

Common Forms for Uncommon Actions: The Search for Political Organization in Dust Bowl California

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By James Hamilton

This study addresses the forms of social criticism penned by migrant farmworkers who worked the California fields in the late 1930s and early 1940s through the examination of mimeographed newspapers published in a California migrant labor camp. It concludes that the inability of migrants to organize for effective political action was due not only to lack of resources or the strength of the status quo (which was sizable), but also to a failure to find a cultural means by which migrants could collectively see their situation, organize, and work to change it.

From 1935 until the beginning of WW II, the Dust Bowl migration was widely regarded as evidence of the failure of the United States' market economy to generate decent jobs and decent lives for all its citizens.¹ By the late 1930s, more than 500,000 people had left the south central states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri, with more than 300,000 making their way to California, only to find infrequent, low-paying work amidst widespread persecution and inescapable poverty.²

Neither the presence of migrant farmworkers nor the living conditions they endured were new to Californian farms or to the 1930s. To the

James Hamilton is an Assistant Professor in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

contrary, they had been long-standing features of state as well as national agriculture.³ Yet what was new was the comparative legitimacy of alternative political movements and their organizational strength. Therefore, chances for widespread improvements in the migrant farmworkers' situation rested largely on their ability to join with these political movements and apply enough pressure to the rigid and reactionary agricultural industry and state political elite to bring about significant change.

The present study grapples with the complexities of producing an effective political movement, both in this case and in general, and the role of journalism and communication in this process. It is a contribution to recent work about alternative journalism, alternative political movements, and the alternative cultural forms they use.⁴ Upon examining the cultural forms used by a selection of Anglo migrant farmworkers who worked the California fields in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the study addresses the usefulness of these forms for making sense of the situation in which Anglo migrant farmworkers found themselves, then to assess to what degree such cultural forms aided or inhibited their ability to organize politically.⁵ Although this is a story of a proto-movement that never coalesced, much can be learned about strategies of alternative politics and the role of communication and culture by investigating failures as well as successes.⁶

Tension Between Individualism & Collectivism

The creation of an effective political alliance between labor and migrants depended on reconciling two distinctive and in many ways opposed traditions of labor activity. As Hyman Berman notes about the history of radical labor movements in the United States, the tension between individualism and collectivism constitutes the core of a "major problem [.] . . . whether it was [ever] possible for a Leninist[-style] movement with its centralized authority and its quasi-military discipline to coexist in a region [such as the American West] where the [labor] traditions are individualistic and even anarchistic."

In an investigation of such issues in the early 20th Century, Berman concludes that no synthesis was possible between "the individualist, iconoclastic spirit which characterized the frontier radical tradition" and "the building of a truly American working class revolutionary movement."⁷ This major problem in radical organization was at the center of the difficulties between migrants and labor organizations. Overcoming this difference was a Herculean challenge for labor organizers and migrant activists—one that, in this case, was not met and that continues to this day.⁸

What makes such an examination possible is the survival of mimeographed newspapers that were published in migrant labor camps in the 1930s and 1940s. For purposes of this essay, the *Weed Patch Cultivator*, later named the *Tow-Sack Tattler*, provides the material on which one case can be documented.⁹ The newspaper appeared from 1938 to 1942 in the federally run Arvin Migratory Labor Camp near Bakersfield, California.¹⁰ Although the scattered issues and haphazardly preserved archival material that have survived do not allow one to make definitive statements about such matters as editorial practice and newspaper/management day-to-day relations, they begin to reveal a complex situation that speaks directly to the issues.

Although many government camps also published newspapers during this time, this particular camp newspaper deserves attention for two reasons. First, it was conceived and produced in the inaugural federal government camp, which served as the blueprint for all federal camps to follow.¹¹ By 1941, the federal Farm Security Administration (FSA) ran 53 camps in 11 states from California to Florida, Washington State to Texas, and many camps came to publish newspapers at a later date, likely relying on the Camp Arvin newspaper as the basic template as much as they did for other camp matters.¹²

Second, the camp in which this newspaper appeared was located in Kern County in the San Joaquin Valley—an area of high labor activity and a time during some of the largest agricultural strikes in the country.¹³ Kern County constituted what Devra Weber calls "a relatively hospitable atmosphere for Anglo organizing." Remnants of earlier labor, populist, and socialist movements persisted, as did the Communist Party, which "found enough members there to become the strongest branch in the [San Joaquin] Valley," and the Socialist Party.¹⁴ In autumn 1938, the largest strike in the state was staged by cotton pickers in Kern County, where some 3,000 workers stayed out of the cotton fields for two weeks. During 1939, although there were fewer strikes, those that did take place were larger than in the previous year, with the largest one involving the entire San Joaquin Valley, the conflict again over pay for work in the cotton fields.¹⁵ Hence, efforts to fashion an alliance between migrant farmworkers and the labor movement had a great chance of occurring here, with the residue of such efforts more likely available for study today.¹⁶

The issue of how to examine such a process remains a topic of debate among journalism historians. Whatever position taken, these

debates suggest that journalism historians are not immune to siding with a particular theoretical perspective concerning the nature of communication and its role in social life.¹⁷ Accordingly, this study also seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of a cultural perspective *vis-à-vis* other, mainstream perspectives.¹⁸

Instead of seeing newspaper items as means of persuasion or propaganda, as mechanically integrating individuals into social systems, or as individual expressions of unique views competing in a free and open marketplace of ideas, a cultural perspective seeks to detect and understand commonly held world views that made such items intelligible and meaningful in the first place, and how they may become a common basis of legitimacy and action.¹⁹

Creating a "Meaningful Cultural World"

Carey characterizes communication in this sense as "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action."²⁰ It is the production of this "meaningful cultural world" and the shape of its primary contours that are of interest here.²¹ Correspondingly, the purpose of analysis is not to investigate whether attitudes were changed as a result of reading the newspaper, whether a supposedly singular migrant culture became integrated with an equally singular labor movement, nor to attempt to simply document what various people at that time and place ostensibly thought. Rather, it is to suggest in what ways previously unseen and unrecognized conditions of subjugation were made visible, palpable, and important enough perhaps to be recognized and acted upon collectively.

