

## The Oklahoma Experience: The Thirties

Long neglected by state historians on the grounds that nobody cares to be reminded of hard times, the decade of the 1930s remains the most misunderstood in Oklahoma history. It is popularly believed to have been only a time of dust and depression, when Oklahomans--or worse, *Okies*--were objects of national scorn, derision, or pity. The 1930s presented Oklahomans an unhappy image of themselves; and for a half-century they have tried, with varying degrees of success, to refute it, to replace it with something more pleasant, or to ignore it whenever the rest of the world seemed inclined to allow them to do so. Regardless of the approach, the responses of Oklahomans to the 1930s have tended to be defensive and more productive of heat than of light, further obscuring important information about the Depression years. Many commentators seem content to say that John Steinbeck got some of his facts wrong in *The Grapes of Wrath*, so as to dismiss one of the great works in American literature from consideration and to divorce it from the well-spring of its inspiration. As one Oklahoma historian has put it, the Depression was not important because it was "just a phase we went through." Indeed it was, but Oklahoma and its people have seldom had to endure a more significant one.

The impact of the Depression in Oklahoma was determined in part by patterns of land occupancy established in the late nineteenth century. Owning land could be accomplished under federal land laws in Oklahoma Territory, which became the western half of present-day Oklahoma. But because most of eastern Oklahoma originally had been Indian land; lease arrangements became the rule; and lease-holders used sharecroppers or tenant farmers to work the land for them. High prices for agricultural products inflated the state's economy during World War I, but markets collapsed thereafter, and Oklahoma entered an agricultural depression in the 1920s. If the rest of America had to wait for the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 to usher in the Great Depression, it should be noted that by then most Oklahomans already had experienced nearly a decade of hard times.

Low prices and the mechanization of farming operations forced sharecroppers from the land. Owners no longer needed their labor; so they packed up their belongings and their families and headed for California orange groves or Arizona cotton fields in search of jobs. Perhaps 100,000 people left Oklahoma in the 1930s, most of them from the eastern half of the state. Woody Guthrie sang of "Dust Bowl Refugees," but the eastern boundary of the Dust Bowl extended only as far as Oklahoma City. Regardless of the dust storms, significantly fewer people left western Oklahoma, because energy production, especially in natural gas, brought an uncommon prosperity to the region. In

short, the part of Oklahoma that should have been the most devastated was actually the most prosperous, and the part least affected by dust and drought experienced the worst economic collapse. Oklahoma City in the 1930s had a fifty-square-mile "Hooverville" of displaced people living in packing crates and rusted car bodies, but it also had oil companies drilling in people's front yards and paying monthly royalties that put groceries on the tables of many whom the Depression had placed in the ranks of the unemployed. The juxtapositions in the history of Oklahoma during the 1930s are as striking as they are unexpected, and they do not always support the conventional images of the Depression as a time of universal suffering.

Certainly economic problems strained Oklahoma's social fabric in the 1930s, but the cultural history of those times belies the notion that the Depression completely stifled creativity as people struggled to survive. Indeed, there was a vigorous cultural climate in Oklahoma in the 1930s that has not been equalled since. Oklahoma-born writers like George Milburn and William Cunningham achieved national prominence during the 1930s. Woody Guthrie laid the groundwork for a national reputation that would blossom in the early 1940s and led some to call him America's poet laureate. Jim Thompson, like William Cunningham, directed the Oklahoma Writers Project for a time, in preparation for his emergence as one of America's foremost writers of hard-boiled fiction in the 1940s and 1950s. And Will Rogers, perhaps the nation's best-known political commentator, talked Americans through the difficult early days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in weekly radio programs and entertained millions with his motion pictures about ordinary folks resolving their problems through the application of common sense. Each responded to the Depression in a unique way, and together their contributions merit the respectful attention of modern Oklahomans.

The books for this program approach the historical problem of the 1930s from several directions. Although Betty Rogers' recollections of her husband Will encompass much more than the 1930s, she shows the importance of an Oklahoma background in the life of a national hero of the 1930s. John Steinbeck's classic novel depicts one family's journey from Oklahoma to California; and Jim Thompson describes his own family's journeys and his curious odyssey associated with his education as a writer. The series concludes with Patty Lou Floyd's fictive meditation on the lives of some who remained in Oklahoma during the 1930s. Each book reminds us that adversity makes triumph possible and that hardship strengthens both resolve and character. Each suggests that it would be a good thing for Oklahomans to confront the 1930s directly and to deal with the events of the decade unequivocally. To plan effectively for the future, people must be thoroughly conversant with their past. If they avoid the 1930s, Oklahomans merely avoid evidence of--and lessons from-- what might well have been their finest hour.

