

California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Archives

Special Topics

A School of Their Own

Educating Okie Children in 1930s California

*Christy Gavin
Librarian, CSUB Dust Bowl Migration Archives
February, 2011*

Introduction

During the Great Depression, nearly 400,000 Oklahomans, Arkansans, Texans, Kansans, and Missourians migrated to California (Gregory 9-10). As a result their children flooded California schools, especially in the farming communities of the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys, where the newly arrived migrants doubled the population in the 1930s (Stein 47). The population spike was highest in the cotton growing areas, such as Kern County, which added 52,000 residents by 1940 (Gregory 83). As one Kern County educator observed, migrant children “were everywhere, and the teachers in the smaller schools could handle one or two probably, a few like that, but it was getting [to be a quite a problem] in the larger schools” (Stanley and McColgan 1). Kern County school principal Jewell Potter reported that for the Edison school district, the average daily attendance jumped from 55 pupils in 1935-36 to more than 140 in 1937-38. During 1937-38, busiest academic year, 1937-38, the enrollment rose from 130 to 325 (J. Potter 26).

Depression-era educators probably would have agreed with Lester Kirkendall’s 1940 assessment that the tremendous influx of Okie children had “raised a regular welter of educational problems—most of which are unsolved” (Kirkendall 490). One major problem was that schools were fiscally unable to accommodate the multiple needs of migrant students. As Bessie M. Knapp, Chair, Migratory Committee, California Congress of Parents and Teachers testified at a 1940 Congressional hearing:

The [California] compulsory school law forces these children into our schools but it does not provide the means to keep them housed, clothed, and fed so that they might with safety to themselves and the more fortunate children, attend our schools” (United States 2433).

Knapp is quite right in her assertion that the state expected the school districts to deal with the rising tide of migrant pupils without additional support from state coffers. However, the school districts' scrambled attempts to cope with the problem usually resulted in failing both the new arrivals and the local children. As Emmett Berry, superintendent of schools in Porterville, California, testified in 1940, "Heavy enrollments have lowered standard achievements of all students in fundamental subjects" (United States 2436).

Compounding the problem of overcrowded, underfunded schools were the overwhelmed educators. While most were well intentioned they were ill-prepared to understand either the nature or the nurture of migrant children. Thus, poor budgets and lack of teacher preparedness were obstacles to providing a safe academic environment for distressed migrant children. As Leo B. Hart,¹ superintendent of Kern County schools, observed in later years, teachers "often solved the migrant problem by shuffling the children into the corners of classrooms only to ignore them (Stanley and McColgan 2).

"One of Those People"

On school grounds, migrant children were perceived as "those people" a synonym for white trash because of their poverty, ties to farm labor, and social awkwardness (Gregory 78). In the classroom, newcomers stood out because they were often older and bigger physically than their local classmates. Because migrant children were unable to provide their school records, they were often placed in grades that did not correspond with their chronological age. This meant their apparent achievement level often did not match their age and physical size. Contemporary studies and reports confirmed what many educators at the time recognized: that as a result of constantly relocating and working out of school, there was "a general retardation of pupils" among migrant children. According to one study, 23 schools reported that children were two-to-three years behind the average grade level for their age. One teacher reported that "out of my 32 [pupils] this last month only six pupils were up to their normal grade" ("Teaching the Migratory," 35, Heffernan 188). As a child migrant Lillie May² recalls: "It was the shock that so many children were held back a year because [they] were new out here. . . . They lost a whole year . . ." (May 24). Unfortunately, the so called "retardation"³ among migrant children was seen as stupidity among native school children. Consequently, as Gregory points out, "[t]hat provided useful ammunition for their native classmates: 'Oh, he's from Oklahoma—he's dumb' was heard frequently on the school grounds" (Gregory 129). Luckily, enlightened

¹ Leo B. Hart served two terms (1930-1946) as the Kern County School Superintendent of Schools.

² The interviews cited in the California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives are part of the California State University, Bakersfield's California Odyssey Project's Oral History Program funded in 1980 by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The interviews focus on residents who migrated to the San Joaquin Valley from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, and Texas between 1924 and 1939.

³ Kern County school principal Jewell Potter asserted that with "few exceptions these [migrants] are retarded" (J. Potter 26). During the 1930s, educators used "retardation" to describe children who were held back one or more grades because they failed to expected attainment levels (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

educators realized the real reason so many migrant children were held back a grade was due to environmental issues and not a lack of mental aptitude (United States 2435).

