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[See table of contents](#)

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# A NEW DEAL EXPERIMENT WITH GUIDED DEMOCRACY: THE FSA MIGRANT CAMPS IN CALIFORNIA

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During the 1930's, over 300,000 migrants from the states of Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, and Oklahoma entered California. These "Okies" rapidly supplanted California's Mexican and Filipino agricultural laborers and became the mainstay of the state's harvest labor force. The deprivation and exploitation to which these "Okies" were subjected has been brilliantly described in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and there is no need here to review that tragic and epic tale.<sup>1</sup> The Okie found life in California a grinding cycle of underemployment, low pay, disease, prejudice and despair. When not wandering the agricultural valleys in search of work upon California's immense intensive fruit, vegetable, and cotton ranches, these migrants congregated upon squalid ditchbanks, in shacktown "Okieville," or in filthy grower-owned cabins.

The sole stroke of good fortune experienced by the Okies during their depression days in California was the existence of a string of Federally-owned and operated migrant labor camps scattered throughout the state along the major migratory routes of the farm workers. Conceived early in 1935 by an official of the state's Emergency Rehabilitation Administration, the idea grew from the fact that most labor strife in California's agricultural history had been the result of intolerable housing conditions for farm laborers. The plan involved the construction by the state and federal governments of concentrations of tidy tents or cabins located in the central valleys where intensive agriculture predominated.<sup>2</sup>

In April, 1935, Franklin Roosevelt ordered the formation of the Resettlement Administration under the direction of the controversial Rexford Guy Tugwell.<sup>3</sup> California's projected migrant camps were

<sup>1</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 1936). An extended factual account of the subject may be found in Walter J. Stein, "California and the Dust Bowl Migration" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1969). See also Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Boston, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Stein, "California and the Dust Bowl Migration," Chap. IV.

<sup>3</sup> The history of the "rise and decline" of the Resettlement and Farm Security Administration may be found in Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1968). See also Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, 1964).

transferred to the new agency and, despite opposition from the state's growers, who feared that the camps would become "hotbeds of labor agitation," the program was approved and the camps constructed. 1937 saw the reorganization of the Resettlement Administration and its re-christening as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under the Jones-Bankhead Farm Tenant Act. FSA operated under tight budgets and severe Congressional scrutiny. Nonetheless, California's FSA officials found sufficient funds to continue building migrant labor camps. By 1940, fifteen such camps were completed or under construction.

The organization, operation, and management of these migrant camps provides an opportunity for the historian to observe *in micro* the implementation of one pattern of New Deal thought, which has been described by Richard Hofstadter as "more unabashedly humanitarian, more inspirational, more concerned with maintaining democracy in the face of technical and administrative change, more given to idealization of the people," than the more skeptical cast of mind inherent in the works of, say, Thurman Arnold.<sup>4</sup> As much as any other New Deal activity, the FSA camp program demonstrated this face of the Roosevelt administration. In its internal workings, the program was an experiment in "guided democracy." It was, moreover, a case study in the pathology of American liberalism. The refusal of the Okies to turn overnight from "sow ears" to "silk purses" under the guiding hands of the camp managers provoked a coercive response from the young reformers who had set out with the notion that they could suddenly "make America over" simply by "rolling up their sleeves."

Apart from their primary goal of providing sanitary housing for farm workers, the FSA camps were an attempt to achieve a social end. At the camps, the Okies were to be schooled in the FSA's concept of American democracy; "rugged individualists" were to be given their first exposure to the idea of community. Under the direction of their camp managers, the Okies would be taught to subordinate private goals to the welfare of the group. In short, the FSA camps strove to reconcile two sides of a dilemma that was centuries old. "Liberty" would be taught to coexist with the New Dealers' version of fraternity.