To do this, one studies forms in the historical context of their production and reception in order to understand how they provided the cultural basis for collective action. Cultural forms in this sense, writes Raymond Williams, are regarded as "common property, to be sure with differences of degree, of writers and audiences or readers, before any communicative composition can occur."²²

Thus, forms constitute a social relationship (the requirement for collective action) in at least two ways. The first is that any form makes use of established social conventions if it is to be understood. Even the most avant-garde work depends on (an) already established set(s) of conventions in order for viewers or readers to judge its avant-gardism. Forms in this sense renew mutual assumptions, expectations, obligations, and understandings.²³ A second sense in which forms constitute a social

relationship is in terms of what they accomplish: the evoking, positing or proposition of a relationship, and, also, the evoking, positing or proposition of, in the words of Williams, "an active relationship to the experience being expressed."²⁴

Therefore, when understood as a social relation, form is the means by which the making and understanding of social relations is attempted and always variably achieved. By implication, journalism and language use in general must be seen ultimately and fully as, again in Williams's words, "a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality."²⁵ Such a position suggests that, far from camp newspapers' being simply an inert "record of the process" of "subcultural construction" (as one historian of this situation puts it), they themselves were a major cultural mode of the production of social relations.²⁶

Attention to form is of particular usefulness when addressing alternative media. As David Spencer points out, cultural forms such as songs, verse, stories, and fables generally have received little attention from labor historians in comparison to the more "serious" forms of essays, tracts, and speeches. However, cultural forms used by the rank and file are of immense importance in assessing social movements, because they are vernacular expressions of non-elite world views, thereby suggesting more defensibly popular instead of elite experience.²⁷

The forms that migrant criticism of living and working conditions took in the newspaper included blustery personal statements and turgid, simplistic essays composed of labor union clichés. However, forms such as verse, personal commentary, and jokes had their basis in everyday migrant experience. Because they emerged from migrants' experience, if used to give shape and meaning to working and living conditions in which all labored, such forms had a greater potential of compellingly dramatizing exploitative conditions and therefore more of a chance of achieving widespread collective awareness and action.²⁸ What potential existed in forms used—and what did not—are the topics discussed in this article.

The Inescapable Reality of Beans & Dust

Living and working conditions of migrant farmworkers in California during the 1930s were generally acknowledged as desperate and unconscionable, but they were as inescapably a part of day-to-day reality as beans and dust. Despite these persistent conditions, little had been done to change them.²⁹ Although migrant laborers had worked California fields since the later 1800s, attempts to organize them had failed largely

because of the difficulty of organizing such a scattered and mobile workforce. As a result, radical activity earlier in the century had been limited to areas of high concentration of workers, such as timber camps and anarchistic activities of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).³⁰

By the 1930s, with the renewed legitimacy of labor, organizing activity among farmworkers picked up, beginning with the efforts of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). Few long-term gains were made, however, before organizational difficulties and wave after wave of vigilante repression beat the union down to the point where, by the mid-1930s, it disbanded.³¹ What made organizing so difficult was the federal government's and labor's shunning of migrant farmworkers and their plight.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) strongly resisted any attempt to create an affiliated farmworkers' union because it emphasized its heritage of supporting skilled craftsmen, not manual laborers. Also, non-farmworker members were much more desirable for union-building activities because, as Cletus Daniel notes, they were "overwhelmingly nonmigratory, able to afford modest union dues, and eligible to claim the rights and protections afforded by the National Labor Relations Act," the last reason a particularly damning one for farmworkers, the only labor group excluded from the protection of federal legislation.³²

Agricultural Industry Growth Spurs Union Activity

However, the industrial-scale growth of California agriculture created a similarly industrial-scale work force in size and concentration, thereby making organization more possible than it had been. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, few areas of the economy had been more affected by the growing efficiency of industrial capital than agriculture.³³ Furthermore, such industrialization had become the dominant practice in California, where concentrations of mobile workers were needed in increasingly large numbers to service the state's labor-intensive cash crops.³⁴ The concentration of wage workers, combined with increasingly desperate living and working conditions, led to an explosive situation, which organized labor saw as an opportunity and that those who ran the state's agricultural industry saw as a substantial threat.³⁵

Both government and labor became involved in this emerging situation. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal government attempted to

address it through the Resettlement Administration, later becoming the Farm Security Administration (FSA).³⁶ Organized labor in the form of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), under the leadership of John L. Lewis and his seeming tolerance of Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) members and activities, also committed resources to organizing migrant farmworkers.³⁷ In particular, the political potential of tens of thousands of alienated farmworkers convinced some in the CIO to try to merge migrants into a larger national organization. Therefore, the increasing industrialization of the California agricultural industry, combined with the reformist stance of the federal government and the emergence of the CIO and its initial willingness to work on behalf of migrant farmworkers, helped provide an institutional basis for the agrarian radicalism in California of the late 1930s.

While the federal government started its migrant labor camp program, union organizers for the CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) set out to organize migrant workers into a potent national political force aligned with the goals of labor. As noted earlier, initial results—large strikes in 1938 and 1939, with the epicenter being the San Joaquin Valley—were important.³⁸ Migrants lived and worked, and the camp newspaper was initially written, produced, distributed, and read in this explosive context, with the federal camp project and labor unions aligned against the agricultural industry and state government supporters.

Camp Newspapers Emerge

The government-funded camp newspaper was but a recent example of the long-standing government practice of self-promotion, to which substantial financial resources had long been channeled and that were at a high level in the 1930s.³⁹ Organized labor's involvement in the camp newspaper continued a long-standing tradition of using newspapers to aid the organization of its activities, and was linked to similar uses as the labor press and the radical press.⁴⁰ Yet, due to institutional requirements, each was limited to working through the migrant social formation instead of controlling content directly.

Far from being an indigenous response by migrant farmworkers, the newspaper was established, supported, and encouraged by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) for two reasons. The first is that it played a part in the official FSA goal of "rehabilitating" migrants from "rootless wanderers" to responsible, wage-earning citizen-consumers.⁴¹ The other

side of this seemingly altruistic goal was the political need for incorporating an increasingly desperate, disenfranchised portion of the populace that had nothing to lose and everything to gain from radical, if not revolutionary, activism.⁴² An important component of this rehabilitation was the camp newspaper, which migrants were supposed to read and produce in order to learn the role of news in a liberal democracy and the boundaries within which such activity "properly" occurred.⁴³

The second reason the FSA established and supported the camp newspaper was for institutional survival. In addition to playing a role in the rehabilitation program, the newspaper was intended to provide evidence to a skeptical Congress of migrant "rehabilitation" and, therefore, that money appropriated by Congress was being well-spent. From the beginning of the program in 1935, congressional opponents of New Deal policies found the FSA a highly visible example of a government program run amok. FSA directors therefore spent a good deal of resources to document activities and to build public approval and political support for the camp program as humanitarian aid.⁴⁴ Camp newspapers were important to these efforts, as well.