Two major environmental factors were poverty and ill health. Surveys of rural white children of migratory agricultural workers living in California, conducted during 1936 and 1937, revealed that over 27 percent had nutritional problems:

10 ½ percent of school age children “were getting 1 ½ to 2 pints of milk daily, the amount considered optimum for growth and development, while 15.8 percent were getting no milk. . . [such nutritional deficits cause the] mental dulling which occurs with constant inadequacy of food and frequent lack of it” (United States 2433)

Along with hunger and poor health, skipping school adversely affected academic performance among migrant children. They were forced to miss school so that they could follow their parents while they bounced from one job or crop to the next, or they spent school days working alongside their parents in fields. Bobby Glen Russell recalls attending three Kern County schools in one year (Russell 10). Frank Manies remembers that he attended 22 schools in Oklahoma and California (Manies 2). Changing schools constantly put an extra hardship on these children. Hattye Shields recollected, “I didn’t like that. That was very hard” (Shields 16).

School disruptions were a way of life even before they arrived in California. In their home states they were often pulled out of school to move with their families to the next farm or job—“just trying to survive,” recalls one migrant (Russell 1). Moreover, school days were cut short because of the practice among country schools to truncate the academic year to accommodate the rhythms of the farming cycle. It was common for classes to be in session only during the months when children were not needed to do chores or care for their siblings. Thus, by the time migrant children enrolled in California schools they were far behind in their schooling as compared to their native counterparts. Unsurprisingly, when compared to native pupils, migrant children ranked much lower academically (“Teaching the Migratory,” 35). Moreover, once they got back into school they often, according to one Kern County principal:

Seem[ed] oblivious to work, responsibility, play, health and a sense of what makes good citizens. The social adjustment of [these] overage pupils. . . .seem[ed] an insurmountable task (Potter 26).

Yet some migrant children were able to adapt despite missing so much school. Frank Manies, for example, claims “that [he] learned to adjust quite rapidly” (Manies 2.) And Goldie Farris, originally from Texas, remembers:

being a good student, speaking up, reading and doing my homework. When we left there [Waukena, Tulare County, California] and went to Brawley we went through the same thing [subject matter] again. The teacher started me in arithmetic clear back: at the beginning of the book. Every child was working at his own speed in arithmetic. She started me way back at the beginning but by the time we left in March I was not only caught up but I was almost through with my book” (Farris 15).

Success in school was possible for those fortunate children whose parents encouraged their education. Lillie May and her siblings, for example, did not have to repeat a grade because their father challenged the school's decision. According to May, her father told school officials that, "I don't want you to put them back until you give them a chance." Her father requested that his children take a competency test, which they did and they passed. Moreover, May claimed she and her siblings had had certain subject the year before when they still lived in Oklahoma. When her cousins visited them from Oklahoma "they were ahead of us " but Californians seemed to believe that "in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri and in all those states that their schooling was behind here but it wasn't" (May 24).

Migrant mother Loye Holmes' recalled helping her children with their homework and involvement with school activities:

[making] it a point to get acquainted with the teachers. I tried to take part in the functions and things. I think that really helped and I joined the PTA. I could hardly afford it but I always managed. I didn't join at first and my first child said the teacher would always say something about it so then I was aware that it was very important to my daughter so then I joined the PTA" (Holmes 23).

Thus, as contemporary studies and personal narratives affirm, migrant children, when well-nourished and in good health, were just as mentally capable as their native counterparts (United States 2435). And Bessie M. Knapp, Chair, Migratory Committee, California Congress of Parents and Teachers, reported that if the migratory children are given proper advantages and respected as regular children, they will grow up into useful citizens" (United States 2436).

"One of Those People"

To the Okie newcomer, school was an alien place where they were treated as outsiders. Being perceived as an outsider challenged their sense of self, causing them to become very self-conscious of their family and cultural heritage. Billie Pate, originally from Texas, described what many migrant children must have felt about being suddenly dropped into a new geographical and cultural landscape:

It's kind of interesting when you only know one way of life and for the first ten years you grow up in an environment and that's the only thing you know and that's the only thing you've ever experienced. Then, that's a good way of life because you don't know anything differently. And then, one day at the age of ten [you move to California and] you're called trash" (Pate 13).

On school grounds, these newcomers were ridiculed for what they ate, what they wore, and how they spoke. Lunch was often humiliating because they either had no lunch money, or they brought "foreign" food that consisted of fried potatoes, biscuits, and beans instead of the typical sandwich. Migrant Joyce Seabolt remarked: [P]erhaps even the fact that a child wouldn't have enough money for lunch and therefore didn't participate in luncheon activities make him a target of ridicule (Seabolt 34). And William Rintoul, as a young child growing up in Taft, recalls, ". . . a lot of kids I know, came to school without any money to buy a candy bar or anything else.

