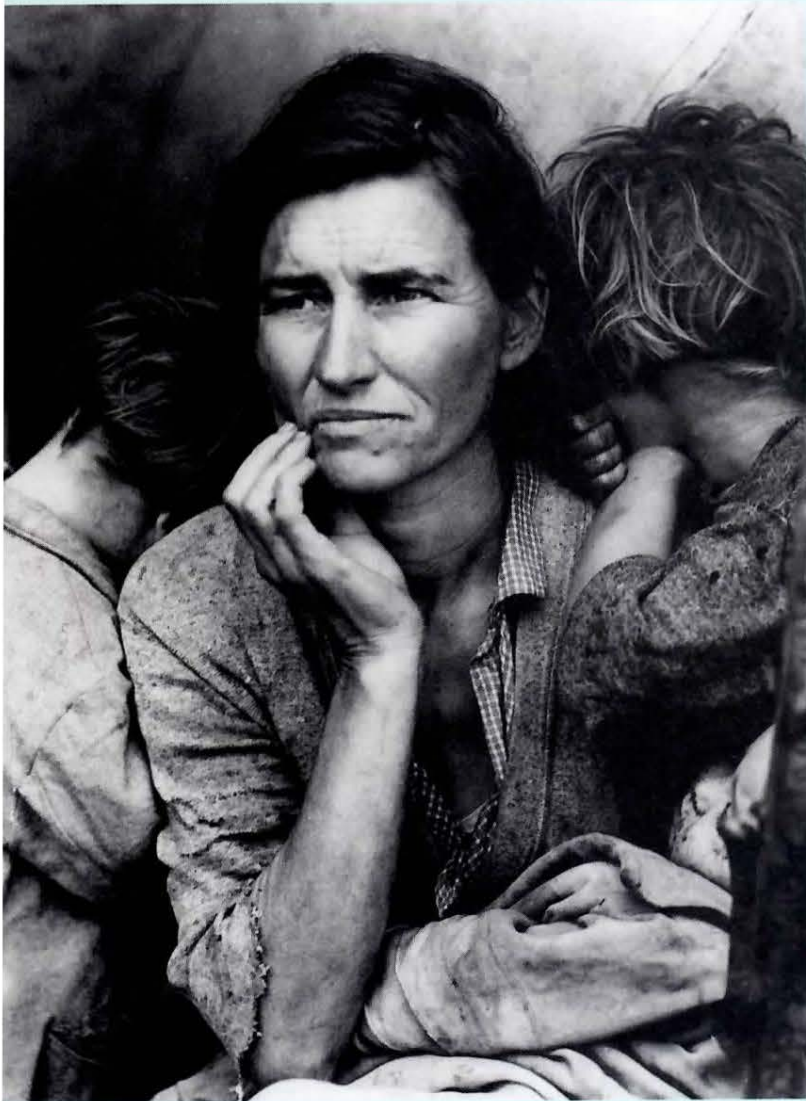


TURNING DUST INTO ART

by Bruce Watson



Toward the end of the 1930s, Americans were introduced to the reality of the Dust Bowl through pieces of work by photographers and writers of fiction and music. By then, some of America's finest artists had produced works that seemed literally to spring from the dirt of the plains.

In March 1936, photographer Dorothea Lange was headed home to Berkeley, California. She had been taking photographs of rural America for the Farm Security Administration. This was Lange's first solo trip after nearly a year of visiting migrant camps with economist Paul Taylor, whom she later would marry.

Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother is one of the most famous images to come out of the Dust Bowl.

Roaming through the camps, Lange spoke with their friends, and they showed her their photographs. "I took myself for a moment, and I wanted to get something in a sign," Lange made on the "Migrant Mother" at the "Pickers Camp".

Driving into the dirty camp, Lange spotted a mother and children beside an old car and approached the desperate mother. "I was a magnet," Lange said. She took just five minutes, but one became the iconic image of the Dust Bowl.

Migrant Mother is a woman, her face a study in worry, while her children are behind her. The picture conveyed the suffering of the Dust Bowl. The newspaper article and photos of Dust Bowl migrants remain some of the most powerful images of the 1930s.

A few months after that photo, a young reporter and writer visited the migrant camps in California. In a truck, twenty-five miles from Steinbeck traveled his native state. He met a woman who had fled the Dust Bowl. After hearing the story, he wrote several novels.

Roaming through the camps, Lange spoke with the people, winning their friendship before taking their photographs. Traveling by herself for a month, Lange just wanted to get home. But something in a sign that read "Pea Pickers Camp" called to her, and Lange made one more stop.

Driving into the **ramshackle**, dirty camp, Lange immediately spotted a mother and three children beside an old tent. "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet," Lange remembered. She took just five photographs, but one became the most famous image of the Dust Bowl.

Migrant Mother shows the woman, her face wrinkled with worry, while her children hide behind her. At the time, this picture conveyed the human cost of the Dust Bowl better than any newspaper article. And Lange's photos of Dust Bowl victims remain some of the most powerful images of that tragedy.