However, there were problems with having the FSA support and promote camp newspapers. The Associated Farmers and other opponents to organized agricultural labor felt that, should migrants organize, it could threaten their control of the industry. Government migrant labor camps already gave laborers a chance to live with and get to know each other, thereby creating more of an opportunity to organize.⁴⁵ If camps became a base of labor activity (newspapers being one important means of organization), growers would have to apply political pressure to undercut the FSA camp program, thereby eliminating this protective environment for union activities.⁴⁶ The camp education program therefore contained fundamental contradictions. It helped the FSA meet its pedagogical goals by supposedly helping to build a self-governing democratic community. But the more successful the program was, the more it threatened growers' control of the agricultural industry, thereby antagonizing a powerful coalition of interests that had the power statewide and nationally to reduce or end the FSAs funding.⁴⁷

Camp newspapers therefore came to occupy a very important ideological role that had potential effects far beyond the boundaries of Camp Arvin. Opposition to the camp program could be minimized if the newspaper successfully transformed rootless migrants into rooted, wage-earning middle-class citizens, but opposition would certainly increase if the newspaper helped build a serious labor movement. Because of these

high stakes, the FSA not only helped establish camp newspapers, but the institutional imperative was to shape them in very particular ways. Certain roles had to be promoted and others excluded if the (re)educational program was to succeed and the FSA survive.

Although explicit controls on content could not be legally instituted, Camp Arvin management still attempted to control the paper indirectly from the very first issue through the (re)educational program and related regulations. Despite the reported Camp Committee decision to start the paper, its editorial policy stated in the first issue suggests substantial management involvement.⁴⁸ In addition to emphasizing the democratic function of using the paper to "discuss ideas" (thereby indicating its kinship with the education program already in place), the use of "your" and "them" (instead of "our" and "us") makes clear the distinctness of the writer from the migrant population:

[The newspaper] should serve the people of Camp in these ways: (1) to inform them of working conditions in general and in this district; (2) to make it possible for them to discuss ideas or events which are important to them; (3) to let the campers know what is going on in Camp, and above all feel that it is your paper; and lets have your ideas, jokes, poetry etc. Any contributions should be left with Earl Stone [the camp secretary].⁴⁹

Another passage further in this statement directly addressed the kind of stories to be allowed: "Any camper with something to say, *as long as it has interest for the Campers in general*, entertaining or serious, may have space"⁵⁰ [emphasis added]. Who is doing the deciding is never made explicit, but, as the newspaper is being produced in government offices and by government-hired workers, and based on how the educational program was managed, it is reasonable to assume that the camp manager would be called in to decide.

Camp Manager Controls Content

The camp manager had many ways of controlling the newspaper, thereby keeping it within the limitations dictated by the FSA goals of maximizing its educational value and minimizing its threat to California growers. Methods included appointing the editor; supplying all materials, including paper, a typewriter, and access to a mimeograph machine; and

making available the camp secretary to transcribe migrant-donated items, and to type and produce the newspaper.⁵¹ Material aid included allowing the newspapers to be sent through the mail free of charge.

Camp newspapers were routinely sent to other migrant camps as well as to area libraries and to the FSA home office, which used stories from them for its own public relations materials.⁵² Of course, this support served as a control because it could be withdrawn at any time, thus silencing the paper. Although the campers' fund (generated by a 10 cent per site per day fee) soon paid for the paper on which the newspaper was printed, the government continued to provide production support.⁵³ The FSA regarded the overall value of the newspaper highly enough that, when migrant interest was low, management kept it going. As September and October were peak work times of the year, few migrants had the energy or interest to carry on the newspaper during these months, and so the duty to keep the paper going was assumed and exercised by management.⁵⁴

Despite these efforts to shape and control the newspaper, the relationships between labor, the migrants, and the FSA were such that complete FSA control of the newspaper was, at least, impractical and, at most, impossible. If the extent to which its officers directed efforts toward the FSA camps is any indication, the UCAPAWA felt that the government camps were of great strategic value. At least five FSA camps (Arvin, Gridley, Marysville, Shafter, and Visalia) had active locals of the UCAPAWA, the Worker's Alliance of America (a national pressure group aligned with the UCAPAWA), or both, and during strikes the UCAPAWA used several FSA camps as strike headquarters without interference from government employees.⁵⁵

In addition, labor activity in the government camps was possible largely because of the sympathy most FSA personnel—especially those in the field—had for the goals of organized labor. Many FSA workers, including the camp managers (mostly liberals, some socialists), personally supported efforts by the migrants to organize.⁵⁶ However, no federal worker could publicly take such a stance for fear of antagonizing the FSA's powerful political opponents.

Publicly, the official FSA position toward the camp newspaper and toward the struggle between unions and growers was neutral. Whenever the newspapers and their control were mentioned, public relations officer Frederick Soule stressed that the papers were "community institutions over which the Farm Security Administration has no control."⁵⁷ However, in practice, the two qualities most characteristic of the FSA camp manag-

ers—sympathy toward the workers' struggle for bargaining power, and the goal of teaching migrants the ways of democratic self-reliance—allowed the newspaper to work toward a far greater than intended range of goals.

Labor presence in the camp paper was sporadic, but it peaked during the 1939 strike, assisted by Sam Birckimer, the editor of the newspaper by October 1939, and a UCAPAWA organizer.⁵⁸ In addition to explanatory essays about the purposes of the UCAPAWA and the WA of A, he penned and printed accounts of how the organizing in the fields was conducted as well as pep talks to try to maintain likely flagging interest and support near its end.⁵⁹

Developing Migrant Cultures

The newspaper therefore took shape within these sets of conditions. It consisted of a single sheet, 8 inches wide and 15 inches deep. The masthead was hand-drawn, and stories consisted of typed columns, with copies produced by mimeograph.

Although conditions and the institutional support existed for the formation of a migrant farmworker union and an alliance with the CIO, the complexity of those labeled "Dust Bowl migrants" worked against such formulaic responses. Historian James Gregory describes them as "Southwestern 'plain-folk,'" whose culture and outlook was linked to a long-standing heritage of anti-monopoly and citizen-producer ideas, agrarian and working class radicalism, and nationalist and sometimes racist attempts to preserve the country's white male Protestant dominance. As Gregory notes, catechisms in this heritage typically stressed "the dignity of hard work and plain living and promised deliverance from the forces of power, privilege, and moral pollution, near and far."⁶⁰ Thus, nationalism, populism, racism, and an often evangelical religiousness were complexly blended.⁶¹

While sympathetic to critiques of industrialists and others in authority, migrants also shared a belief in a white Protestant and an often intensely patriotic nationalism, and, in this way, held deeply and simultaneously radical and conservative views.⁶² One can make sense of these contradictions by understanding them in terms of individualism and collectivism. By doing so, their social implications become clearer.

Intensely individualistic, their approach toward living stressed individual strength and persistence — fitting the saying "God helps those who help themselves." Individualism spawned such diverse responses for often desperate living conditions as stoic fatalism and resignation, reluc-

tance or heated resistance to pressure to join a group, or the favoring of disorganization rather than taking the chance of worsening one's lot through aligning with the wrong people or the wrong cause.

Yet many also shared a collectivism in terms of a sentimental, homespun regard for one's family, hometown, people, state, region and nation. Where individualism typically underwrote inaction or resistance, collectivism helped constitute a source of pride while it underwrote voluntaristic activity. It legitimized taking pride in being American, an "Okie" or "Arkide" (a term of derision turned into a term of pride when used by a migrant), a member of a union, or as a farmer.