The key FSA personnel in this endeavor were the camp managers who lived at the camps and were in constant, intimate contact with the campers. Tom Collins, organizer of Guam's public school system, and later administrator of a private school for "maladjusted boys and young men," was FSA's most important camp manager. A "genius"

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1963), p. 322n.

for the job, Collins was both trailblazer and trainer for the camp program.<sup>5</sup> He prepared the psychological ground in new camps, served as their first manager, and then moved on, leaving the functioning units for managers he had trained.<sup>6</sup> Collins' role in the camp program brought him considerable publicity, and it was to him that John Steinbeck dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>7</sup>

Collins' fellow-managers comprised a group with various backgrounds but relatively similar attitudes. At the inception of the program, FSA decided to avoid hiring trained social workers as managers. Officials at the California Regional Office tended to mistrust them: "... it would take the average trained social worker so long," one wrote, "to fill out forms, write histories, and do the usual intake routine to which she was accustomed, that by the time she had determined eligibility the starvation would be complete."<sup>8</sup> Instead, the administrators "selected sympathetic but vigorous young people with no tradition of case work technique."<sup>9</sup> Many of the managers were graduate students from the University of California, imbued with a strong sense of camaraderie, dedicated, idealistic, and determined to install "democracy" within the camps. Some managers were socialists, most were New Deal liberals, and all approached their jobs with messianic zeal.<sup>10</sup> "To those with whom we work, the migratory laborers," one wrote, "[this program] is re-birth, re-living the re-building of hope.... With their cooperation, we are, most certainly, helping them to help themselves. May nothing occur to cause a cessation of this program."<sup>11</sup>

More missionary than managerial in temper, these young men would not have been content to perform mere administrative "house-keeping" tasks at the FSA camps, and FSA policy reinforced their intention to remake the Okies under their care when the Washington office announced: "In strange surroundings, without friends, their life-long rural economic and cultural patterns shattered [the Okies] were in need of social as well as economic rehabilitation."<sup>12</sup> "In

<sup>5</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, February 5, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, February 13, 1937.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth R. Otis to author, April 5, 1967, in author's private files.

<sup>8</sup> R. C. Timmons, "Medicine Follows the Crops," undated manuscript, no pagination, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 2, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mrs. Eleanor Engstrand, Berkeley, California, September 7, 1965; Westley Migrant Camp report, July 14, 1939, United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Commission papers, Record Group 145, Carton 36,889, Federal Records Center, San Francisco, California (hereinafter USDA ASCC papers).

<sup>11</sup> Arvin Migrant Camp report, May 23, 1936, Harry E. Drobish papers (unsorted), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>12</sup> Farm Security Administration, *Community Activities And Education Among Western Farm Workers* (San Francisco, 1941), no pagination, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 2.

managing the camps," Regional directors were instructed, "the FSA accepts the responsibility for sponsoring recreational, cultural, health, home industry and self-help programs for the enrichment of the life of the campers . . ." <sup>13</sup> Further, Regional directors were authorized to "redelegate to regularly appointed camp managers any or all of their authority" with the sole qualification that managers function in accord with national FSA policy. <sup>14</sup> So broad a mandate provided the local managers with considerable power which they did not hesitate to exercise.

Camp managers generally interpreted their mission to enrich the life of the campers in two ways. While they strove to break cultural habits engrained in the Southwest for generations, they also attempted to instill in their wards new patterns of social and political behavior which would convert them into model citizens of a model community sculpted by committed young liberals.

The Okies had brought with them a number of characteristics which camp managers and other employees of the FSA interpreted either as "quaint" or "degraded." Okie folklore was "quaint." The managers sought to preserve it. Okie songs were assiduously collected, dialects studied, peculiar names recorded. <sup>15</sup> In 1941, one of the camps became the scene of America's "first festival of the folklore of the migratory agriculture workers from the Southwest," replete with "fiddling," "tall tales" and "hog calling." <sup>16</sup> Among the more sentimental of the FSA's employees, the campers received a good deal of romanticizing. One nurse, for example, attempted to give her superiors at the head office "the feel of" working with the migrants :

See? For one thing, you would see the most magnificent sun-bonnets that ever baffled man . . .

Hear? Well, if you have an ear for language, you would be interested in following dialects, in identifying Old English songs and phrases which have survived generations.

. . . if, like the writer, you should have the harmless hobby of collecting names, you would find some merry moments, even in dull files. Wouldn't Obed Goforth, or Pink See Boggs cheer any bleak day? . . . <sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> FSA Instruction 550.3, U. S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with the Right of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively, Pursuant to S. Res. 266, *Hearings*, 74th Cong., 1940, Part 59, p. 21,934.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21,935.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Margaret Valiant, *Migrant Camp Recordings* (n.p., n.d.), no pagination, Giannini Foundation Library, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>16</sup> The camp at Woodville, California. FSA News Release, September, 1941, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 8.

