Novel (1939) / Film (1940)
A home in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, where The Grapes of Wrath begins, 1938.

Photo by Dorothea Lange
The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936)
Wheat Prices per bushel in dollars

The Great Depression

Past / Present

THE FOOD BUBBLE
How Wall Street Starved Millions and Got Away with It
By Frederick Kaufman
A dust storm in Oklahoma, 1936.
Photo by Arthur Rothstein
And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But ....

—from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Chapter 5
THE WESTERN STATES nervous under the beginning change. Texas and Oklahoma, Kansas and Arkansas, New Mexico, Arizona, California. A single family moved from the land. Pa borrowed money from the bank, and now the bank wants the land. The land company—that’s the bank when it has land—wants tractors, not families on the land. Is a tractor bad? Is the power that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours it would be good—not mine, but ours. If our tractor turned the long furrows of our land, it would be good. Not my land, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But this tractor does two things—it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people are driven, intimidated, hurt by both. We must think about this.

—from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Chapter 14

[A foreclosure sale in Iowa in the early 1930s when "the bottom fell out of everything." Military police were on hand to keep farmers from disrupting the auction. ca. 1935.]
“I got to figure,” the tenant said. “We all got to figure. There’s some way to stop this. It’s not like lightning or earthquakes. We’ve got a bad thing made by men, and by God that’s something we can change.”

—from The Grapes of Wrath, Chapter 14
Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California, 1936. Photo by Dorthea Lange
To harvest the crops of California thousands of families live literally on wheels, San Joaquin Valley, 1935.

Photo by Dorthea Lange
“Them Okies? They’re all hard-lookin’.”

"Jesus, I'd hate to start out in a jalopy like that."

"Well, you and me got sense. Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas."

—The Grapes of Wrath, Chapter 18
Oklahoma squatter’s family, Riverside County, 1935.

Photo by Dorthea Lange
A family living in a tent in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, 1939.
Photo by Russell Lee, Farm Security Administration.
Corn belt refugee, Merced County, 1935.
Photo by Dorthea Lange
Chapter 3

The concrete highway was edged with a mat of tangled, broken dry grass, and the grass heads were heavy with oat beards to catch on a dog’s coat, and foxtails to tangle in a horse’s fetlocks, and clover burrs to fasten in sheep’s wool; sleeping life waiting to be spread and dispersed, every seed armed with an appliance of dispersal, twisting darts and parachutes for the wind, little spears and balls of tiny thorns, and all waiting for animals and for the wind, for a man’s trouser cuff or the hem of a woman’s skirt, all passive but armed with appliances of activity, still, but each possessed of the anguish of movement.

The sun lay on the grass and warmed it, and in the shade under the grass the insects moved, ants and ant lions, to set traps for them, grasshoppers to jump into the air and flick their yellow wings for a second, saw bugs like little termites, plodding relentlessly on many tender feet. And over the grass at the roadside a land turtle crawled, turning aside for nothing, dragging his high-domed shell over the grass. His hard legs and yellow-nailed feet threshed slowly through the grass, not really walking, but boosting and dragging his shell along. The barley beards slid off his shell, and the clover burrs fell on him and rolled to the ground. His horny back was partly open, and his fierce, humorless eyes, under brows like fingernails, stared straight ahead. He came over the grass leaving a beaten trail behind him, and the hill, which was the highway embankment, reared up ahead.
A mother and her children, 
*Elm Grove, CA, 1936.*
Photo by Dorothea Lange, 
Farm Security Administration.
A homeless family walks from Phoenix to San Diego, looking for work; shown here on Highway 99 in Imperial Country, CA, 1930.

Photo by Dorothea Lange
“Caravans of Hunger: Thousands of Landless Farmers Wander California’s Highways . . . For Their Children: Flies and Filth”

LOOK Magazine (May 25, 1937)
Child of agricultural day laborers camped near Spiro, Oklahoma. She is sitting on the bedroll. There was no bed in the camp. Sequoyah County, Oklahoma (June 1939). Photo by Russell Lee
Mother and child of agricultural day laborers family encamped near Spiro. Sequoyah County, Oklahoma. June 1939.

Two agricultural day laborers eating dinner after spending the morning chopping cotton. Beans are the staple fare of these workers. Near Webbers Falls, Oklahoma. June 1939.
Join the conversation. Everyone’s welcome.

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**Tues., Sept. 28 (5:00 PM in Krauskopf Memorial Library)**

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Is Steinbeck’s novel truly “obscene in the extreme” as some folks thought upon its publication in 1939? Or did it contain something more dangerous than dirty words? Highlight the naughty parts in your copy and join us for a presentation /discussion in honor of Banned Books Week.

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