I know one family . . . who existed pretty much on oatmeal mush. It was all they could afford. Times were genuinely hard” (Rintoul 5).

Another target for derision was coming to school looking shabby and disheveled, wearing no shoes and dressing unfashionably. Many of the Dust Bowl interviewees mentioned being made of fun because of their appearance. Ethel Belessuoli felt out of place wearing cotton dresses when all the girls wore wool skirts and sweaters and “dressed nice” (Belessuoli 18). And Martha Jackson recalls, “In study hall once two girls sat there and talked about what I was wearing—about how long my dress was and if I was ever going to cut it off and things like that. We curled our hair a little different too” (Jackson 16).

Dorothy Rose remembers that she always called the shoes she wore on Sundays as “slippers.” But a local girl admonished her:

You don't call shoes slippers. You're suppose to call your shoes shoes." She was trying to make me understand that slippers were bedroom slippers that you wore at home. We called what we wore at home house shoes. If we wore dress shoes like patent leather or Sunday shoes those were our slippers. It was a fancy shoe. Theard lots of things like that (Rose 24).

Earl Butler talks about friends teasing and picking fights over migrants wearing bib overalls, “In Missouri it was fashionable to wear lace boots up to your knees and I think overalls, probably the blue overalls. Even though some kids out here wore them it wasn't that fashionable. . .” Butler also observes that the pressure to look fashionable was much harder on girls than boys:

I remember I was in the third grade and it was much easier for me than it was for my sisters because a boy can wear patched jeans or whatever and get by with it, whereas, at that time all the girls wore dresses and it was more noticeable. I always felt that they were more at a disadvantage than I was. . . . There was no question of changing because you couldn't afford to buy anything else. I'm sure it hurt the girls more” (Butler 10).

Migrants’ speech, like their perceived odd lunches and apparel, created a significant barrier to acceptance. Elizabeth Day, a Nebraskan who migrated to California during the 1930s and did not consider herself as part of the “Okie” group, claimed that “you recognized an Okie by the way he lookedby a certain look about the eyes, defeatism, perhaps, and, of course, their Okie grammar when they spoke” (Day 21) To the townspeople, migrants did not speak “Californian.” Goldie Farris, originally from Texas, reflected:

Every time I uttered a word that first year we were here somebody would say, "Oh, I can tell where you're from." The California voices sounded very harsh to me. My first day of school in California the girls' voices sounded so harsh. The first year I was here, my sister and I really worked at getting rid of our accent and by the end of a year nobody could tell. If I get very tired and my voice kind of drags a little bit I can hear it (Farris 14).

As Martha Jackson observed, “We said a lot of words differently. They teased us a lot about that” (Jackson 16). Jackson and other migrants, for example, contracted certain words—“you” and “all” to make “ya’ll”. As Byrd Morgan recalls, “We said, ‘Ya’ll.’ Of course we learned to drop that pretty quick. I thought at the time that ‘you guys’ was the favorite expression [of California kids] then. . . .they would tease us about saying, ‘Ya’ll’, and I’d say, ‘Well, it’s better than naming everybody ‘guy’. I had a brother name Guy” (Morgan 23).

Migrants spoke in double negatives, such as “ain’t” and “might could,” and dropped the “g” at the end of “ing” words. Moreover, their “twang” elicited guffaws and laughter. They tended to stretch the vowels in some words. For example dog sounded like “doawg,” and “sat” became “sa-aat” (Stanley, *Children* 36). Many of the migrant interviewees mentioned they were made to be very conscious of their twangy accent—“it would certainly give you away, no question about it” (Morgan 23). And Lillie May recalls:

The most embarrassing thing that happened to me was a teacher when I was reading in geography in front of the class and I was in the seventh grade. When it came to R-O-U-T-E we always called that route. The teacher corrected me and said, "Route [root]". I said, "I'm sorry but you're in the wrong place. I'm reading this sentence." I read it again and he corrected me again and made a remark about "now we really know you're from Oklahoma," Then he pronounced it R-O-O-T. I went home and told my dad. I said, "Do you know we rooted our way all the way to California on Highway 66?" He said, "What are you talking about--that's route not root." That's the only time the teacher ever did anything” (May 22).