<sup>17</sup> Miss Mary Sears, "Agricultural Workers Health and Medical Association," undated manuscript, no pagination, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 2.

Considering the fact that *Fortune's* reporter had found "Five Foot Two" and "Twelfth Street Rag" among the most popular songs in the camp, these hyperbolic comments may have been more apropos of the tiny collections of mountain people huddled in the Ozarks than of the typical California migrant. In any case, the nurse's sentimentalization of the Okies did not prevent her from approaching them with a good deal more uplifting zeal than anthropological interest. We shall "pump into these people," she continued, "the medicines, the vitamins, the calories, the teaching... to rebuild their lives in a new and different environment."<sup>18</sup>

Urban, secular, and educated, the managers were all the Okies were not. Many of FSA's managers believed that Okie cultural patterns that were not "folklorish" or "quaint" were fit matters for "rehabilitation" or, rather, reform. The migrants' religion held a prominent position on the list of items to be rehabilitated.

Few areas in the United States during the 1930's remained either as fundamentalistic, or as emotional, in religion, as the Southern Great Plains area that supplied the bulk of California's "Okies." The average Okie migrant belonged to a small, highly sectarian church of the "hell-fire and damnation variety."<sup>19</sup> These churches were basically eschatological in outlook, and provided for the Okie a compensatory psychological release from grinding rural poverty. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt, studying the Okies in the San Joaquin Valley, found that they consistently emphasized the values of the "next world" in lieu of the deprivations of this world. "The real blue bloods," one Okie told him in a comment typical of many, "are those who are saved." The saints, the migrants maintained, are persecuted *here*, but that did not matter, for they will be uplifted in heaven.<sup>20</sup> These Pentecostal religions were useful protection for dispossessed people but they were neither sophisticated nor very fastidious. "We prays and shouts to git closer to Gawd," one migrant told FSA's consultant. Some of the migrants were "holy rollers" and others "faith healers," and both varieties annoyed the managers.<sup>21</sup>

In the view of FSA's California officials, the "problem" inherent in the migrant's religion was that it was "productive of fanaticisms and irrationalities which can seriously disturb the general social

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Engstrand Interview.

<sup>20</sup> Walter R. Goldschmidt, *As You Sow* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1947), pp. 157-159.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Thomsen, *Our Migrant Brother* (Council of Women for Home Missions, n.p., n.d.), no pagination; Marysville Migrant Camp report, September 7, 1935, Drobish papers; Kern Migrant Camp report, January 25, 1936, Drobish papers.

equilibrium.”<sup>22</sup> The management of the camps would have been “heartily glad if it could keep out the churches, letting the people attend the ones of their choice in the town.”<sup>23</sup> Despite their irritation with the Okie religions, however, the managers understood that they could not legally “[interfere] with the individual’s or group privilege of freedom of thought and worship.”<sup>24</sup>

Unable to prevent the entry of the churches into the camps, therefore, managers instead took steps to *protect* the campers from their hyper-emotional religions. At one camp, Pentecostal preachers were not permitted to take up collections.<sup>25</sup> Fear that faith-healing sects might spread disease among the campers led another camp manager to develop a complex system of observation for clandestine services. When he heard sounds “very much like a dog on a distant hill baying a mournful ritual at the full moon,” he knew that an ill Okie lay abed somewhere in the camp, and that “services” were in progress. Never able to surprise the faith healers at work, he concluded that the congregation had lookouts stationed on the job. The secret war continued without let-up.<sup>26</sup> A month later the same manager reported a minor victory in a skirmish with the “ultra-religious” campers who prevented their children from visiting the camp theatre. He was “gradually breaking this condition . . .” and some of the Okie mothers were even accepting the fact that their children were taking part in rehearsals for a short playlet.<sup>27</sup>

Religion was the Okies’ most important emotional prop, and managers usually found that the campers could not be detached from it. More worldly patterns of behavior seemed more accessible to reform, and managers attempted zealously to institute in their wards more “liberal” attitudes regarding manners and morals. During the early days of the camp program, managers and others observed that the Okies’ recreations were “simple,” inexpensive, and generally solitary, the result of years of rural isolation. Evenings, the men congregated in the camp offices to exchange reminiscences of lynchings “as though they were high school boys discussing a football game, or as a fond papa telling a bed time story.”<sup>28</sup> Except for the occasional communal entertainment of lynching, however, the

<sup>22</sup> John Beecher, “The Migratory Labor Program in California,” undated manuscript, p. 11, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Kern Migrant Camp report, January 25, 1936, Drobish papers.