Individualism Versus Collectivism

Such a dynamic was the basis for contradictory responses to a sociologist's interviews during the late 1930s and early 1940s with migrants who lived in Kern County—some of whom lived for a time at Camp Arvin, the camp at which the newspaper analyzed for this study was produced.⁶³ Even while professing pride as Americans, migrants still advocated the kinds of ideas promoted by politically radical labor organizers to correct the injustices suffered in a failing American society.

If they cut that relief off in California they will have a revolution in California. They'll [migrants will] fight fer it, they always have And by-god I ain't no Communist, but I may sound like one though.⁶⁴

It also was the basis for conflict between generations. In 1936, a supporter of organizing migrant labor noted this disagreement within one family. Oklahoman Jim Killen, reported the writer, "believed in organization as the devout believe in religion," although he was not entirely committed to labor. However, there was substantial disagreement within his family about the best attitude and action to take, indicating differing generational, gender and political alignments in terms of individualism and collectivism.

His brother talks violence; his father industrial democracy; his mother mumbles.

His father: "There kaint be any recovery until the workin' man gets paid enough so he can buy what there is to sell."

His mother: "It's been worse than this in Oklahoma. There's

been times when we'd been glad to work for 10 cents a day."⁶⁵
His brother: "Blast their God damn fields with dynamite."

In the same way that they could be patriots while finding severe faults with the American system, migrants could champion the cause of labor while at the same time denouncing it. Many were skeptical of the CIO because of its (as they put it) Communism, disorganization, lazy members who joined only to avoid working, and high-rolling union leaders' exploitation of the rank-and-file. However, many also found value in collective action as part of the union, which they saw as the only way to bring about better pay, prevent starvation and help those on relief get their fair share.⁶⁶

Thus, collectivism - individualism as articulated within populist and radical labor traditions comprised the cultural context of migrants' activity. Migrants were not of a single mind, but instead rallied and fragmented in contradictory ways, sharing with the FSA patriotism and the belief that migrants' problems in America were due to the corruption of a sound, egalitarian political system rather than to defects inherent in that system. The migrants shared with the UCA/PAWA an anger at migrants' economic subjugation. Their goal was to achieve, in Oklahoman, folk-singer and migrant- and labor-spokesman Woody Guthrie's words, "a good job at honest pay," which would require widespread changes in the status quo.⁶⁷

What made this situation particularly complex was the fact that points of agreement were also polarizing differences. Migrants often chafed within the authoritarian, patriarchal FSA educational program, which addressed symptoms rather than causes of the migrants' plight, and this individualism complicated efforts by the portion of migrants who were union-minded to build a collective consciousness that might become the basis for collective political action.⁶⁸ Also, despite the Popular Front strategy of the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) which called for collaboration with trade unions rather than revolution, the UCA/PAWA's revolutionary rhetoric offended many migrants' deep-seated faith in the United States and confirmed their equally deep fear of "creeping" communism.⁶⁹

"Don't Be What You Ain't"

Although the FSA placed official notices of various kinds in the newspaper (a perk from its role of providing support), most items came

from migrant farmworkers who lived in the camp. These contributions took many forms, ranging from letters to the editor, anonymous gossip columns, and one-liner jokes to lengthy essays about the labor situation. By seeing these items in social terms, how they did or didn't fit with the aim of organizing into a self-aware political force becomes clearer. The individualism of migrant culture was expressed in a variety of items, but, most evocatively, in verse which expressed a rugged, good-natured self-sufficiency and unpretentiousness:

Don't be what you ain't
Jes' be what you is
If you is not what you am
Then you is not what you is
If you're just a little tadpole
Don't try to be a frog
If you're just a tail
Don't try to wag the dog.
You can always pass the plate
If you can't exhort and preach
If you're just a little pebble
Don't try to be the beach.
Don't be what you ain't
Jes' be what you is,
For the man who plays it square
Is a-goin' to get "his."
—Juanita Davis.⁷⁰

This often became a fatalism, underscored by religious resignation, such as in a poem that concluded: "It is not for us to understand / Just leave it all in Jesus (sic) hand."⁷¹

Individualistic items also addressed the specific situation of farm laborers in California, but they often took the form of personal statements that justified only individual actions. Reluctance to appear "uppity" by telling others what to do undercut their collective potential, such as in a personal statement by a farmworker with a family who, during the 1938 strike, mentioned the inequity of some people staying out only for a few days, then returning to work in the fields before the strike achieved its goals. As he explains, "I don't know whether to call them scabs or not," because they had to work to get food to eat. He concludes that his family has enough food to hold out longer, and that "my family has no intention

of going back to the cotton fields until this strike is over," thereby explaining his reasoning only for himself and his family, which others could take or leave.⁷² Such reluctance to tell others what to think and what to do—and regarding such people as bossy and know-it-alls—ran deeply in many items, such as a poem that poked fun at "grumblers," who complained about everything. The advice given to people who were confronted with grumblers was to "turn a deaf ear, and pretend you can't hear."⁷³

Calls for Collectivism Failed

However, as organized action can only take place and be represented in collective terms, cultural forms that presented the common situation and case were essential for this mobilization to have a chance. The editor of August 1939 appealed to migrants for more contributions to the newspaper, and her explanation suggests the general awareness of the ability of newspaper items to evoke common experience.

If you've been moved, either to laugh or cry by something that's happened to you or around you, it's pretty certain that some of your neighbors would be moved in the same way if they saw the story in print.⁷⁴

With some exceptions, the potential of working collectively for change was never realized. Although collectivist appeals were often made, such expressions either did not address the immediate, concrete situation; were simplified (and therefore easily discounted as empty slogans or pie-in-the-sky wishes); or were too abstract, therefore not linking effectively the day-to-day working reality of individual migrants with the structural conditions of subjugation.

Collective calls that did not address the specific situation attempted to organize migrants socially, but not in the service of labor activism. Many migrants saw no necessary role for a radical critique of the United States' political and economic system, and items in the newspaper that expressed this version of collectivism, such as the poem that follows, did so in uncritical terms.

Makes no difference where you wander,
Makes no difference where you roam.
You don't have to stop and ponder,
For a place to call your home.

When they ask you where you were born lad,
Speak right up - be proud to say,
That your home's the land of Uncle Sam,
The good old U.S.A.

— A Camper⁷⁵

A collective-minded religious confession in verse also countered individualism, but in a way that made the current, earthly situation irrelevant when compared to greater goals.

