to the family.

It is amusing how many times we find some of the campers in the irrigation ditches nursing a liquor bottle. They do not stray very far from the property though. They keep out of sight and roll over and sleep it off. No one bothers them.

Thomas Collins
The statistical summary, page one, this report, shows quite an increase in the population. The number of children, for example, jumped from 12 for last week to 58. This alone, has made the past week one of the busiest we have experienced for some time. In fact we have had little time for the adults, the children taking most of our time. It is quite a task to have them all properly bathed and cleanly dressed as soon as possible after arrival, and to be on the lookout for children’s diseases. Like the children of the average normal family, they keep one ever alert to keep them from mischief within the various buildings.

Thursday and Friday night the management entertained the new comers (children) with games and outdoor play on the platform in order to make them feel "at home" and as an incentive for them to use the platform rather than the units for play purposes.

The new arrivals, we found, were all low in food stuffs. Most of their personal belongings were tied up in sacks and long ago ready for the laundry. In one case we immediately referred the group to the SRA for immediate assistance, not that they were destitute, but because work was not available and their food supplies were below a safe margin to carry them over the week end.

Some of the groups were large, e.g., three groups had a total of 10 persons in each group—with in-laws, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews etc. One group had seven persons. The larger groups were poorly prepared for camping out, having one small tent. By draping a canvas from the tent to the side of the automobile they obtained additional shelter. One group was without a cooking stove, using an open fire in the rear of the camping lot. This type of camper is usually found in the north during fruit season, rather than down here.

Another interesting feature—4 groups with a total of 35 persons arrived in California in April 1936. No doubt the Los Angeles Police blockade of the border at Nyehe has eased up considerably since April 1.
Kern Migratory Labor Camp
Route 5 Box 215
Bakersfield, California.

Report for week ending April 25, 1936

Number of families or groups at camp

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>April</th>
<th>Total number of individuals</th>
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<td>19</td>
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Number cases communicable diseases—none
Number cases illness—none
Number destitute persons—none
Dismissed from camp and reason—none

Referred to other agencies—1 group help S.R.A.

This was new arrival at camp this week

Number unemployed groups at camp—3 new arrivals this week

Number employed (heads of groups)—32

1 W.P.A.
31 farms

Number of children at camp—boys 37 girls 31

To four years of age—15
5 to 12 years of age—35
13 to 18 years of age—13

Number treated at camp first aid station—7 (cuts, burns, bruises)

Page 1 of 7 pages

Thomas Collins
Kern Migratory Labor Camp
Report for week ending April 25, 1936

Labor report:

This week the campers were employed as follows:

1. Farm labor, fruit thinning, irrigating, burning weeds. Cutting, weeds. Wage rates 25¢ per hour. Average weekly earnings $12.00.


3. Painting, carpenters helpers, wheelbarrow work. Wage rates 15¢ to 20¢ and 25¢ per hour. Average weekly earnings $10.00.

Again this week we have had all group heads employed with the exception of those groups which arrived at camp Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

We believe the new arrivals will find work difficult to obtain. In fact we expect them to move northward for fruit thinning.

Several group heads report they look forward to a lay off next week with no work available for two or three weeks. In this event they plan moving northward as far as Marysville, for the fruit.

Culload shipments of potatoes have started moving from Shafter and we have been informed there has been quite an influx of migrants to that section. Some groups have stopped at camp to see if they knew anyone here. They did not stop to camp having informed us they were enroute to Santa Rosa and Marysville.

Considerable cotton, planted early and nipped by the frost, had to be re-planted. This will make cotton chopping, usually employing a great number of laborers, rather late in some sections within driving distance from the camp. Great cotton acres are are only just now being planted.

Unless group heads have been misinformed, we look for several group heads to "check out" for points North, sometime during the next week.
11.13.

1940s: Alien Registration Act of 1940

Alien Registration Act of 1940

U.S. Statutes at Large (76th Cong., 3rd Sess., 670-676)

AN ACT

To prohibit certain subversive activities; to amend certain provisions of law with respect to the admission and deportation of aliens; to require the fingerprinting and registration of aliens; and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

TITLE I

Section 1. (a) It shall be unlawful for any person, with intent to interfere with, impair, or influence the loyalty, morale, or discipline of the military or naval forces of the United States—

(1) to advise, counsel, urge, or in any manner cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty by any member of the military or naval forces of the United States;

(2) to distribute any written or printed matter which advises, counsels, or urges insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty by any member of the military or naval forces of the United States.