<sup>25</sup> Marysville Migrant Camp report, September 7, 1935, USDA ASCC papers, 36,891.

<sup>26</sup> Arvin Migrant Camp report, January 25, 1936, Drobish papers.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, February 22, 1936, Simon J. Lubin papers, Carton 13, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, November 14, 1936, Simon J. Lubin papers, Carton 13.

Okies were "old hands" at "self-entertainment" and disliked formal group activities. Back home, they had preferred "possum and coon hunting" to organized sport, and they retained these patterns in California.<sup>29</sup>

Gradually, camp managers developed programs designed to foster a habit of organized group activity. A typical week's schedule of evening entertainment included meetings of the Young People's Clubs, a dance, a boxing match, an amateur night, movies, and a convocation of the camp council.<sup>30</sup> During the day, migrant women were taught pre-natal care, initiated into the mysteries of sophisticated plumbing fixtures, and, most controversial of all, edified by the FSA's birth control program.<sup>31</sup> This latter intruded upon the Victorian sensibilities of the migrants who reacted with outraged modesty to the frequent visits of Margaret Sanger's Birth Control League as well as to films on pre-natal care and female cancer prevention.<sup>32</sup> Managers found that social habits died as slowly as religious ones. Few attended the dances, and while many women had evinced some interest in birth control not one "ever did anything about it."<sup>33</sup>

In one area of interest to migrant and manager alike no attempt was made to change the Okies' habits. Informal racial segregation was maintained within the camps, perhaps because Californians and Oklahomans both accepted the basic principle. Negro, Mexican, and Filipino migrant workers were not excluded from the camps. Camp policy was simply to recommend that "colored" field workers be placed in one unit of the camp, the white Okies in another.<sup>34</sup> This unofficial practise became policy, as indicated by notations in the

<sup>29</sup> Lillian Creisler, "Little Oklahoma, or, The Airport Community" (unpublished master's thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1939), p. 55; Arvin Migrant Camp report, November 14, 1936, Simon J. Lubin papers, Carton 13.

<sup>30</sup> U. S., Congress, House, Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, *Hearings*, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1938, Part 7, p. 3,002.

<sup>31</sup> Mildred Delp, *Baby Spacing Report on California and Arizona, March, August, 1940*, no pagination, Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 9; "Migratory Labor: A Social Problem," *Fortune*, XIX (April, 1939), 100; *Happy Valley Weekly*, January 14, 1939 (Indio Migrant Camp newspaper). Nearly complete collections of the weekly mimeographed newspapers of the migrant camps may be found at the University of California, Berkeley and the Farm Security Administration papers, *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Warren Engstrand to Harvey Coverley, March 20, 1942, USDA ASCC papers, 36,881; "Migratory Labor: A Social Problem," 100; *Happy Valley Weekly* (Indio Migrant Camp), January 14, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> "Migratory Labor: A Social Problem," 100; *Tent City News* (Gridley Migrant Camp), May 13, 1939.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Thomsen to Tom Collins, October 9, 1936; Collins to Thomsen, October 12, 1936, USDA ASCC papers, 36,879.



camp newspapers, such as: "Unit four was opened up and cleaned for the colored people."<sup>35</sup>

FSA's managers, then, accepted the racial mores of the Okies but attempted to reorient their religious practises and social habits. These attempts were intermittent and not a major source of friction between the campers and the managers. A far more serious problem intruded upon relations between FSA and the migrants when the camp managers attempted to redefine the meaning and implications of the democratic concept for the Okies. Throughout the life of the camp program, this issue more than any other demonstrated the naiveté of this facet of the New Deal's approach to the "one third of the nation."