As a result of being made fun of many migrants “learned very quickly to try and drop the brogue” and “worked hard trying to sound like Californians” (Rose 22, Jackson 16) Jewell Egbert remembers she lost her accent “pretty quick” (Egbert 25). Joyce Seabolt was “pleased when [her accent] did go away and the teasing and ridicule stopped” (Seabolt 34). Migrants quickly realized that their “strange speech” equated them to the poorer, farm worker classes. Dorothy Rose felt that the locals considered her and other migrants to be beneath them socially:

Not that we had to go to the back of the bus or anything but I certainly felt people considered us lower class. I know some of my friends felt that too so we really worked hard so that they wouldn't know by our speech that we were from Oklahoma.”(Rose 16)

The inability to pay for extracurricular activities also isolated migrant children. Joyce Seabolt recalls that as a third grader she was not able to participate in May Day dances:

I can remember dancing up a storm learning that dance around the Maypole. I couldn't participate in that May Day dance because I didn't have any shoes--that was one rule they made. It hurt and I didn't forget it. Even today, I'm not a wealthy woman but I'm comfortable and I feel very badly when I see a child with tattered clothes and worn shoes because it brings back memories of those earlier years. It brings tears to my eyes (Seabolt 24).

Butler remembers another incident that was an embarrassment as well as a disappointment:

I wanted to go out for basketball but there was just no way to buy shorts. I don't know whether you had to buy your jerseys and shoes too but there just wasn't the money for it so, consequently, I think you lost sometimes on things like that. If you're active in sports at an early age your chances are better to get along with other people" (Butler 10).

And Dorothy Rose refused to attend her junior and senior proms because she could not afford to buy appropriate dresses. (Rose 25)

School taught migrant children that they did not measure up to local standards. Their poverty and speech left them vulnerable to being stereotyped as lazy, dirty, and stupid and somehow to blame for their predicament. Thus, these negative labels often left migrant children feeling defeated, seeing themselves as flawed, undesirable, or morally defective (Philips). Moreover, the defeatism they felt at school mirrored what their parents felt as they grappled with economic uncertainty, mobility, and familial unrest (Heffernan 188). As Theobald and Donato observe "[M]any Okie migrant children dropped out rather than suffer the humiliation of school, causing one father to lament that his son was 'going to grow up dumb, just like me'" (Theobald 35).

How did other Okie children respond to the taunts and bullying? Some overcame their shame by hiding certain aspects of their lives. Goldie Farris recalls:

making friends with one girl and I was very careful never to let her know where I lived. Finally not too long before we left there I told her where we lived and I can remember her looking at me and she was so surprised. 'You don't look like one of those people' "(Farris 15).

Lula Martin recalls a painful experience where she felt pressure to violate her ethical principles to save face:

I had a teacher who liked to make you feel bad. In a sewing class she asked what our room was like and would we like to change our room and she was going to help us redecorate our room. I didn't have a room. There wasn't even any paint. I slept in the living room on a little cot. I don't think it was even painted, but it was made into rooms then. I'm sure she knew that I lived like that. . . . So she went right down the [row] and I was so embarrassed and I thought, what will I say? I didn't want to lie because I was really, taught never to lie and I knew if I lied I'd feel bad about it for a long time. And yet I wasn't going to say I don't have a room. I could have done that. So I told her my room was pink and green. Then she said that color combination was not good so we'll change it to so-and-so. I felt really guilty that I had told that lie because I didn't even have a room. It was no big deal. Most people wouldn't have been bothered, I think I was just overly sensitive" (Martin 19).

Other migrant children reacted to being an outsider through avoidance. Dorothy Rose, for example, expressed her sense of isolation and loneliness in her poem “Algebra Teacher”:

I keep to myself
Stay away from the town-people's kids
Take my poke of lunch
To the Main Street Park Plaza
I eat alone on a bench behind the shrubbery (Rose 22)

Rose also recalls that she avoided being ostracized by interacting with people who didn’t attend schools other than hers:

I felt that people from another school wouldn't know where I was from for some reason. I hardly ever dated anyone when I was in high school that went to that high school. I dated them from surrounding towns. At that time we went to all the surrounding towns quite a bit. We went dancing on Saturday night at a certain ballroom and it seems that all my friends that I felt comfortable with were from other schools. They weren't going to know I was an Okie or call me an Okie” (Rose 24).

Migrants often retaliated to taunts with their fists. Martha Jackson recalls the ridicule she experienced:

They made fun of us a lot. I remember once we had a debate in assembly about the Okies coming to California. We almost had a fight and the teachers had to dismiss assembly right away because there would have been a fight. It just seemed like half of the kids there were from Oklahoma and it was just about to erupt into a brawl”(Jackson 17).