### ***Will Rogers: His Wife's Story***

**by Betty Rogers**

Will Rogers is nowadays most commonly identified as a "humorist," but on his passport he chose to list his occupation as "journalist." In either capacity, he was America's foremost political commentator from the early 1920s until his death in 1935. He had begun remarking upon the news of the day to fill time between his rope tricks on the vaudeville stage, earning the cognomen of "Cowboy Philosopher." Eventually he would leave the rope tricks behind, going on to write syndicated newspaper columns, star in Hollywood films, and host weekly nationwide radio broadcasts. If Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that all Americans had to fear during the Depression was fear itself, Will Rogers, through various media, suggested that a good laugh might relieve apprehension. Humor characterized his response to hard times. Betty Rogers' memoir reveals much about the nature of the man who sustained so many during the darkest days of the Depression.

### ***The Grapes of Wrath***

**by John Steinbeck**

John Steinbeck informed the world of the plight of uprooted Oklahomans in this 1939 novel. Despite an occasional hostile editorial and a few legislative outbursts, the book was well received in Oklahoma. Bookstores quickly sold out, and libraries had to purchase extra copies to satisfy demand. The story of the Joad family was a story of survival against long odds, of common people ennobled by their quest for work and food and a place to live out their lives; and it touched the heart the way great literature must. Yet, in the fifty years since its publication, the book has come to be viewed by many Oklahomans as detrimental to the image of the state and its citizens. Although California bore the brunt of Steinbeck's social criticism (and to such an extent that some California communities still ban his book from schools, and libraries), Oklahomans seem overly sensitive to the novel. The question is, why? What is there about the Joads that could shame or embarrass? Barefoot and illiterate they may have been, but what of their values? Can economic circumstances supplant strength, integrity, and compassion as measures of human worth? Perhaps their reactions to *The Grapes of Wrath* tell us more about Oklahomans now than Steinbeck ever hoped to tell us about Oklahomans then.

### ***Roughneck***

**by Jim Thompson**

Anadarko-born Jim Thompson survived the Depression by taking very nearly every job known to man, if it paid enough to put food on the table. This is his memoir of the 1930s and 1940s, published in 1954 after he had at last established himself as a writer. In it may be found a recounting of some of the experiences contributing to the stark and

terrifying fictions that have led some critics to rank him with Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler as progenitors of hard-boiled American fiction. The book has an edge to it that some may find disconcerting, for Jim Thompson never pulled his punches. To some, his memoir contradicted what was, by all accounts, a kind and gentle nature. But his is yet another story of survival; and it reminds us that simply getting through the day in the 1930s sometimes carried a high cost. Hard times bear the name because they are just that.

### ***The Silver DeSoto***

**by Patty Lou Floyd**

Patty Lou Floyd spent the Depression growing up in Duncan, Oklahoma. Her book is a series of recollections cast as stories and narrated by Betty Jane Bledsoe, who spent the Depression growing up in Dexter, Oklahoma. The Joads and Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie may have gone to California, but Betty Jane Bledsoe stayed put. For her, the 1930s were less a time of economic calamity than of coping with the myriad problems of adolescence. As she deals with the deaths of family members, puzzles over the nature of the universe, and wonders at the world that lies beyond Dexter, she is witness to the fact that economic distress was not always the central feature of community life in the 1930s. Even in the middle of the Dust Bowl, one still had to be mindful of taking shelter from tornadoes of having one's homework ready on time, of noting the arrival of the Rock Island train. If Jim Thompson wrote of individual strength and John Steinbeck wrote of family strength, then Patty Lou Floyd speaks for the strength of community. Hers is another kind of survival and another perspective on the 1930s in Oklahoma.

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### **For Viewing**

*Bound for Glory* (1976)  
*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)  
*Judge Priest* (1934)  
*The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936)  
*The Story of Will Rogers* (1952)  
*A Vision Shared* (1988)

### **For Listening**

Studs Terkel: *Hard Times* (Caedmon TC 2048)  
The Wit and Wisdom of Will Rogers (Caedmon TC 2046)  
Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings (Elektra EKL 271-272)

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