The Okies may not have thought consciously of the manner in which they interpreted democracy. They were, nonetheless, firmly ensconced within the more individualistic, libertarian, side of the democratic ideology. The Okie liked to think of himself as " beholden to no one," an individual making his way alone with neither aid from, nor gratitude to, the government or anyone else. Observers were unanimous in dubbing the Okies "rugged individualists" and the migrants' behavior lent validity to the sobriquet. It was upon their "rugged individualism" that an attempt to unionize them in California foundered and died, and it was in their desire to own farms of their own that FSA's experimental collective farms met their greatest obstacle. Their religion, their entertainments, their refusal to accept relief with equanimity — all these testified to the fact that the Okies placed by far the greatest emphasis upon "liberty" to the detriment of "equality and fraternity."

Unaccustomed to the interdependent life made inevitable by industrialization and the rise of cities, the Okie was a "rugged individualist." He "did what he pleased" because he was white, isolated upon his farm, and free from the restraints imposed upon dwellers in more populated areas. The Great Plains migrant was not anti-social, not a ruthless egocentric who preferred isolation to neighborliness. Indeed, the records of the migration are filled with moments of altruism and charity, and novelist Steinbeck was obviously moved by the sense of shared misery which drew them together into a community of the dispossessed.<sup>36</sup>

But, when the needs of the group conflicted with the desires of the individual migrant, the group invariably took second place. In this, the Okies were basically no different from other Americans, but their refusal to accept *certain* restraints was more obvious. The

<sup>35</sup> *Happy Valley Weekly* (Indio Migrant Camp), November 11, 1939.

<sup>36</sup> Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *passim*.

Southern Great Plains migrant was unprepared to observe minor regulations that other Americans observed simply by force of habit. One camp manager saw in the migrants a hatred for the law and was shocked to find them idolizing Pretty Boy Floyd and other criminals. The migrants had an "outlaw psychology," he concluded.<sup>37</sup> Other managers frequently complained that the campers refused to observe traffic regulations upon the camp grounds and, worse, that they would not obey quarantines imposed by local public health authorities. "For some time," one manager reported, "we have had difficulty enforcing rules of isolation, people who were isolated would wander into camp. Last week I had a man and woman arrested for breaking isolation . . . . When the man was sentenced, he said, 'Sure are mighty strict here in California.'"<sup>38</sup> The best summation of the "Okie psychology" came from the camp at Marysville, California, where "experience" showed "that this group [was] very independent. 'Thou shalt,' or other phrases bearing on the 'must' bring resentment. Of course, this is typical of all independent groups. [With most such groups] one gets immediate response through 'suggestions.' When such groups are from Oklahoma, Texas or Arkansas, it requires, at times, several personal contacts."<sup>39</sup>

From the local camp manager to Chief Administrator Rexford Guy Tugwell at the Washington office, FSA's officials envisioned their agency's social mission to be the obliteration of the more individualistic facets of the Southern Great Plains migrants' personality. It was, after all, upon "rugged individualism" that Tugwell blamed the desperate condition of America's agricultural people and their lands. Tugwell proposed instead a collective principle which demanded that members of a community subordinate personal desire to group needs. A habit of group decision-making would have to emerge from a well-planned social and political environment. To achieve this end, California FSA officials invented a constitution for the camps, under which the campers provided the legislative and judiciary, the manager provided the executive, and all worked together in an ideal microcosmic democracy.

The constitution that would transform the Okies from rugged individualists into cooperative citizens was a mimeographed FSA form, a standard text for all the camps. When a new camp was opened, the blank spaces were filled in, and an "instant democracy" modeled on the American Constitution sprang to life :

<sup>37</sup> Marysville Migrant Camp report, August 29, 1936, USDA ASCC papers, 36,891.

<sup>38</sup> Shafter Migrant Camp report, January, 1940, USDA ASCC papers, 36,886; *Camp Herald* (Firebaugh Migrant Camp), November 7, 1941, November 14, 1941.

<sup>39</sup> Marysville Migrant Camp report, August 24, 1935, Drobish papers.