Many brawls erupted when migrants were called “Okie.” In those days it was a derogatory term that classified individuals, originally from the south central states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri, as:

ignorant and uneducated, dirty of habit if not of mind, slothful, unambitious, and dependent. [They] may be viewed now as emotional, again as phlegmatic; sometimes as sullen and unfriendly; again as arrogant and over-bearing. Not rarely [are they] accused of being dishonest. These characteristics are sometimes considered innate [and] sometimes lack of education is held responsible”(Goldschmidt 61).

Byrd Morgan remembers putting his fist in the mouth of someone who called him an Okie, “They'd gang up on a kid if they had a chance like any kids will do. Yes, I had quite a few fights for the first two or three years”(Morgan 23). And Charles Newsome recalls trying to convince the local children that he was an Oklahoman not an Okie . . . “[I was] somebody back where [I] came from” (Newsome 37).

Like Newsome, migrants’ pride in their cultural heritage protected them from the scorn of others. Viola Mitchell echoes what many migrants from the middle central states believed:

I always taught my kids not to pick a fight, but if anybody jumped on them, let them have it. That's just what they did. We always held ourselves up and demanded respect and I taught the kids to do that cause back there in Hollis, if you didn't have money and own land, you wasn't nothing. I learned real young to hold my head up high and if they said something to me I didn't like, I let them have it. And I got respect and that's what I kept" (Mitchell 9)

Thus, like Mitchell, by demanding respect they subverted the term "Okie." Lillie May remembers advising another migrant to "just stick your nose up in the air and [be] proud you're an Okie"(May 22). And James Lambert recalls:

Well, to a lot of people "Okie" means a dirty word. Back years and years ago, back in the 1920s and 1930s "Okie" was trash. But "Okie" meaning to me is that you are one hell of a man or a woman or a child whichever one you might have been at that time. You worked hard, you lived hard and you played hard. There was nobody else to do the work same as your "Arkies", your "Texan" people, they were the same (Lambert 17).

Pride plus a sense of humor enabled many to adapt to their new surroundings. Morgan recalls:

After a little while, you joke back. One favorite one was they'd asked if you knew why they didn't have any insane asylums in Oklahoma. 'No, why? Well, they sent all the crazy people to California to teach school.' So you learned to cope with it" (Morgan 23).

Okies vs. Townspeople

The tensions on school grounds between the newcomers and the local children mirrored the conflict between their parents and townspeople. One migrant observed:

I don't know, but looking back I think a lot of what the kids picked up on they heard at home. There must have been some talk at home or they wouldn't have disliked the fact that the kids were from Oklahoma or anywhere else. A lot of them didn't know where Oklahoma was. It was really foreign to them. It could have been an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean for all they knew" (Morgan 23).

Gladys Potter describes it this way:

Probably the greatest single factor in the lives of [migrants] is the feeling that they are never received into a community or into the life of the community. . . .They are never allowed to feel at home in the communities which demand their services" (G. Potter 138).

Once the crops were planted and harvested, the locals expected the migrants to move on. Yet, many stayed put. Unlike their Mexican counterparts, many migrants did not move on. As a result many who chose to stay ended up jobless, living in squalor. Migrants set up camp wherever they could,

pitch[ing] their camps . . . beneath the railroad trestles and the river bridges, along the ditch banks and among the trees in groves and orchards, their shelters, shacks and sheds, their tents and trucks were crowded, forming little colonies of miserable, frustrated refugees. . . human chattel of the fields." (Hart, *Report 27*)

The images of these people living in filth generated a perception among some educators and townspeople that this "migratory horde" (Reichard 9) were an ignorant, primitive, shiftless lot who came to California for a hand-out. One teacher believed that these "adult children" and their "little tow heads" were just as happy to rely on the dole. (Reichard 9) This belief echoes migrant Bobby Glen Russell's observation that the locals felt that "Okies and Arkies just weren't that smart—all they knew how to find as the Welfare Office." (Russell 6) The community wanted the migrants to disappear because they viewed them as a tax burden, social threat, and competition for scarce jobs.