(b) For the purposes of this section, the term "military or naval forces of the United States" includes the Army of the United States, as defined in section 1 of the National Defense Act of June 3, 1916, as amended (48 Stat. 153; U.S.C., title 10, sec. 2), the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Naval Reserve, and Marine Corps Reserve of the United States; and, when any merchant vessel is commissioned in the Navy or is in the service of the Army or the Navy, includes the master, officers, and crew of such vessel.

Sec. 2. (a) It shall be unlawful for any person—

(1) to knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence, or by the assassination of any officer of any such government;

(2) with the intent to cause the overthrow or destruction of any government in the United States, to print, publish, edit, issue, circulate, sell, distribute, or publicly display any written or printed matter advocating, advising, or teaching the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence.

(3) to organize or help to organize any society, group, or assembly of persons who teach, advocate, or encourage the overthrow or destruction of any government in the United States by force or violence; or to be or become a member of, or affiliate with, any such
society, group, or assembly of persons, knowing the purposes thereof.
(b) For the purposes of this section, the term "government in the United States" means the
Government of the United States, the government of any State, Territory, or possession of
the United States, the government of the District of Columbia, or the government of any
political subdivision of any of them.

Sec. 3. It shall be unlawful for any person to attempt to commit, or to conspire to commit,
any of the acts prohibited by the provisions of this title.

Sec. 4. Any written or printed matter of the character described in section 1 or section 2
of this Act, which is intended for use in violation of this Act, may be taken from any
house or other place in which it may be found, or from any person in whose possession it
may be, under a search warrant issued pursuant to the provisions of title XI of the Act
entitled "An Act to punish acts of interference with the foreign relations, the neutrality
and the foreign commerce of the United States, to punish espionage, and better to enforce
the criminal laws of the United States, and for other purposes", approved June 15, 1917
(40 Stat. 228; U.S.C., title 18, ch. 18).

Sec. 5. (a) Any person who violates any of the provisions of this title shall, upon
conviction thereof, be fined not more than $10,000 or imprisoned for not more than ten
years, or both.
(b) No person convicted of violating any of the provisions of this title shall, during the
five years next following his conviction, be eligible for employment by the United States,
or by any department or agency thereof (including any corporation the Stock of which is
wholly owned by the United States).

TITLE II

Sec. 20. Section 19 of the Immigration Act of February 5, 1917 (39 Stat. 889; U.S.C.,
title 8, sec. 155), as amended, is amended by inserting, after "Sec. 19.", the letter "(a)",
and by adding at the end of such section the following new subsections:
"(b) Any alien of any of the classes specified in this subsection, in addition to aliens who
are deportable under other provisions of law, shall, upon warrant of the Attorney General,
be taken into custody and deported:
"(1) Any alien who, at any time within five years after entry, shall have, knowingly and
for gain, encouraged, induced, assisted, abetted, or aided any other alien to enter or to try
to enter the United States in violation of law.
"(2) Any alien who, at any time after entry, shall have on more than one occasion,
knowingly and for gain, encouraged, induced, assisted, abetted, or aided any other alien
or aliens to enter or to try to enter the United States in violation of law.
"(3) Any alien who, at any time after entry, shall have been convicted of possessing or
carrying in violation of any law any weapon which shoots or is designed to shoot
automatically or semi-automatically more than one shot without manual reloading, by a
single function of the trigger, or a weapon commonly called a sawed-off shotgun.
"(4) Any alien who, at any time within five years after entry, shall have been convicted of
violating the provisions of title I of the Alien Registration Act, 1940.
"(5) Any alien who, at any time after entry, shall have been convicted more than once of violating the provisions of title I of the Alien Registration Act, 1940.

"No alien who is deportable under the provisions of paragraph (3), (4), or (5) of this subsection shall be deported until the termination of his imprisonment or the entry of an order releasing him on probation or parole.