A few months after Lange took that photo, a young newspaper reporter and writer also began visiting the migrant camps in California. In an old bakery truck, twenty-four-year-old John Steinbeck traveled throughout his native state talking to people who had fled the Dust Bowl. After hearing their stories, he wrote several newspaper articles



about the people he called "harvest gypsies."

Still, he felt an urge to write more about the human tragedy and suffering. So in 1938, Steinbeck began to tell their story in a novel:

"To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the **rivulet** marks.... In the water-cut gullies the earth dusted down in dry little streams...."

Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, told the story of the fictional Joad family. It follows the Joads from Oklahoma to the migrant camps of California, where they pick fruit and try to survive extreme poverty.

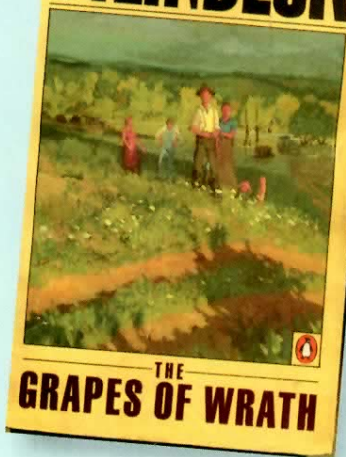
Photographer Lange was caught in action in 1937 in Texas.

Ramshackle means so poorly constructed that disintegration is likely.

A **rivulet** is a small brook or stream.



STEINBECK



ABOVE: Henry Fonda was Tom Joad in the movie version of John Steinbeck's classic *The Grapes of Wrath*. **LEFT:** Steinbeck's eye-opening tale of the Joads, an Oklahoma family driven from their land during the Dust Bowl, became a bestseller. It also was the focus of book burnings.

The book sold almost a half-million copies in 1939 and eventually won the Pulitzer Prize in literature. More than any other piece of fiction, *The Grapes of Wrath* brought the story of the Dust Bowl to readers throughout America. When it first was published, it actually was controversial and subsequently banned. But in 1940, the Joad's story reached even more people when *The Grapes of Wrath* was made into a film starring actor Henry Fonda as the young Tom Joad. Parts of the movie were filmed at Arvin

Federal Camp (see the article on page 29).

Steinbeck and Lange had to visit Dust Bowl refugees in order to learn and tell their stories. Another artist, musician Woody Guthrie, simply had to set his personal story to music.

Guthrie, born in Okemah, Oklahoma, grew up in the farming town of Pampa on Texas's flat, dry panhandle. He was in his twenties when the Dust Bowl sent him scurrying like a tumbleweed across the plains. Leaving his wife and daughter, Guthrie went to California to find work in 1936. He got a job

TOP RIGHT: Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* album cover. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** One of Guthrie's songs is preserved as artwork on the cover of one of his notebooks.

singing folksongs on the radio. Soon, Guthrie began to slip some of the songs he had written into the show. When he made his first album in 1940, Guthrie called it *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

Guthrie recorded all fourteen songs on the album in one day. He just stood at a microphone with a guitar and sang:

"We are ramblers, so they say,
We are only here today,
Then we travel with the
seasons,
We're the Dust Bowl
refugees."

In one song, Guthrie boasted, "dust can't kill me." In another, he joked about having the "dust pneumonia blues." Guthrie sang about Steinbeck's hero, Tom Joad, and **lamented:**

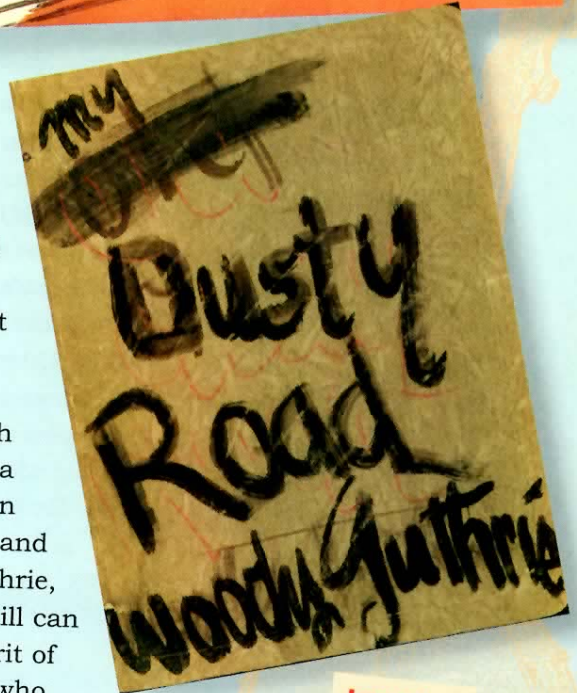
"So long, it's been good to
know yuh.
This dusty old dust is a-gettin'
my home
and I got to be driftin' along."
Dust Bowl Ballads sold just a few hundred copies. But the gritty lyrics describing survival in the Dust Bowl have inspired generations of songwriters, including present-day musician



Bob
Dylan.

No art could heal the scars of the Dust Bowl. Yet, thanks to artists such as Dorothea Lange, John Steinbeck, and Woody Guthrie, today we still can feel the spirit of the people who survived them. 🐉

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Lamented
means
expressed
grief.