A complex set of interacting forces both economic and ecological brought the migrant to California. Following World War I, a recession led to a drop in the market price of farm crops and caused Great Plains farmers to increase their productivity through mechanization and the cultivation of more land. This increase in farming activity required an increase in spending that caused many farmers to become financially overextended. The stock market crash in 1929 only served to exacerbate this already tenuous economic situation. Many independent farmers lost their farms when banks came to collect on their notes, while tenant farmers were turned out when economic pressure was brought to bear on large landholders. The attempts of these displaced agricultural workers to find other work were met with frustration due to a 30 percent unemployment rate.

At the same time, the increase in farming activity placed greater strain on the land. As the naturally occurring grasslands of the southern Great Plains were replaced with cultivated fields, the rich soil lost its ability to retain moisture and nutrients and began to erode. Soil conservation practices were not widely employed by farmers during this era, so when a seven-year drought began in 1931, followed by the coming of dust storms in 1932, many of the farms literally dried up and blew away creating what became known as the "Dust Bowl." Driven by the Great Depression, drought, and dust storms, thousands of farmers packed up their families and made the difficult journey to California where they hoped to find work.

Why did so many of the refugees pin their hopes for a better life on California? One reason was that the state's mild climate allowed for a long growing season and a diversity of crops with staggered planting and harvesting cycles. For people whose lives had revolved around farming, this seemed like an ideal place to look for work. Popular songs and stories, circulating in oral tradition for decades (for more on this topic see "The Recording of Folk Music in Northern California" by Sidney Robertson Cowell), exaggerated these attributes, depicting California as a veritable promised land. In addition, flyers advertising a need for farm workers in the Southwest were distributed in areas hard hit by unemployment. An example of such a flyer, publicizing a need for cotton pickers in Arizona, is contained in Charles Todd's scrapbook. Finally, the country's major east-west thoroughfare, U.S. Highway 66 -- also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," "The Main Street of America," and "Will Rogers Highway" -- abetted the westward flight of the migrants. A trip of such length was not undertaken lightly in this pre-interstate era, and Highway 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to an area just south of the Central Valley of California.
Although the Dust Bowl included many Great Plains states, the migrants were generically known as "Okies," referring to the approximately 20 percent who were from Oklahoma. The migrants represented in Voices from the Dust Bowl came primarily from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Most were of Anglo-American descent with family and cultural roots in the poor rural South. In the homes they left, few had been accustomed to living with modern conveniences such as electricity and indoor plumbing. The bulk of them shared conservative religious and political beliefs and were ethnocentric in their attitude toward other ethnic/cultural groups, with whom they had had little contact prior to their arrival in California. Such attitudes sometimes led to the use of derogatory language and negative stereotyping of cultural outsiders. Such intergroup tension is further illustrated in regard to the California farmers' attitudes toward both Mexican and "Okie" workers, and discriminatory attitudes toward migrant workers in general.

California was emphatically not the promised land of the migrants' dreams. Although the weather was comparatively balmy and farmers' fields were bountiful with produce, Californians also felt the effects of the Depression. Local and state infrastructures were already overburdened, and the steady stream of newly arriving migrants was more than the system could bear. After struggling to make it to California, many found themselves turned away at its borders. Those who did cross over into California found that the available labor pool was vastly disproportionate to the number of job openings that could be filled. Migrants who found employment soon learned that this surfeit of workers caused a significant reduction in the going wage rate. Even with an entire family working, migrants could not support themselves on these low wages. Many set up camps along irrigation ditches in the farmers' fields. These "ditchbank" camps fostered poor sanitary conditions and created a public health problem.

Arrival in California did not put an end to the migrants' travels. Their lives were characterized by transience. In an attempt to maintain a steady income, workers had to follow the harvest around the state. When potatoes were ready to be picked, the migrants needed to be where the potatoes were. The same principle applied to harvesting cotton, lemons, oranges, peas, and other crops. When they were not working or looking for work, or tending to the civil and domestic operations of the camp, the migrants found time to engage in recreational activities. Singing and making music took place both in private living quarters and in public spaces. The music performed by the migrants came from a number of different sources. The majority of pieces belong to the Anglo-Celtic ballad tradition. Songs such as "Barbara Allen", "The Brown Girl", "Nine Little Devils", "Father Rumble", "Lloyd Bateman", "Pretty Molly", and "Little Mohee" all reflect this tradition. Gospel and popular music are other sources from which migrants took their inspiration. The minstrel stage, tin pan alley, early country, and cowboy music were all popular music
sources that fed the performers' repertoires. The works of the Carter Family, Jimmy Rodgers, and Gene Autry were particular favorites of the migrants. Songs like Jack Bryant's "Sunny Cal" and Mary Sullivan's ballads "A Traveler's Line" and "Sunny California" all speak of hardship, disappointment, and a deeply cherished wish to return home.

In addition to songs and instrumental music, the migrants enjoyed dancing and play-party activities (singing games accompanied by dance-like movements). Included in this online presentation are square dance calls, such as "Soldier's Joy" and "Sally Goodin", and play-party rhymes like "Skip to My Lou" and "Old Joe Clark." Newsletters produced by camp residents provided additional details about camp social life and recreational activities.

As World War II wore on, the state of the economy, both in California and across the nation, improved dramatically as the defense industry geared up to meet the needs of the war effort. Many of the migrants went off to fight in the war. Those who were left behind took advantage of the job opportunities that had become available in West Coast shipyards and defense plants. As a result of this more stable lifestyle, numerous Dust Bowl refugees put down new roots in California soil, where their descendants reside to this day.

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Library of Congress
April 6, 1998