"(c) In the same of any alien (other than one to whom subsection (d) is applicable) who is deportable under any law of the United States and who has proved good moral character for the preceding five years, the Attorney General may (1) permit such alien to depart the United States to any country of his choice at his own expense, in lieu of deportation, or (2) suspend deportation of such alien if not racially inadmissible or ineligible to naturalization in the United States if he finds that such deportation would result in serious economic detriment to a citizen or legally resident alien who is the spouse, parent, or minor child of such deportable alien. If the deportation of any alien is suspended under the provisions of this subsection for more than six months, all of the facts and pertinent provisions of law in the case shall be reported to the Congress within ten days after the beginning of its next regular session, with the reasons for such suspension. The Clerk of the House shall have such report printed as a public document. If during that session the two Houses pass a concurrent resolution stating in substance that the Congress does not favor the suspension of such deportation, the Attorney General shall thereupon deport such alien in the manner provided by law. If during the session the two Houses do not pass such a resolution, the Attorney General shall cancel deportation proceedings upon the termination of such session, except that such proceedings shall not be canceled in the case of any alien who was not legally admitted for permanent residence at the time of his last entry into the United States, unless such alien pays to the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization a fee of $18 (which fee shall be deposited in the Treasury of the United States as miscellaneous receipts). Upon the cancelation of such proceedings in any case in which such fee has been paid, the Commissioner shall record the alien's admission for permanent residence as of the date of his last entry into the United States and the Secretary of State shall, if the alien was a quota immigrant at the time of entry and was not charged to the appropriate quota, reduce by one the immigration quota of the country of the alien's nationality as defined in section 12 of the Act of May 26, 1924 (U. S. C., title 8, sec. 212), for the fiscal year then current or next following.

"(d) The provisions of subsection (c) shall not be applicable in the case of any alien who is deportable under (1) the Act of October 16, 1918 (40 Stat. 1008; U. S. C., title 8, sec. 137), entitled 'An Act to exclude and expel from the United States aliens who are members of the anarchist and similar classes', as amended; (2) the Act of May 26, 1922, entitled 'An Act to amend the Act entitled "An Act to prohibit the importation and use of opium for other than medicinal purposes", approved February 9, 1909, as amended' (42 Stat. 596; U. S. C., title 21, sec. 175); (3) the Act of February 18, 1931, entitled 'An Act to provide for the deportation of aliens convicted and sentenced for violation of any law regulating traffic in narcotics', as amended (46 Stat. 1171; U. S. C., title 8, sec. 156a); (4) any of the provisions of so much of subsection (a) of this section as relates to criminals, prostitutes, procurers, or other immoral persons, the mentally and physically deficient, anarchists, and similar classes; or (5) subsection (b) of this section."

Sec. 21. The Act entitled "An Act to provide for the deportation of aliens convicted and
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sentenced for violation of any law regulating traffic in narcotics", approved February 18, 1931, is amended—
(1) By striking out the words "and sentenced";
(2) By inserting after the words "any statute of the United States" the following: "or of any State, Territory, possession, or of the District of Columbia,"; and
(3) By inserting after the word "heroin" a comma and the word "marihuana".

Sec. 22. No alien shall be deportable by reason of the amendments made by section 20 or 21 on account of any act committed prior to the date of enactment of this Act.

Sec. 23. (a) The first paragraph of section 1 of the Act entitled "An Act to exclude and expel from the United States aliens who are members of the anarchistic and similar classes", approved October 16, 1918, as amended, is amended to read as follows: "That any alien who, at any time, shall be or shall have been a member of any one of the following classes shall be excluded from admission into the United States:">
(b) Section 2 of such Act of October 16, 1918, as amended, is amended to read as follows:

"Sec. 2. Any alien who was at the time of entering the United States, or has been at any time thereafter, a member of any one of the classes of aliens enumerated in section 1 of this Act, shall, upon the warrant of the Attorney General, be taken into custody and deported in the manner provided in the Immigration Act of February 5, 1917. The provisions of this section shall be applicable to the classes of aliens mentioned in this Act, irrespective of the time of their entry into the United States."