Separate But Not Equal: Migratory Schools

During the mid-to-late 1930s, educators became aware that mainstreaming migrant children into regular classrooms was not conducive to academic success—such children needed to be situated in a safe and healthy learning environment. Conscientious educators asked, "How can [we] best meet their many needs as they wander in and out of the overcrowded schools in the state." (G. Potter 139) Clearly, educators realized their responsibility went beyond academic needs to addressing social, health, and familial needs. School districts appealed to the state of California for assistance in delivering effective education to migrant children. Eventually, the state offered two options: Districts could either integrate specially-trained emergency teachers into regular schools or establish a separate school for migrants (Heffernan 184). Unfortunately, school districts had difficulty with both options because the state did not provide supplemental funds. Consequently, school superintendents had to bow and scrape before their local communities for the needed funds. Unsurprisingly, local response was usually unenthusiastic at best and hostile at worst. (Heffernan, 184) As a result, lack of funding and little community support forced school districts to build temporary migratory schools, many of which were substandard, lacking basic facilities, such as flush toilets and treeless playgrounds, dusty in summer and muddy in winter, and devoid of swings and jungle gyms ("Teaching the Migratory" 34)

The Okie School

One such school proved to be an exception and became a shining example of what a migrant school could accomplish. Known as the Weedpatch school, it was the brain child of the aforementioned Kern County Schools Superintendent Leo B. Hart. He envisioned a school that the Okie students could be proud of and claim as their own. The school would engender an environment where they no longer had to "to endure the embarrassment, humiliation and disapproval they had so often experienced in their search for a better life." (Hart, *Report*, 29). During his years as a teacher and counselor, Hart observed firsthand the plight of Okie children—their poverty, educational disadvantages and their victimization in the classroom and on the playground. He recognized that Okie children came to school ill and hungry. Thus, the

new school ensured that every child had rest periods and health examinations. They also were given cod liver oil and orange juice between meals (Hart, "Vineland" 2). No longer were Okie children stuck in classes where they were physically bigger than the other students. Hart and the teachers agreed that, "the best instruction would come through grouping students in classrooms according to age. The discrepancies in previous background and training were taken care of through individual attention or small groupings." (Hart, "Vineland" 2) Hart was so confident of the success of the school that he enrolled his own children (Stanley, *Children* 56).

Financing the school was a challenge. Because Hart received scant government funds for his school, he became a self-described panhandler. . . . "stump[ing] Kern County for donations of supplies and materials" (Stanley 47). In September, 1940 the school opened with two temporary buildings but not much else . . . "no grass, no sidewalks, no playground equipment, no toilets, and no water" (Stanley, "Educating" 8) To provide water for the school, Hart, the teaching staff, the principal, and students "joined hands in . . . laying a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch pipeline across 1,000 feet of ground to a neighboring family water main" (Hart, "Vineland" 2). During the school's first year teachers and children continued to build the school that included a kitchen, food storage units and desks that were made out of orange crates. Later they bought used desks for one dollar apiece from schools that had purchased new desks (Stanley, "Educating").

In the second year they built an auditorium, and a home economics building. Thus, while learning how to read and write the students also were learning how to plumb, wire, plaster, and work with wood (Stanley, "Educating" 7).

Hart's decision to pull the migrant children out of the regular schools satisfied everyone--local educators, parents, and the community at large. The emergency school would eliminate overcrowded classrooms, relieve the teachers' stress in trying to cope with the needs of Okie children, and would reduce the daily brawls between migrant children and local school students. And best of all, at least from the townspeople's viewpoint, the Okies would be "would of sight" and taxpayers wouldn't have to foot the bill for buses, lunches, playground equipment, and so on" (Stanley, *Children* 47).

Compassionate Teachers Only, Please

While many school teachers were professional and compassionate toward migrants, others were less so⁴. Several of the Dust Bowl interviewees mentioned unkind teachers. Billie Pate recalls that even though he and his brother were good students in Texas, that was not the case in California. He remembers that they "started off on the wrong foot" in a class where all the students were natives except for himself, his brother and two other boys, all of whom were from Oklahoma and Texas: "Well, for some reason our teacher resented and made it known that she didn't like the Okies and the Arkies and the Texans. So, it was a very bad relationship"(Pate 13).

⁴ A 1936 Kern County schools study stated that the reason migrant children were held back in school may or may not be due to "their inferior native ability"(Dawe 38).

Ethel Belezzuoli recalls something a teacher at Porterville High School said to her. Why, the teacher asked, did “all us Okies came out here.” Her response: “Probably for the same reason you did.” Bertezzuoli went on to say, “she was the only teacher that had ever made any remark along that line. There were a few people that said things but I always consider the source and with most people it's ignorance. (Belezzuoli 15)

Ruth Criswell remembers that during the time when her family was living in tents, the teacher of her brother and sister sent them home with a letter in which the teacher claimed that the school was going to transfer her siblings to another school because, said the letter, “They were obviously of low I.Q. [Intelligence Quotient]. They're Okies and Texans.” Criswell recalls her reaction: “I don't know just how to describe it. I thought it was the most obnoxious thing I'd ever heard of a teacher doing. She didn't send any grades. We thought she'd send grades along. She couldn't support what she said with grades. . . My mother threw it [the letter] in the stove” (Criswell 35).

