

Migrant Farm Workers

Land in America is plentiful, but not always cheap. Those who cannot afford to buy it often work it for a wage. Tenant farmers cultivate a plot of land and pay a portion of the harvest to the owner, as do the Joads before the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. But migrant farmers and laborers occupy a rung further down the ladder, traveling seasonally and getting paid by the bushel to do painful and dehumanizing “stoop labor.”

Since subsistence farming began to wane during the late 19th century, cheap migrant labor in America has been in constant demand. The people taking migrant jobs have belonged to many different groups: whites like the Joads, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. The Depression-era photographs of Dorothea Lange, Horace Bristol, Walker Evans, and others made the grim faces of migrant farmers a permanent part of the collective American memory.

During the Depression, American citizens desperate for work did most of the migrant labor. Due to the labor shortage caused by World War II, however, the Bracero Program brought five million Mexican agricultural workers to the United States, beginning in 1942. The program ended two decades later, when a rash of accusations and lawsuits regarding human rights abuses were filed against the American and Mexican governments.

In the 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought to light the conditions of migrant laborers. Led by Arizona-born César Chávez, the union organized protests, marches, and boycotts to educate the American public about who was picking their produce and the conditions in which they lived. In the 1970s, an estimated seventeen million Americans participated in a successful boycott of non-union grapes.

In more recent years, right-to-work legislation and a surplus of labor have prevented most migrant farmers from unionizing. Though estimates vary, it is safe to say that more than two million migrant farm workers labor in America’s fields—most of them Spanish-speaking and at least 100,000 of them children. About a third of the total are U.S. citizens who live a hand-to-mouth existence. Their average education stops at the sixth grade, their lifespan ranks substantially below the American norm, and the majority of them have incomes well below the poverty line.

Many farmworkers today labor under conditions familiar to the writers and photographers who chronicled their precursors during the Depression. Migrant farmers remain a large yet nearly invisible presence in the American mosaic.