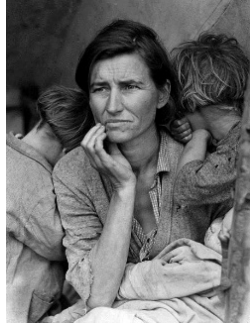


# How Dorothea Lange and John Steinbeck Captured California in the 1930s

By ReadWorks



By the time California became an American state in 1850, it was already an important place for farming. Miners, ranchers, and farmers had been settling there for decades due to the state's many types of geography. California had a population of about 90,000 in 1850, and this grew to over 5 million by 1930. By the 20th century, California produced a lot of the nation's fruits, vegetables, and other crops.

When severe drought hit the Great Plains in the 1930s, many sought refuge in California. Migrant laborers arrived in the United States with no work, and their families often went hungry. This disastrous time was captured by newspaper reporters, but it also lives on in history through novels and photographs. Two Californians in particular were exceptional at recording this hard period.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. He attended Stanford University, also in California, though he did not graduate. Eventually he moved to New York to become a writer, but he did not manage to get a career off the ground. He returned to his home state, where he started to write fiction about California and its people. Many of Steinbeck's most famous novels and short stories were written in the 1930s during America's Great Depression. Even though they are fictional, his subjects often show what was happening in history at the time. His book *Tortilla Flat* focused on people living in the countryside in Monterey, California.

*Tortilla Flat* is a funny story about a group of friends mostly enjoying themselves, but Steinbeck's later books dealt with more serious issues. *In Dubious Battle*, which the writer published in 1936, looks at migrant laborers who picked fruit in California's orchards. The workers were striking for better working conditions. Steinbeck also used his work to show the life and hardships faced by California's migrant ranch workers. *Of Mice and Men* is his story of two such workers, Lennie and George, who make their way from one town to another in

California looking for work. Their dream is to own their own land one day, but many obstacles make this difficult to achieve.

Finally, Steinbeck's most famous novel about Californians is *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939. Like some of Steinbeck's other stories, the book shows people facing poverty and hardship during the Great Depression. In the novel, a family of tenant farmers, the Joads, moves from Oklahoma to California after a drought leaves them too poor to farm. They are forced to become migrant laborers in order to survive.

Steinbeck's novels showed fictional versions of the very real problems people in California faced during the 1930s. In contrast, the photographs of Dorothea Lange offer real-life examples of hardship. Lange was born in New Jersey in 1895. As a young adult, she settled in San Francisco, California. She had decided in high school to become a photographer, and at first, she ran her own studio, where she took people's portraits.

During the 1920s, Lange traveled with her first husband, Maynard Dixon, around the southwestern United States. She began to take pictures of people and places in what is called "documentary style photography," because of the way it documents people's lives. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, she began to take many more photos of the poor in order to illustrate the many problems they faced. She started with what she saw right in San Francisco and took pictures of striking laborers and people waiting on bread lines.

In 1934, Lange started working for the California State Emergency Relief Administration. The next year, she began to work as a photographer for the Resettlement Administration. Lange worked with her second husband, Paul Taylor, who wrote reports on migrant farm workers while Lange took the photos.

In 1936, Lange took what became her most famous picture. "Migrant Mother" shows a woman staring away from the camera. She is surrounded by some of her children. Two of them are hiding their faces. Everyone is hungry. The family is stuck in a pea-pickers' camp in California. They sold the tires on their car in order to buy food. Conditions at the migrant workers' camps were terrible. After Lange put the photo in a newspaper in San Francisco, the government stepped in to make sure no one at the camp starved. Without Lange and her work, conditions there could have been very different.

While we have history books to remind us of what took place in California and across the country during the Great Depression, photos and fiction can serve this purpose, too. Steinbeck's novels and Lange's photographs, showing specific people and events from that time period, have made a lasting impression on how we view the events of 1930s California.