We, the people of the \_\_\_\_\_ Migratory Labor Camp, in order to form a more perfect community, promote the general welfare, and insure domestic tranquillity, do hereby establish this Constitution for the \_\_\_\_\_ Migratory Labor Camp.<sup>40</sup>

All legislative powers granted by the constitution were vested in the Community Council, a body composed of three members from each of the camp's subdivisions and elected by all campers over twenty-one. Its powers comprised the promotion of the general welfare, management of the community fund to which all campers contributed, and regulation of the camp's community property. Judicial powers were lodged in a Community Court, chosen by the Council. Its duties included interpreting the camp constitution, adjudicating disputes between campers, and trying cases involving violations of the Council's ordinances.

The powers of both the Council and the Court were necessarily limited. The camp was not an autonomous body and its members were subject to the laws of the state of California. In terms of its limited powers, however, the constitution was, at least superficially, democratic. In a theoretical sense, it conferred upon the Court and the Council powers like those exercised by their namesakes in Washington. In practise, however, the provisions governing the camp's executive made clear that this was to be a "guided" democracy, under which the campers had the power to make only "progressive" decisions. The executive power was lodged in the camp manager. The camp's "president," therefore, was neither elected nor subject to the desires of the camp Council. He held absolute veto power over the Community Council in situations where he believed their decisions conflicted with government policy or with law. Similarly, decisions of the Court were to be "rendered in the form of a recommendation to the camp manager," and were not binding.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the fact that managers held essentially dictatorial power at the camps, they chose to exercise it only rarely. In minor altercations with the Council, they generally chose the road of gentle persuasion in preference to the veto power which served as their ultimate deterrent. The migrants were a proud and easily offended group. For the successful manager, discretion was the key to acceptance by the campers.<sup>42</sup> When, for example, one of the camp councils determined to "blow the works" and lavish the camp funds

<sup>40</sup> "Constitution," Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Arvin Migrant Camp report, February 22, 1936, USDA ASCC papers, 36,879.

on an "ice cream feed," the manager cautioned that this would afford only "momentary pleasure." His persuasive powers were successful in this case, and he exultantly notified his superiors that "We now have a brand new mimeograph machine and public address system," purchased with the ice cream money.<sup>43</sup>

Similar tactics prevailed when religious problems threatened to disrupt relations between manager and campers. As one manager told an observer: "Maybe Jehovah's witnesses want to give the camp a good working over. One of the saints comes to me and requests permission. I could tell him no and get rid of him in ten seconds, but that might make a martyr out of the guy. So I make a date for the guy with the Council," who, hopefully, "finally see the [Witnesses'] racket and unanimously tell him they don't allow peddlers in their camp" when he asks for contributions.<sup>44</sup>

Managers frequently executed the decisions of the Council or the Court in good faith. At various camps, councils passed strong ordinances regulating the use of liquor at the units, and a few banned alcohol entirely. When families at one camp violated these regulations, the camp Court imposed sentences upon them. When the miscreants refused to abide by the decisions of the Court, the manager called upon the local sheriff and had them forcibly evicted.<sup>45</sup> Under normal circumstances, warnings from the Council and the manager, or in severe cases, a visit by the local sheriff, were sufficient to ensure that wayward campers "pulled along with the team." There were, however, migrants who neither fitted nor could be molded to meet FSA's image of democracy in the camps. In dealing with them, FSA's authority, not camp democracy, made the rules. Those who did not fit in were cast out. By 1940, FSA's camp managers had circulated a blacklist of "two thousand families that are barred from this camp or other camps, because they are problem families." "Please never lose sight of the fact," one manager explained, "that these families before coming here lived at a standard far below that which we must keep in our camps. Bringing them quite abruptly [*sic*] into a higher civilization, is a problem that one must experience to realize."<sup>46</sup> Migrants were also blacklisted for failure to conform to models established by camp managers. In evicting two campers, for example, one manager observed that the camp Council had charged them with drunkenness. This was not, he continued, *his*

<sup>43</sup> "Narrative Report, Region IX, March 1941," Farm Security Administration papers, Carton 2.

<sup>44</sup> Beecher, "The Migratory Labor Program in California," p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> "Narrative Report, Region IX, March 1941."

