Dust Bowl Migration

Date ★ 1934–1936 (written in 1999)
Place ★ Arvin Federal Camp (“Weedpatch Camp”), near Bakersfield, California
Type of Source ★ Eyewitness (recollection)
Author ★ Evelyn Ruth Selbach Johnson
Context ★ Beginning in 1934, drought and dust storms crippled farming on much of the Great Plains. Thousands of farming families crowded California, searching for jobs and homes. As a result, many were forced into migrant camps to live in huts and tents. The “Okies,” “Arkies,” and other migrants were looked upon down as ignorant, lazy, and criminal. Evelyn Selbach’s family moved to California at the beginning of the migration and recounts her experience.

In early 1934 our family left Oklahoma. On the way we stopped in Mexico where my father, Theo Selbach worked a short time for the oil company. We continued our journey to California, upon arrival we set up camp.

The farmer of the property made us move. This was mid-summer and my father went to work at DiGiorgio in the grape fields. We moved our tent to DiGiorgio Road on the south side. We set up our tent between the road and the irrigation ditch. Weedpatch road was a short distance west from our tent.

I was ill during this time, but had to watch my six month old baby brother and two small sisters. My baby brother, Billy, fell in the ditch of water and almost drowned. I pulled him out safely, but I received a belt.

My dad went hunting at Bear Mountain with Judge Parish who lived on the corner of Weedpatch Road and Buena Vista road. They were friends.

The farmer said we had to move from his property. Judge Parish leased a patch of weeds behind his family’s home to my Dad.

Some of my mother’s family moved in the patch of weeds when we did.

The patch of weeds was on Buena Vista Road. When we first moved to the patch of weeds they were taller than our heads, and a solid mass of goatheads. We pulled the tall weeds and made paths to walk and play in. I remember there was very few living there. None of us had shoes to wear, only to school. We walked to Vineland School.

Once a week we kids would walk about a mile to a dump, that was on Buena Vista road. We would look for shoes to wear. It was a great day if [we] found a pair of high heels.

My Uncle Rance Pool bought the weed patch from the Parish family. Over the next few years the camp filled up. Most living spaces were tents and some managed to use their tents for roofs and have board floors with screens between

irrigation ditch
belt
leased
goatheads
Vineland School
camp

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the floor and the tent side. On cold days the canvas flaps were rolled down and tied. All heat was wood cook stoves, all light was kerosene lamps. Laundry was all done by tub and board. Water eventually was run through the camp and faucets located through the camp. We carried all water in cans used for drinking and cooking. The smart people planted caster [sic] bean seeds to make bushes for shade. They poured their waste water on them to help them grow and get larger.

When my Uncle Rance Pool purchased the land, he put water faucets in and charged a small amount for space rent. He put nicer places in the camp for people to live in.

My Uncle Rance had oil in Texas. He put up a tent he brought from Texas. It had a bedroom and living area with a Persian rug and kerosene ice box for their food.

Most people living in the camp were employed by DiGiorgio Ranch, or nearby farms, which were very few.

For two years we walked to Vineland School. It was quite a trip and I can definitely remember the teachers weren’t all pleased with the deluge of smart brained Okie kids. I can remember my own experience. In Oklahoma, I moved up a grade. No way, I was made to go through that grade again at Vineland School. I can definitely remember, not appreciating the treatment received at this school. Some of the children at times were made to sit on the floor in the back of the room, even if seats were empty. I believe it was because at times some of these children were barefoot and less clean. After a few years, a bus came and picked us up at Weedpatch Camp. I can remember the county sending out equipment and nurses. We all lined up and were given a shot for every disease available. Some families believed this to be the Devil’s work and refused to let their children receive the vaccinations. The religion in Weedpatch Camp at that time was called Holy Roller. I think I must have had enough sense to go ahead and get my shots. I can remember having been given permission. Flies were a terrible problem. I can remember one terrible story of a new born baby getting maggots in its ears and for some reason everyone had to have one or two dogs, myself included.

Also at times there would be a large county truck that came loaded with fruit and vegetables and give them for free.

When we managed to get a penny we would go to the local grocery store. I remember the owner was a judge or justice of the peace. Almost every day he was accusing some child of stealing candy.