TITLE III

Sec. 30. No visa shall hereafter be issued to any alien seeking to enter the United States unless said alien has been registered and fingerprinted in duplicate. One copy of the registration and fingerprint record shall be retained by the consul. The second copy shall be attached to the alien's visa and shall be taken up by the examining immigrant inspector at the port of arrival of the alien in the United States and forwarded to the Department of Justice, at Washington, District of Columbia.

Any alien seeking to enter the United States who does not present a visa (except in emergency cases defined by the Secretary of State), a reentry permit, or a border-crossing identification card shall be excluded from admission to the United States.

Sec. 31. (a) It shall be the duty of every alien now or hereafter in the United States, who (1) is fourteen years of age or older, (2) has not been registered and fingerprinted under section 30, and (3) remains in the United States for thirty days or longer, to apply for registration and to be fingerprinted before the expiration of such thirty days. (b) It shall be the duty of every parent or legal guardian of any alien now or hereafter in the United States, who (1) is less than fourteen years of age, (2) has not been registered under section 30, and (3) remains in the United States for thirty days or longer, to apply for the registration of such alien before the expiration of such thirty days. Whenever any alien attains his fourteenth birthday in the United States he shall, within thirty days
thereafter, apply in person for registration and to be fingerprinted.

Sec. 32. Notwithstanding the provisions of sections 30 and 31—
(a) The application for the registration and fingerprinting, or for the registration, of any alien who is in the United States on the effective date of such sections may be made at any time within four months after such date.
(b) No foreign government official, or member of his family, shall be required to be registered or fingerprinted under this title.
(c) The Commissioner is authorized to prescribe, with the approval of the Attorney General, special regulations for the registration and fingerprinting of (1) alien seamen, (2) holders of border-crossing identification cards, (3) aliens confined in institutions within the United States, (4) aliens under order or deportation, and (5) aliens of any other class not lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence.

Sec. 33. (a) All applications for registration and fingerprinting under section 31 shall be made at post offices or such other places as may be designated by the Commissioner.
(b) It shall be the duty of every postmaster, with such assistance as shall be provided by the Commissioner, to register and fingerprint any applicant for registration and fingerprinting under such section, and for such purposes to designate appropriate space in the local post office for such registration and fingerprinting. Every postmaster shall forward promptly to the Department of Justice, at Washington, District of Columbia, the registration and fingerprint record of every alien registered and fingerprinted by him. The Commissioner may designate such other places for registration and fingerprinting as may be necessary for carrying out the provisions of this Act, and provide for registration and fingerprinting of aliens at such places by officers or employees of the Immigration and Naturalization Service designated by the Commissioner. The duties imposed upon any postmaster under this Act shall also be performed by any employees at the post office of such postmaster who are designated by the postmaster for such purpose.

Sec. 34. (a) The Commissioner is authorized and directed to prepare forms for the registration and fingerprinting of aliens under this title. Such forms shall contain inquiries with respect to (1) the date and place of entry of the alien into the United States; (2) activities in which he has been and intends to be engaged; (3) the length of time he expects to remain in the United States; (4) the criminal record, if any, of such alien; and (5) such additional matters as may be prescribed by the Commissioner, with the approval of the Attorney General.
(b) All registration and fingerprint records made under the provisions of this title shall be secret and confidential, and shall be made available only to such persons or agencies as may be designated by the Commissioner, with the approval of the Attorney General.
(c) Every person required to apply for the registration of himself or another under this title shall submit under oath the information required for such registration. Any person authorized to register aliens under this title shall be authorized to administer oaths for such purpose.

Sec. 35. Any alien required to be registered under this title who is a resident of the United States shall notify the Commissioner in writing of each change of residence and new
address within five days from the date of such change. Any other alien required to be registered under this title shall notify the Commissioner in writing of his address at the expiration of each three months' period of residence in the United States. In the case of an alien for whom a parent or legal guardian is required to apply for registration, the notices required by this section shall be given by such parent or legal guardian.