<sup>46</sup> Shafter Migrant Camp report, November 1940, USDA ASCC papers, 36,886.

major indictment against them : "Neither family has been accepted into the social gatherings of the camp, therefore I consider them unworthy for future residents of our government camps."<sup>47</sup>

Despite all the managers' efforts, FSA's experiment with "temporary, cooperative communities" under the aegis of guided self-government steadily deteriorated. During the early days of the program, it had appeared that the program would succeed. All their rugged individualism notwithstanding, the migrants turned out in high percentages for camp Council elections. At one camp's election in late 1936, 90 percent of the eligible migrants had voted for camp Council.<sup>48</sup>

This early spurt of participatory democracy was more apparent than real. Indeed, it is difficult, in the light of events that followed, to account for it at all. It is possible that during the early days of the camp program, which coincided with the worst years of the migration, the migrants were so demoralized, so apathetic that, told to *be* democratic, they *were* democratic. In any event, as the migrants settled into the camp program, they reverted to accustomed habit and largely ignored the cooperative democracy that FSA had conceived for them. By 1940, camp after camp had fallen into a pattern of petty gossip, political apathy and constant exhortations from the managers that the campers be democratic or else!

The camp at Marysville had been FSA's California showcase. In 1937, it was "a place where people worked, played and lived for one another instead of against one another." The camp of 1940, a long-time resident of the unit complained, "is just a place of bickering and fussing."<sup>49</sup> Democracy at the camp had collapsed : "The Chairman opens the meetings and the manager takes it over." Throughout the FSA camp system, manager and migrant alike were noting a growing refusal of the residents to engage in the process of camp decision-making. At one camp, in 1941, the manager complained that the remark most frequently heard among groups gathered around the common buildings was "To Hell with the Council."<sup>50</sup> Campers charged that the Council had ceased to function democratically : "We can go on open meeting night and discuss some rules that the campers don't want and next meeting night the one man council will pass it over the campers."<sup>51</sup> Accused by the manager

<sup>47</sup> James Eastly to Mr. Hollenberg, July 15, 1940, USDA ASCC papers, 36,889.

<sup>48</sup> W. F. Baxter, "Migratory Labor Camps," *Quartermaster Review* (July-August, 1937), 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Voice of the Agricultural Worker* (Marysville Migrant Camp), May 7, 1940.

<sup>50</sup> *Camp Herald* (Firebaugh Migrant Camp), October 10, 1941.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, October 17, 1941.

of "failing to take an active part in the government and operation of your community," the campers did nothing to retire the Council which they had vocally consigned to perdition.<sup>52</sup> Two months later, only thirteen of the camp's 326 voters turned out to elect a new Council.<sup>53</sup>

The identical pattern was repeated at several of the other camps. At one, the camp newspaper's Independence Day issue began with a jeremiad from the manager: "This space was reserved for news of the election which supposedly was to be held on Thursday night at the Social Center. But what we want to know is what happened to the voters? . . . Democracy never will work by itself. Only the people by making their will known can make it work. You must vote to make the Community Council really YOUR COUNCIL."<sup>54</sup> Earlier, at another camp, the manager had been grieved at the absence of campers at the general meetings.<sup>55</sup> "Some of the remarks made at the camp," he complained, "wouldn't do justice to a child. If you don't like the rules made by past sensible campers you shouldn't force yourself to suffer any longer." Regaining his composure, he excused some campers' "lack of good judgment" and concluded: "After all I know that it is necessary to do a good deal of educational work around here."<sup>56</sup>

A number of factors conspired to produce the collapse of FSA's social experiment. In the first place, the migrants were not different from other groups in their inability or unwillingness to cast off habit patterns that had taken years to produce. A mimeographed constitution, its blank spaces filled in by the campers, might provide the mechanisms of FSA's ideal democracy, but it could not turn the migrants into latter-day Madisons and Hamiltons. There were, nonetheless, deeper reasons for the failure of the plan, and these grew from the breezy, optimistic, often unrealistic manner in which reformers of the depression era approached social problems.

The Okies reached California in desperate social and economic dislocation. They were vulnerable, defenseless, and disoriented. American citizens, they were nonetheless rejected socially and exploited economically in California. Outside the camps, they became a class of pariahs, detested by the older "Californians," the butt of political campaigns, the focus of an intense anti-migrant propaganda drive. The circumstances of their migration, the agricultural labor they accepted, and the fact that they *were* different and somewhat less

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, October 24, 1941.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, December 17, 1941.