Lord help me live from day to day,
In such a self and helpful way,
That when I kneel to pray,
my prayers may help others.
Help me Lord in all the works I do,
To ever be sincere and true,
And know that all I do for you,
must need be done for others.
— Mrs. Sharwell.⁷⁶

Appeals that simplified the situation did not address the depth of the problem or the difficulty of the solution. For example, after a writer notes the inequity of cotton growers getting \$14 per hundredweight while those who pick it get 75 cents, he concludes that the industry sets the price and that, only if workers were organized, "your trouble would be over."⁷⁷ Another item on the same page concludes "you people who are picking this 80 cent cotton surely can't expect a lot of favors from the good people of California." The solution was simply to "wake up and git in line don't sleep all your life."⁷⁸

Poems and song lyrics urged migrant laborers to "get off the row" and join the CIO.⁷⁹ Reprinted lyrics to songs sung on the picket lines as well as those penned by Woody Guthrie appeared often.⁸⁰ Some of these songs parodied or appropriated others, such as in "Associated Farmer Has a Farm."⁸¹ Hand-drawn pictures were used as well, such as one example that consisted of the head and shoulders of Woody Guthrie, with a caption: "The Dust Bowl Kid says: Prices is *High* wages *Low* / A man that would pick / 80 cents cotton is a slave / and nothing more! — Woody."⁸² But, whatever value they may have had in terms of momentary morale, none served as a deeper critique which might have sparked sustained resistance.

Examples of simplified and abstract appeals include a series of self-described "weekly letters from the editor" which were penned by a recent arrival to Camp Arvin from another camp nearby and appeared during the 1939 strike. His aim was to "explain what different organized groups are and what they stand for," beginning with the Workers Alliance of America and continuing with the UCAPAWA. Overall goals of the WA of A were to "bring about real economic recovery, to assure useful work at decent wages for all willing workers, to promote greater purchasing power among the people and to provide real social security for all" — laudable, yet entirely future, abstract goals that spoke little to farmworkers concerned with where to find food immediately.⁸³

Later the same month, the editor attempted to explain how unions work by using examples such as how a team of horses can accomplish more by working together and how a car runs well when all parts are working. Such appeals still did not explain why it continued to be so difficult to organize, instead simply proposing "wouldn't it be wonderful if we were all joined together in one or more organizations and cooperated with each other in times like we are not having."⁸⁴

The key to producing a collective consciousness was not in ignoring individualism or in simply asserting an automatic, abstract collectivism, but in overcoming the polarization altogether by recognizing migrants' situation as, paradoxically, a collective experience of alienation. Wandering and working as a purposeless, isolated individual was a typical theme of individualistic items, yet some items were able to dramatize alienation as a collective experience encouraged by specific conditions.

One of the few examples of this is a remarkable verse titled "Cotton Fever" which depicted the alienating experience of toiling as an individual in the cotton fields. Its form is a square dance call. The square dance was the primary cultural form of popular (as opposed to authoritarian) gatherings. Weekly square dances that attracted workers from camps miles around were staples of camp life. In this way, its use relied upon the intimate knowledge of all farmworkers. However, this square dance was not for enjoyment. The caller was not a person, but cotton bolls, setting the cadence and dictating pickers' every move. The poem ends with the cotton bolls still calling, reminding the pickers that this life was hard, but that this work was better than dying as a pauper, which would put one's surviving relatives into debt. Farm labor in current conditions was the only choice allowed.

COTTON FEVER

Along the road on either side
Cotton green and two miles wide.
Fields fan out in rows string-straight,
And a boll flings out his waddled bait
And grins at me and seems to say:
"You'll be a grabbin' at me one day
At six bits a hundred weight."

Then the bolls started rustling,
Shouting in the air
Just like as if they was callin'
Off a square:

"Chase that possum, chase that coon,
Chase that cotton boll around the moon.
Crawl down a row and stand up straight
On a six-bit whirl for a hundred weight
Hunker on along and grab 'er all around.
Lint's heaped up an' a record yield;
Gin's chuck full so gin 'er in the field.
You can live on the land till the

Day you die,—
Jus' as long as you leave when the
Crops laid by,
So pick 'er on down to the end in the gloam,
Then swing up your sack and promenade home.
Meet your baby, pat him on the head
Feed him white beans an' a piece of corn bread.
No need to worry, he'll go feight —
At jus' six bit a hundred weight."

And so I mosey down the hill
Cotton bolls a-callin' still:

"At Long Row's End the Boss Mean wait,
Nail you up in a wooden crate.
At six bits a hundred livin's hard,
But dyin's dear in the County Yard —
At twenty-five bucks a hundred weight!"
—A Camper.⁸⁵

Migrants earned money in the cotton fields, but precious little of it and at the price of dehumanization. They best fit this system when they didn't think, but just listened to the call of the bolls and worked as isolated individuals. It was a "fever," a sign of sickness, not of well-being. No other item worked culturally in the same way as this verse. Similar poems about working in the fields neglected to talk about the relationship between workers and conditions, emphasizing instead individual reactions to it.⁸⁶ Others criticized corrupt institutions, such as "the kept press," but neglect to link migrants' everyday experience to the case. The issue of why a corrupt, commercial press matters to migrant farmworkers who are wholly concerned with simply feeding their families from day to day was never broached.⁸⁷ Although a cultural solution to the problem of organization momentarily surfaced, it was far too little and far too late.

Keys to Cultural Change

Upon the end of the 1939 growing season and the onset of WWII, the institutional milieu changed substantially. Many conditions and developments caused the UCAPAWA's provisional presence to wane. The continual problem of organizing migrant farmworkers was never solved, and CIO head John Lewis' disinterest in it made finding a solution even more difficult.⁸⁸ CPUSA moral credibility was seriously impaired by the signing of the non-aggression pact between the Soviets and the Nazis. Combined with the wartime improvement in the nation's economy (which meant large numbers of new war-related jobs for unskilled workers in southern California), and increased nationalism which undercut oppositional positions, labor's appeal and effect in the California fields was generally neutralized.⁸⁹ After the high season of 1939, labor activity quickly dissipated.

The FSA stepped into the void left by the collapsed labor movement. Under constant threat of congressionally mandated disbandment, the FSA opportunistically settled on a new, unassailably patriotic goal of aiding wartime food production.⁹⁰ Consequently, the FSA became far less tolerant of migrant uses of the newspaper that were contrary to this new purpose. With organized labor virtually gone from the institutional scene and disinterest in aiding the new FSA goal tantamount to being labeled a traitor, the FSA soon exercised its authority unopposed. From the end of 1939 to the end of the camp newspaper in 1942, with the collapse of the influence of organized labor and the radical left, hegemonic identification

of migrants with the FSA and the existing American political system was largely achieved.

The fashioning of a cultural means of bridging the contradiction between individualism and collectivism and rallying it for political organization constituted a need that, with only a few exceptions, was not met. Migrant resistance was at most unorganized, with union organizers more often scrambling after wildcat strikes than planning them.⁹¹ The case described in this study suggests that such failures were not due only to lack of resources (although money to support strikes was always in short supply), living and working conditions that went as bad as many portray them to be (they were often far worse), or the strength of the status quo (which was sizable), but in a failure of a means by which migrants could embody the situation culturally, organize, and work to change it.