One migrant attributes some of his “oneriness” to the biased attitude of one teacher:

I think we had one teacher who was actually prejudiced. I'm sure she was. . . That made it kind of hard. Well, I think we got the blame in some cases when we didn't have it coming. I know we did. Because of that this stepbrother of mine and I got pretty ornery sometimes. We were pretty hard scrappers anyway. After we moved from there though I really never had any more problems at school” (Morgan 24).

Central to Hart's vision for the new school were committed teachers who could see beyond the children's poverty and backwardness to their potential as educated and productive citizens. Hart acknowledged that he was interested only in the “the best teachers. . . teachers whose attitude indicated that they were really interested in this type of student and wanted to help in the program.” (Stanley, *Children* 46) Hart traveled to several colleges throughout California to recruit the best qualified teachers. Hart was able to pay these elementary teachers very well--\$36,000 and 45,000 a year compared to the “twenty something” high school teachers were earning (Stanley and McColgan 11). But, these teachers earned every cent, not only were they expected to teach in the classroom but also work with the children outside of class (Stanley, “Educating” 8). In addition to assisting the school children in digging ditches and sewer lines, they counseled them through their personal troubles, supplied them with juice and soup until the cafeteria was built, and often bought them shoes and clothing (Stanley “Educating” 8).

Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and . . .

Blending the academic with the practical was central to Hart's school curriculum. He believed that while these children were economically and socially disadvantaged, “they were an average group of kids with all the feelings, aspirations, and dreams of other youngsters” (Stanley, “Educating” 8). With this in mind, Hart developed a curriculum that reflected “what the children wanted to become, not what they were” (Stanley, “Educating” 8). They, Hart realized, required more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic—they also needed to know how to survive in the real world. So they learned how to build furniture, type a letter, cobble shoes, and make a

dress. Moreover, to help them become socially confident and be better stewards of their health, he integrated instruction in manners, morals, and health education into their daily lessons. (Hart, *Report 28*)

As can be seen, students learned by doing. They applied their new skills to practical situations they would encounter in the home and workplace. In the “laboratory of beauty,” for example, teacher Barbara Sabovitch taught girls the “needs of the Junior Miss” (Stanley, *Children 56*). They learned to style hair and care for nails and skin and to whip up their own cosmetics. As Hart observed, “Cream, powders, pastes and rouge hold no mysteries for them” (Hart, *Report 38*). Boys, on the other hand, learned about aviation from studying an old C-46 that Principal Pete Bancroft procured for the school (Stanley, *Children 56*). “I taught them aircraft mechanics,” Bancroft said, “and if they maintained a grade of 90 percent or better in arithmetic, I let them drive the plane down the makeshift runway.

Students raised sheep, pigs, chickens and cows on school property. They planted and harvested potato and vegetable crops which provided food for the school: “From pasture and the pens via the cold storage room comes the meat for the cafeteria to provide nourishing meals for the students” (Hart, *Report 32*). Girls and boys learned institutional cooking by preparing and cooking lunches for nearly four hundred students daily. Lunch cost two cents or was free if a child was unable to pay. Breakfast was also served with the help of PWA (Public Works Administration) cooks. Supplies were augmented with surplus commodities and private donations. “Many an undernourished child,” Hart observed, “was restored to normal health” (Hart, *Report 34*).

Soon, a close bond based on mutual trust and respect developed between the teachers and the students. This made the Weedpatch school unique. Teachers, said Hart, “went out of their way to help these children and teach them things about themselves and the world that they couldn’t learn anywhere else” (Stanley, *Children 56*). The children became self-confident enough to know “they were as good as anybody else” (Stanley, *Children, 70*). The close ties between child and school meant there were very few disciplinary problems. After visiting the school representatives of the California Youth Authority complimented Hart on “the finest crime prevention program in the State of California” (Stanley, *Children 71*).

After a few years, the local community became aware of the Weedpatch school’s success. Consequently, local businesses and organizations donated materials, livestock, and plants to the school. For example, the DiGiorgio Ranch donated potatoes and the labor to help the children plant and harvest the crop. The Weedpatch students reciprocated by sharing the swimming pool they constructed themselves with the townspeople. Eventually, the reciprocal sharing created a “cementing feeling between the community and the school.” (Stanley, “*Educating*” 8). Ironically, the very people who viewed Okies with such disdain, came to respect the Weedpatch school. So much so, that many parents clamored to enroll their children. According to Stanley, parents “began to phone [Hart] and write letters seeking to transfer their children to “the Okie school.” The locals “came to accept [the migrant newcomers] as part of the community when they saw what had been accomplished” (Stanley, *Children 71*).