<sup>54</sup> *Happy Valley Weekly* (Indio Migrant Camp), July 4, 1941.

<sup>55</sup> *Tent City News* (Gridley Migrant Camp), July 15, 1939.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, September 2, 1939.

“modern” than the Californians all forced upon them an “inferior” role the instant they left the camp boundaries. FSA demanded that the migrants play a dual, almost schizoid, role. In the midst of their rejection by California, they were asked by their camp managers to function within the camps as ideal citizens of an ideal republic. To maintain both roles was a near-impossible task.

If the migrants had somehow succeeded in playing their dual roles simultaneously, other forces would still have doomed the experiment. The maintenance of the camps was essentially a simple matter of housekeeping concealed by an apparently complex arrangement of subsidiary activities. An FSA camp was not a Puritan settlement on the American frontier in the 1650's; it was a housing unit located within a functioning county in a modern state. Friends of the FSA occasionally equated the camp Councils with “Town Hall Democracy,” but the migrants understood that camp democracy was really a game. The constitutional issues with which the campers were asked to deal — ice cream feeds versus mimeograph machines, for one — were trivial problems compared with the deadly struggle for existence that the migrant families daily waged when they left the camp's boundaries. Adults engaged in attempting to make a new life in California, they had two choices when they confronted FSA's democracy: either to ignore it, or, by playing the game, to engage in what must have seemed childlike pursuits.

Finally, the frequent jeremiads from the managers demanding that the campers be democratic did not conceal the fact that the managers held the coercive power should they choose to exercise it. The blacklists did exist; so did the occasional “guidance” from the managers. To these poor, proud, and independent Okies, the managers must, at times, have seemed insufferably patronizing. In a very real way, FSA differed little from institutions where authority actually resides elsewhere than in the subordinate groups upon whom a democratic veneer is overlaid. In mental hospitals, petty problems are resolved in the wards by councils of patients. Doctors and orderlies exercise the real power. On college campuses, student governments represent students in such matters of significance as the allocation of funds to the football team and the college daily, the time and location of dances, or the construction of new offices for the student body president. Power resides, however, in the administration, as those engaged in radical political action outside or within the campus quickly discover. During the 1960's, student activists dubbed student government with the adjective “sandbox” in recognition of the parental powers of administrators over student democracies. FSA's democracy was a sandbox democracy.

In short, the Okies were not Americans who conformed easily with FSA's image of democracy. Nor were the FSA camps with their limited role in the life of the migrant adequate schoolrooms for educating the "one-third of a nation" into the mysteries of cooperative democracy. Saddled with an unrealistic view of the simplicity of its task, FSA failed to produce a new man out of the Okie. Nevertheless, the agency achieved some limited successes. Unquestionably, it provided the migrant with accommodations better than those available anywhere else in the state. It fed, clothed, and supported him during the recurrent labor oversupplies and unemployment crises in California during the 1930's. Finally, FSA initiated the migrants into many of the physical trappings and social patterns of a life more "modern" than that in the Southern Great Plains. In all, the best epitaph for the dying social experiment was the comment of one manager who had accepted a "sassing" with some grace and a good deal of patronization from a migrant woman who had refused to clean up her cabin :

This woman, like a majority of the campers probably lived in Oklahoma, with a hard dirt floor, there was no lawn to cut, the slop was thrown on the ground out the kitchen window, after dark instead of going to the toilet they did the job of [*sic*] the back porch, if they ever did anything for the good of the neighborhood it was the result of force of some kind. They seldom voted for one reason or another, they lived easy going lives, no hurry no rush . . . . Taking citizens from such a back ground [*sic*] and putting them in a government camp, expecting to build a good temporary, cooperative community, is quite a job. I know in our talks to the public we do not paint such a picture of the people we work with, yet we in the field know that the picture is a true one of the majority of them, and the fact that we have done a fair job with them, is I think a miracle. <sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ray Mork to R. W. Hollenberg, June 18, 1940, USDA ASCC papers, 36,885.