Endnotes

¹Widely read and cited examinations/polemics include Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939); John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939); and the tremendous volume of photographs generated by Roy Stryker, Dorothea Lange, and others photographers of the Farm Security Administration, which appeared in popular magazines and newspapers across the country. See Carl Fitchauer and Beverly W. Brannan, (eds.), *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

²McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Dust Bowl Migration and Other Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-35; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor*, reprint ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1975); Walter J. Stein, "A New Deal Experiment with Guided Democracy: The FSA Migrant Camps in California," *Canadian Historical Papers 1970*, 133-146; James Hamilton, "Educating Pastors: Recruiting Radicals: The Migrant Camp Newspaper at Arvin, California," *Communication 13* (1993), 255-275.

³More moved in the 1920s than in the 1930s, but circumstances had changed drastically. McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, 7-8, 293; S. Rexford Black, *Report on the California State Labor Camps* (San Francisco: California State Unemployment Commission, 1933), 9; Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴See, for example, David Ralph Spencer, "Rhymes and Reasons: Canadian Victorian Labor Journalism in Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brannan, eds., *Newsworkers: Toward a History of the Rank and File* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁵For greater depth, see James Hamilton, "RR Writing Communities: Dust-Bowl Migrant Identities and the Farm Security Administration Camp Newspaper at Arvin, California, 1938-1942," (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1993).

⁶With a similar intention, Todd Gitlin investigates the fragmentation of left politics in the last 25 years, with the hope of identifying resources for its renewal. See *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995). See also David Tend, "Rethinking Media Activism: Why the Left is Losing the Culture War," *Societal Review 23:2* (1993): 5-33.

⁷Hyman Berman, "Communism and the Frontier Tradition," *European Contributions to American*

Studies 16 (1989): 139, 148. See also Eric Foner, "Why is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop Journal 17* (1984): 57-80. Agricultural radicals often aligned with various forms of anarchism, while industrial activists were more often aligned with collective action, and this difference has a long heritage. For an analysis of this conflict during the late 19th Century, see Theodore Saloutos, "Radicalism and the Agrarian Tradition," in *Failure of a Dream: Essays in the History of American Socialism*, rev. ed., John H.M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipsett, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 52-81.

⁸Evidence of the continued problems includes Gregory, *Exodus*, 102-20; Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and The Farmworkers Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997); Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. Garcia, *Cesar Chavez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); and Ronald B. Taylor, *Chavez and the Farm Workers* (Boston: Beacon Press 1975). An early bibliography of the movement is Beverly Fodell, *Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers: A Selective Bibliography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974).

⁹The run of the Arvin camp newspaper is in places very sparse, due to uneven publication and somewhat haphazard preservation. Largely complementary holdings of surviving issues are held at the National Archives-Pacific Sierra Region in San Bruno, California and at the University of California at Berkeley.

¹⁰No end-date for the newspaper is listed in *The National Union Catalog Pre-1956 Imprints*, v. 617 (Chicago: American Library Association, 1979), 661. The most recent issue that can be located is dated 5 February 1942.

¹¹Camp Arvin was a continuation of an existing State of California camp. See State Relief Administration of California, Division of Special Surveys and Studies, *Migratory Labor in California* (San Francisco: State Relief Administration of California, 1936); Albert Crouch, *Housing Migratory Agricultural Workers in California, 1919-1948* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1948); reprint San Francisco: R and E Associates, 1975).

¹²Camp newspapers were circulated among the various camps. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, *Report of the Farm Security Administration, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, 1941), 38; Jerome Wilcox, correspondence with Frederick Soule, 9 April and 12 April 1940; File 163-01, "Gael [Jan. to June 1940] [1]"; General Correspondence, 1940-42; Farm Security Administration, San Francisco/Berkeley; Records of the Farm Security Administration, Record Group 96; National Archives—Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, California (hereafter referred to as General Correspondence, FSA); Katherine Deitz, "Community and Family Services Activities Described in Narrative Reports from Regions VI and XII, 1941," File 934, Jan 1935-1939 Dec. inclusive [1]"; General Correspondence, FSA. In an August 1936 report to FSA Region IX director Jonathan Gary, sociologist Eric Thompson emphasized the importance of the pioneering efforts of Thomas Collins, the initial manager of Camp Arvin, in conceiving of and putting together not only the Camp Arvin educational program, but the value such efforts have for camps to follow: "I can't help [but] think of Collins' work as absolutely standard-forming. I can think of no possibility of setting up a desirable camp program for migratory workers anywhere which ignores the basic principles that govern Collins' work..." See Eric Thompson, "Preliminary Report on Arvin Migratory Camp," 3 August 1936; File RF-CF-16-918, "Arvin, reports prior 7-1-40"; Coded Administration Camp Files, 1933-45—Arvin; Farm Security Administration, San Francisco/Berkeley; Record Group 96; Records of the Farm Security Administration, National Archives—Pacific Sierra Region, San Bruno, California (hereafter cited as Arvin Camp Records). For more on the educational program and its development, see Stein, "New Deal Experiment"; and Hamilton, "Educating Pastors."

¹³Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 165, 181.

¹⁴Weber, *Dark Sweat*, 153-161.

¹⁵Weber, *Dark Sweat*, 183; Linda C. Majka and Theo J. Majka, *Farmworkers, Agritourists, and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 128-129.

¹⁶United States, Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, by Stuart Jamieson, Bulletin No. 836 (Washington: GPO, 1945); reprint New York: Arno Press, 1975); Claus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Majka and Majka, *Farmworkers*.

¹⁷For example, James D. Startt and William David Sloan argue that interpretations should arise from the material rather than be imposed upon it (*Historical Method in Mass Communication*

(Hilldale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989), 19-39). However, although this advice is in a more basic sense to not use a theory rigidly, the situation is more complex than these and other commentators make it out to be. How they decide which facts are more relevant than others is by relying on a theoretical perspective to sift the relevant from the non-relevant, however implicit that perspective may be. That all historical writing is from a theoretical perspective is persuasively argued in James A. Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *American Historical Review* 84 (December 1979): 1293-1323; Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennan, "Introduction: Communication and the Question of History," *Communication Theory* 3 (May 1993), 130-136; and Hanno Hardt, "Without the Rank and File: Journalism History, Media Workers, and Problems of Representation," in Hardt and Brennan, eds., *Newworkers*, 1-29.

