In the 1930s, disaster struck the southwestern Great Plains region of the United States. In the heartland of the U.S., poor soil conservation practices and extreme weather conditions exacerbated the existing misery of the Great Depression and instigated the largest migration in American history.

**Historical Background**

The semi-arid grasslands of the Great Plains were first settled for large-scale agriculture in the 1860s, when Congress passed the Homestead Act and encouraged thousands of families to move to the area. As the nation’s demand for wheat grew, however, cattle grazing was reduced and more acres were plowed and planted. Dry-land farming in combination with overgrazing caused destruction of the natural prairie grasses. The land became increasingly bare and the strong winds found naturally in the Great Plains began to literally blow the land away. Huge clouds of dust darkened the sky for days and drifted like snow, covering farm buildings and homes.

Throughout the Dust Bowl decade, the Plains were torn by climatic extremes. In addition to dirt storms, residents of the Great Plains suffered through blizzards, tornadoes, floods, droughts, earthquake, and record high and low temperatures. In February 1933, temperatures dropped 74 degrees within 18 hours in Boise City, Oklahoma, and remained below freezing for several days while a dirt storm raged. In 1934, record high temperatures—as high as 120 degrees—caused hundreds of deaths in Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Sunday, April 14, 1935, is still remembered as “Black Sunday.” A day that began with mild warmth ended with a huge dust cloud, pushed at 60 miles per hour, blackening the sky.

**Unfit for Man or Beast**

The dust penetrated everything and everywhere. Wherever air could go, dust could infiltrate. No matter how well sealed a home might be, the dust coated furniture, clothing, and cooking and eating areas. During a dust storm, anyone venturing...
outside would be assailed by sand flying into their faces.

Livestock suffered equally. Poultry were suffocated and larger farm animals were blinded and sickened by the swirling dust.

**Moving West**

Though they tried to hang on, eventually millions of people left the Great Plains. Almost one-quarter of the population was forced out when they lost their farms and ranches in bank foreclosures. The need to feed their children and raise them in more healthful surroundings drove many families to pack everything they owned in cars and trucks and head west. California became a popular destination. Its mild climate and diverse crops appealed to farmers looking for work. Popular stories depicted California as a veritable promised land. Flyers advertising work for farm workers were widely circulated. In this pre-interstate-highway period, Route 66 provided a direct route from the Dust Bowl region to the Central Valley of California.

**Life in California**

Sadly, life in California was not as idyllic as had been hoped. Many migrants gave up farming when they discovered that a good portion of California farmlands were owned by large, corporate farms that cultivated different crops and were far more modernized than the smaller farms of the Great Plains. There were often fewer jobs available than had been advertised, and desperate workers weren't in a position to refuse the poor pay and living conditions offered by the corporate farms.

So, for many migrants, their unemployment continued in California. Roadside camps proliferated, feeding the resistance to migrant workers that came from many local citizens. Groups of vigilantes beat up migrants and burned their shacks to the ground. The local law enforcement officers were often hostile as well.

Eventually, federal help was given to the migrants. Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration built 13 camps designed to be self-governing communities. Each temporary housing complex accommodated 300 families in tents built on wooden platforms.

Over the years, migrants from the Great Plains were integrated into the California culture. The FSA camps disappeared, roadside shacks were replaced with real houses, and migrant children were sent to the local public schools.
SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- The famous Dorothea Lange "Migrant Mother" photo offers an excellent opportunity to consider point of view in photography. Ask your students to speculate on why one image from the series became an icon of the Great Depression. Students may search the Library’s Web site for related images if they want to explore beyond the items in the set.

- The poems and song lyrics provide rich evidence of irony and the pathos of the time. Assign or allow students to select a poem or song and ask them to identify examples of irony or pathos.

- Collectively, this set of resources offers a scaffold for comparing and contrasting historic migrations such as those that resulted from the Dust Bowl, the westward movement of the mid-19th century, and the forced migrations caused by hurricanes and other natural disasters in the early 21st century. Invite students to extend their learning by comparing what they can learn about migration from this set to other migrations.

- The resources can trigger discussions about what causes migrations, transportation issues, hardships encountered, and eventual outcomes for migrants.
**Additional Resources**

- **Bound for Glory: 1939-1943**
  http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/boundforglory/

- **Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives**

- **Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950**
  http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wwghtml/wwghome.html

- **Found Poetry with Primary Sources: The Great Depression**
  http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/poetry/

- **The Grapes of Wrath - Scrapbooks and Artifacts**
  http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/grapes/

- **Out of the Dust: Visions of Dust Bowl History**
  http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/dust/

- **New Deal Programs: Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?**
  http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/dime/


Map of California by the Rural Rehabilitation Division showing areas where different crops are grown, proposed location of initial camps for migrants, and routes of migration. 1935. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. http://loc.gov/pictures/item/2002723443/


http://loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992000353/PP/

http://www.loc.gov/item/toddbib000400/

http://loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992000322/PP/

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1992000320/PP/