Sec. 36. (a) Any alien required to apply for registration and to be fingerprinted who willfully fails to refuses to make such application or to be fingerprinted, and any parent or legal guardian required to apply for the registration of any alien who willfully fails or refuses to file application for the registration of such alien shall, upon conviction thereof be fined not to exceed $1,000 or be imprisoned not more than six months, or both.
(b) Any alien, or any parent or legal guardian of any alien, who fails to give written notice to the Commissioner of change of address as required by section 35 of this Act shall, upon conviction thereof, be fined not to exceed $100, or be imprisoned not more than thirty days, or both.
(c) Any alien or any parent or legal guardian of any alien, who files an application for registration containing statements known by him to be false, or who procures or attempts to procure registration of himself or another person through fraud, shall, upon conviction thereof, be fined not to exceed $1,000, or be imprisoned not more than six months, or both; and any alien so convicted within five years after entry into the United States shall, upon the warrant of the Attorney General, be taken into custody and be deported in the manner provided in sections 19 and 20 of the Immigration Act of February 5, 1917, as amended.

Sec. 37. (a) The Commissioner, with the approval of the Attorney General, is authorized and empowered to make the prescribe, and from time to time to change and amend, such rules and regulations not in conflict with this Act as he may deem necessary and proper in aid of the administration and enforcement of this title (including provisions for the identification of aliens registered under this title); except that all such rules and regulations, insofar as they relate to the performance of functions by consular officers or officers or employees in the Postal Service, shall be prescribed by the Secretary of State and the Postmaster General, respectively, upon recommendation of the Attorney General. The powers conferred upon the Attorney General by this Act and all other powers of the Attorney General relating to the administration of the Immigration and Naturalization Service may be exercised by the Attorney General through such officers of the Department of Justice, including officers of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, attorneys, special attorneys, and special assistants to the Attorney General, as he may designate specifically for such purposes.
(b) The Commissioner is authorized to make such expenditures, to employ such additional temporary and permanent employees, and to rent such quarters outside the District of Columbia as may be necessary for carrying out the provisions of this title.

Sec. 38. (a) For the purposes of this title—
(1) the term "United States", when used in a geographical sense, means the States, the Territories of Alaska and Hawaii, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands;
(2) the term "Commissioner" means the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization.
(b) The provisions of this title shall take effect upon the date of enactment of this Act; except that sections 30 and 31 shall take effect sixty days after the date of its enactment.

Sec. 39. The President is authorized to provide, by Executive order, for the registration and fingerprinting, in a manner as nearly similar to that provided in this title as he deems practicable, of aliens in the Panama Canal Zone.

TITLE IV

Sec. 40. If any provision of this Act, or the application thereof to any person or circumstance, is held invalid, the remainder of the Act, and the application of such provision to other persons or circumstances, shall not be affected thereby.

Sec. 41. This Act may be cited as the "Alien Registration Act, 1940".

Approved, June 28, 1940.
12.0. Abstract Paper

This project aims at investigation whether The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck can be used as a source of information to the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930’s USA. We will deal with the historiographical problems in connection with using fiction as an historical source. We will compare the novel to primary sources, as well as the scholarly work American Exodus by James N. Gregory. We will also discuss the novel from a contemporary context, including politics and the migration topic in America, at the time the novel was written and up till present time. Furthermore we will look at the reception of the novel as a representation of the American grain.
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Studieforløbsbeskrivelse for Troels Gaihede, Historie 3.1.2., 2. modul

1. semester (HIB):

Project: Masculinities in Transition

2. semester

Kurser: history and philosophy

Project: Human Rights

3. semester: jounalistik og kultur og sprogmødestudier

Project: BBC

4. semester

kurser: psykologi og performance design

Projekt: BBC

5. semester

Kurser: metode og litt. Søgning

Projekt: Det Konservative Amerika

6. Semester

Kurser: ingen

Projekt: The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth
The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth

Studieforløbsbeskrivelse for Rebecca Wolffberg, Historie 3.1.2., 2. modul

1. Semester
Projekt: Crossroads – Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

2. Semester
Kurser: History & Philosophy
Projekt: Human Rights In a Diverse World

3. Semester
Kurser: History & Kultur- og sprogmødestudier
Projekt: Shell Shock

4. Semester
Kurser: Politologi & Økonomi
Projekt: USA – Savior or Dominator

5. Semester
Kurser: Metode & Litteratursøgning
Projekt: Jødisk lobbyisme i USA

6. Semester
Kurser: Sociologi & International politik
Projekt: The Grapes of Wrath – Truth or Myth