¹⁸Examples of traditional perspectives used in similar topics include John Stevens, "From Behind Barbed Wire: Freedom of the Press in World War II Japanese Camps," *Journalism Quarterly* 48 (Summer 1971): 279-287; Jay Friedlander, "Journalism Behind Barbed Wire, 1941-1942: An Arkansas Relocation Camp Newspaper," *Journalism Quarterly* 62:2 (1985): 243-246, 271; and Lauren Kessler, "Perceived Freedoms: The Journalism of World War II Japanese Internment Camps," *Journalism History* 15:2/3 (1988): 70-79.

¹⁹Of course, there are many cultural perspectives, and quite a number of disagreements between them. Among the many discussions, see Paul Duncum, "Approaches to Cultural Analysis," *Journal of American Culture* 10:2 (1987): 1-15; Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, reprint ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 56-90; and Raymond Williams, "The Uses of Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 158 (July/August 1986): 19-31.

²⁰James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication and Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18-19.

²¹Although a variety of cultural approaches are gaining currency, most studies in journalism history work from behaviorist, functionalist, or idealist perspectives, explicitly or not. See Hanno Hardt, "Newworkers, Technology and Journalism History," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 346-365. Of relevance to this study is the work of Raymond Williams — in particular *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) — and of the Bakhtin Circle and commentators upon it, especially Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); VAN Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, transl. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²²Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 187-188.

²³Ibid., 166.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 165.

²⁶Consistent with the notion that communication simply reflects reality, Gregory cites traditional structural-functional, Personian sources for his conceptions of culture and ethnicity. See Gregory, *American Exodus*, 304, fn 30.

²⁷Most edited collections are a result of this preference. An example is "Years for the Revolution," *The Appeal to Reason, 1895-1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), which is a valuable collection of essays, but not of alternative forms. Of course, collections of labor songs of the 1930s exist, such as Alan Lomax, ed., *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), but they await their Eric Foner and their version of Foner's work *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), and they are generally not addressed as part of a scholarly exploration into working-class consciousness. A landmark study that takes this view is E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

²⁸Odd Gitlin makes a similar point when addressing the cultural role of rock-and-roll music in the student movements of the 1960s. See Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), esp. 195-221.

²⁹Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976; reprint, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 147.

³⁰Standard works include David Brundage, *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism: Demut's Organized Workers, 1878-1905* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Mahym Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969); and

Philip Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965). Cultural investigations include Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas and Dobosh Shafter, *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the IWW* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985); and Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). Of particular relevance to the topic of this study are such sources as *Songs of the Workers: On the Road, in the Jangles and in the Shops* (Spokane: The Industrial Worker, [191?-?]) and *The Complete Joe Hill Song Book* (Stockholm: Parnal/Ellis Lyrikklub, 1969).

³¹Wajka and Wajka, *Farm Workers*, 74, 85; and Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

³²Bitter Harvest, 258-261, 273-281.

³³McWilliams, *Factories*; Paul S. Taylor and Tom Vasey, "Historical Background of California Farm Labor," *Rural Sociology* 1 (June 1936), 281-295; Paul S. Taylor and Tom Vasey, "Contemporary Background of California Farm Labor," *Rural Sociology* 1 (December 1936), 401, 404; Alan L. Olmstead and Paul Rhode, "An Overview of California Agricultural Mechanization, 1870-1930," *Agricultural History* 62 (Summer 1988), 86-112.

³⁴McWilliams, *Factories*.

³⁵Jameson, *Labor Unionism*; Daniel Bitter Harvest; Wajka and Wajka, *Farm Workers*.

³⁶Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

³⁷Klehr points out that, despite the important alliance of Communists with the CIO during the 1930s, its role could hardly be described as dominant or even unproblematic. See Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 136-146, 223-251. See also Harvey A. Levinstein, *Communism, Anti-Communism, and the CIO* (Westport: Greenwood, 1981).

³⁸Wajka and Wajka, *Farmworkers*, 128-129.

³⁹James L. McCamy, *Government Publicity: Its Practice in Federal Administration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

⁴⁰Elliott Shore, *Talkin' Socialism: J.A. Weyland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1880-1912* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 94-114.

⁴¹Hamilton, "Educating Partisans"; Stein, "New Deal Experiment."

⁴²Eric Thomson, "Why Plan Security for the Migratory Laborer?" (paper presented to the California Conference of Social Work, San Jose, 12 May 1937), National Agricultural Library, Bethesda, Maryland. The global case is summarized in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 85-108.

⁴³Stein, "New Deal Experiment"; Hamilton, "Educating Partisans."

⁴⁴Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*.

⁴⁵Stein, "New Deal Experiment," 133; McWilliams, *Factories*, 294-300.

⁴⁶The overall situation (from a reformer's point of view) is described in McWilliams, *Factories*, 152-211.

⁴⁷By 1938, the economy was sluggishly recovering from a recession, and by 1939 Congress was moving aggressively to dismantle the New Deal. See William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 265-272.

⁴⁸"Camp to Have a Weekly Paper," *Weekpunch Cultivator*, 2 September 1938, 1. "Weed Patch" was the name of the camp when it was under state management.

⁴⁹*Weekpunch Cultivator*, 2 September 1938, 1. Direct quotations from the newspaper are quoted or referred to insofar as they exemplify the use of specific forms. They are reproduced verbatim, except in cases where minimal clarification in punctuation or spelling is needed.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.; Katherine Dietz, "Some Worthwhile Things a Council Can Do," File 934, "[Jan. 1940-May 1940]"; General Correspondence, FSA.

⁵²Jerome Wilcox to Frederick Soule, 12 April 1940, file 163-01, "Geal [Jan. to June 1940] [1]"; General Correspondence, FSA.

⁵³Charles Todd, "The 'Object' Search for a Last Frontier," *The New York Times Magazine*, 27 August 1939; 10-11, 17; Frederick Soule to John Fischer, 2 August 1939, File 160, "Public Relations, General, Jan. 1939-Dec. 1939," General Correspondence, FSA.

⁵⁴R. L. Adams, "Agricultural Labor Requirements and Supply, Kern County," (Berkeley: Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics, 1940), 6; Irving Bernstein, *Unsettled Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969) 144; Frederick Soule to Jerome Wilcox, 19 October 1939, file RF-CF-25-160, "Arvin Public relations," Arvin Camp Records; Fred W. Ross to Frederick Soule, 29 September 1939, file RF-CF-25-160, Arvin; Public relations," Arvin Camp Records.

⁵⁵Majka and Majka, *Farm Workers*, 111, 127-129; Weber, *Dark Sweat*, 164-165.

⁵⁶Ibid. Examples of privately held sentiments suppressed publicly include Collins' refusal to review McWilliams book *Factories in the Field*. See Thomas Collins to L. W. Harwood, 15 September 1939, file 160, "Public Relations, General, Jan. 1939-Dec. 1939," General Correspondence. Unofficially, however, *Factories in the Field* and *The Grips of Wrath* were highly regarded by the FSA. See Frederick Soule to John Fischer, 2 August 1939; and John Fischer to Frederick Soule, 1 June 1939, 8 August 1939, and 8 September 1939, File 160, "Public Relations, General, Jan. 1939-Dec. 1939," General Correspondence.