The “Okie” School Becomes the Sunset School

Since the so-called “Okie School” was an emergency school, it could only exist for five years, according to state law (Stanley, *Children* 71). In 1944, after five years of operation, the school merged with the Vineland School District and became known as the Sunset School. After securing permission from Hart, the local school trustees enrolled their seventh and eighth grade students. Subsequently, the Okie children were soon outnumbered by the local children (Stanley, *Children* 72).

In the long run, the school’s success was twofold. First, because the Okie children liked going to school, they did not want to leave and follow their parents to another job, so many of the parents stayed in town or in the federal camp during the school year. As a result the children’s family lives became more stabilized. And, second, the school prepared these students, who once were deemed dirty and uncouth, to graduate from high school and pursue successful careers in business, teaching, firefighting and other professions. As Bobby Glen Russell observes:

It's real interesting to note that a lot of the so-called slow learners in those days are successful businessmen around Bakersfield. They survived. They made it anyway—the drive that motivated them was survival (Russell 6).

References

- Belessuoli, Ethel. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Butler, Earl. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Criswell, Ruth. . [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Dawe, Theodore. “Migratory Children: Educational Achievement Status of the Migratory Children in Kern County.” *Sierra Educational News* (Sept. 1938):12, 38.
- Day, Elizabeth. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Egbert, Jewell. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Farris, Goldie. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
- Goldschmidt, Walter. *As You Sow*. New York: Harcourt, Brace: 1947.

Gregory, James N. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. New York: Oxford University, 1989.

Hart, Leo B. "A Report on the Development of Kern County Rural Schools, 1939-1946." Bakersfield, Calif.: Court House, circa 1946.

_____. "Vineland School Held Classes for Migrant Children." *Quarterly Bulletin Historic Kern [Kern County Historical Society]* (March 1984):1-3.

Heffernan, Helen. "Report of Conference on Education of Children of Seasonal Workers." *California Journal of Elementary Education*. (Feb. 1938):181-192.

Holmes, Loye [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Jackson, Martha. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Kirkendall, Lester A. "Education and the Recent Western Migration." *Journal of Educational Sociology*. 14.8 (Apr. 1941):488-501.

Lambert, John. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Martin, Lula. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

May, Lillie. [Interview]. Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Mitchell, Viola. . [Interview]. Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Morgan, Byrd. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Newsome, Charles. . [Interview]. Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Pate, Billie. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Philips, Tommy M.. "A Triarchic Model of Poverty." *Theory & Science* 9.3(Summer 2007): n. pag. Web. 11 February 2011.

Potter, Gladys. "Specific Suggestions for the Organization of Instruction in Emergency Schools." *California Journal of Elementary Education*. 7.3 (Feb. 1939):138-148.

Potter, Jewell. "Teacher and Migrant: The Teacher's Problem in a Migratory Situation." *Sierra Educational News* (October 1938):26

Reichard, Alice. "California's Adult Children." *Country Gentleman* (February 1940): 9+

Rintoul, William. [Interview]. Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Rose, Dorothy. [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Russell, Bobby Glen. . [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Seabolt, Joyce. . [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Shields, Hattie. . [Interview]. California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Digital Archives. California State University, Bakersfield, 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.

Stanley, Jerry (Gerald). *Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp*. Crown, 1992.

_____. "Children of the Grapes of Wrath: A Handmade School Saved Okie Kids for a Happy Ending." *American West* 23(2) March-April 1986: 22-28.

_____. "Educating the Children of the Grapes of Wrath." *California Historical Courier* August 1980 32 (4):6-8.

Stanley, Gerald (Jerry) and Susan McColgan. "Leo B. Hart" [unpublished interview] February 2, 1977.

Stein, Walter. *California and the Dust Migration*. Westport, CT : Greenwood Press, 1973.

"Teaching the Migratory: The Problem of the Teacher of Migrant Pupils." *Sierra Educational News* (March 1940):34-36.

Theobald, Paul and Ruben Donato. "Children of the Harvest: The Schooling of Dust Bowl and Mexican Migrants During the Depression Era." *Peabody Journal of Education*. 67.4 (Summer 1990): 29-45.

United States. Cong. House of Representatives. Committee to Investigate Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. *Interstate Migration. Hearing*. 24-25 Sept. 1940. 76 Cong. 3rd session, Part 6. Washinton: Government Printing Office, 1941.