⁵⁷Frederick Soule to Jerome Wilcox, 4 December 1939, File 163-01, "Newspapers and magazines, article and press releases, Jan. 1939-Dec. 1939," General Correspondence.

⁵⁸Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 252. Birkhimer and his family had been in California for three years, and he had started a chapter of the Workers' Alliance at Camp Indio in 1938. "Wage Hearing is Held," untitled letter, *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 29 September 1939, 4; "This and That," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 6 October 1939, 9.

⁵⁹Sam Birkhimer, "Our Strike," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 28 October 1939, 4-5; Birkhimer, "Our Strike," 17 November 1939, 5.

⁶⁰Gregory, *American Exodus*, 141-142.

⁶¹Weber, *Dark Sweat*, 137-151.

⁶²Ibid., 150-154.

⁶³James Bright Wilson, "Social Attitudes of Certain Migratory Agricultural Workers in Kern County, California" (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1942).

⁶⁴Ibid., 277.

⁶⁵"Shafter-Wasco potatoe [sic] district, Kern Co. 5-6/36"; folder "History of AFL Agricultural Unions"; carton 6, "FSA"; Simon J. Lubin Society Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁶⁶Wilson, "Social Attitudes," 322-343.

⁶⁷Guthrie uttered this phrase often. One place it appeared in the camp paper was in untitled, *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 28 October 1939, 3.

⁶⁸Majka and Majka, *Farm Workers*, 130-132; Sheila Goldring Means, "Depression Pioneers: The Conclusion of an American Odyssey, Oklahoma to California, 1930-1950, A Reinterpretation," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1982), 3; and Wilson, "Social Attitudes."

⁶⁹Wilson, "Social Attitudes," 332-333; John Digging, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: Norton, 1992), 173-174; Levensstein, *Communism*, 36.

⁷⁰"Be What You Is," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 11 November 1938, 1. This poem appeared widely in other migrant labor camp newspapers. See Gregory, *American Exodus*, 152.

⁷¹"Leave It In Jesus' Hand," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 12 May 1939, 2. Early in the camp's existence, manager Tom Collins also commented in a weekly report on the religious care of migrant families: "The campers' trust in the Lord, that is good of course. I . . . However we cannot encourage them to become dependent with the hope that the ravens will feed them, or that Jonah will come along with his whale and swallow all their troubles." See Thomas Collins, "Kern Migratory Labor Camp, Report for week ending March 7, 1936," 7; file RF CF 26 918-01, "Arvin [Report] [March 1936]"; Arvin Camp Records.

⁷²"To Them This May Concern," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 21 October 1938, 1.

⁷³"A Grumbler," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 11 November 1938, 2.

⁷⁴"Prize for Best Poem or Idea," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 24 August 1939, 1.

⁷⁵"Wandering," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 21 October 1938, 2.

⁷⁶Untitled, *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 25 November 1938, 2. The religious nature of migrant culture is noted in depth by Wilson, "Social Attitudes," 359-375, and summarized by Gregory, *American Exodus*, 150. Such items appeared most often during major Christian holidays. For examples, see "Bible Reading," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 30 December 1938, 2; "Bible reading for the week: Acts-20-19 to 21," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 27 January 1939, 3; and "Bible Reading of the Week," *Weed Patch Cultivator*, 3 February 1939, 3.

⁷⁷"Here Goes don't Git in a Hurry and Stracks Back," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 6 October 1939, 4.

⁷⁸Untitled, *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 6 October 1939, 4.

⁷⁹Untitled, *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 20 October 1939, 3. Woody Guthrie, who noted that he had "made the Arvin Camp lots of times with the old trussy guitar, and listened to the Campers sing in their churches and at their dances, and pie suppers and speakins" later set this verse to music. In a published collection of songs in which it was included, Guthrie mentioned hearing "a little fourteen year old boy's poem called '14 Ruther To Die on My Feet than Live on My Knees . . . Can you beat that? No, you can't. It kept out of this boy's mind like a young mountain lion, and the road was lined with cops in their big black sedans, laughing, grunting, and talking, and a listening to jazz music on their radios." The 14-year-old boy—George Tapp—also authored the cited poem. See Lomax, *Hard Hitting Songs*, 225.

⁸⁰"Join the Union," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 28 October 1939, 16; "Greenback Dollar" (streamlined)," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 11 November 1939, 4.

⁸¹It was signed "composed by Bill Kindle, Omaha Cole and Ruby Raines." See "Associated Farmer Has a Farm," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 17 November 1939, 7. It was Guthrie's tactic as well to "take old folk songs or tunes and write new words to them and to rework the melody when necessary." See Guy Logsdon, introduction to *Woody Sez*, by Woody Guthrie (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1975), xiv.

⁸²Untitled, *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 11 November 1939, 10. As Guthrie was an accomplished illustrator in the homely style of this illustration, it is likely that Guthrie drew it and signed it. At least one notice appeared of an impending visit of Guthrie and Hollywood actor Will Geer to the Arvin Camp. See "Woody and Geer [sic] to Enterain," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 22 September 1939, 2.

⁸³Weekly Letter from the Editor, "Tow-Sack Tattler," 6 October 1939, 2; "Weekly Letter from the Editor," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 13 October 1939, 4.

⁸⁴Editor's Weekly Letter, "Tow-Sack Tattler," 20 October 1939, 2.

⁸⁵"Cotton Fever," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 24 August 1939, 5. Cotton was weighed and pickers were paid by "hundredweight"—100 pounds of picked cotton. The common price for a hundredweight was 75 cents, hence the "six bits." The "tow-sack" of the newspaper's title is the fabric bag dragged by the picker in which picked cotton was placed prior to dumping it out to get paid.

⁸⁶For example, see "Pea Picking Blues," 8 September 1939, 1; and "Just Around the Corner," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 29 September 1939, 3.

⁸⁷"Only the Kapt Press," *Tow-Sack Tattler*, 8 September 1939, 3.

⁸⁸Levensstein, *Communism* (68) notes that Lewis lent little support to the UCADAWA. In January 1938, he stopped CIO aid.

⁸⁹Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 143-144. An able overview is Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Noonday, 1989), 286-290; Ruiz, *Cannery Women*, 55; Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 281.

⁹⁰Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 323-331. The FSA's stance toward its programs can be labeled one of "careful liberalism"—meaning advocating change, but without antagonizing and putting into danger its increasingly scarce Congressional support. The source of the phrase (and a brief overview of the administrative milieu of the FSA) is Nicholas Alfred Natanason, "Politics, Culture and the FSA Black Image" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1988), 100.

⁹¹Janisson, *Labor Unionism*.