Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp Study Guide

Children of the Dust Bowl: The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp by Jerry Stanley

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Children of the Dust Bowl, The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp, by Jerry Stanley, illustrated with actual photographs from the era, is the story of the migration of Okies from the Oklahoma Panhandle to the land of promises in California. The wicked weather and winds that cursed the Oklahoma Panhandle became unbearable in the late 1930s. From 1931 through 1936, it had rained only a handful of times.

The large majority of Okies in that region were farmers whose livelihood and their very survival depended on rain. The farmers tried to hold on, praying for the day when the rains would come. But things grew even worse when unrelenting winds, sometimes at 50 MPH, became everyday events. The winds whipped up the dry earth, creating a sky constantly filled with the dust of the red clay. The region became known as the "Dust Bowl". The strife of the Okies was the subject of John Steinbeck's famous bestseller, "The Grapes of Wrath".

Unable to sustain themselves in their homeland, the people were lured to California by promises of jobs and the good life. It was rumored that no one ever got sick in California and there was food and jobs enough for all. The Okies sold most of their possessions, bought old jalopies and piled their families in the cars and took of on what was, at times, a journey of uncertainty and peril and near starvation. When the families arrived in California, they were met with signs that told them that there were no jobs available—in fact there were ten men for every job—and to keep moving on.

The people had no options—they didn't have enough money or any reason to return home. Most stayed and worked when they could and just barely made it. They lived in cardboard shacks, under bridges or set up in dry river beds. The lack of nourishing food and the unsanitary conditions brought on illness and death. Local Californians resented their presence—suspecting that they'd take jobs from them and that their taxes were being used to support them. The Okies who felt the greatest sting from the ridicule and ostracization were the children.

Leo Hart, an educator and counselor, recognized the strife that the Okie children were under and understood that though most of the children were illiterate and lacked many social skills, they were fundamentally ordinary children who just needed the chance to shine and let their talents and value show through. Hart set about establishing the Weedpatch School, which was built just for the Okie children. There were just fifty Okie kids who would be the school's first students. These kids, the teachers that Hart recruited and Hart himself built the school brick by brick. He furnished and supplied the school by seeking donations and using every free or used item he could put his hands on. The kids loved the school, and it was quickly apparent that being treated with dignity and respect had a very positive effect on them. Finally, the kids were the focus of attention and were told daily that they were important and that they could accomplish their dreams.

The school, which was classified as an emergency school, was closed after five years by state statute. However, the good that it had done was apparent in the successes that the Okie kids enjoyed as adults. Many became teachers themselves, business owners, police officers—capable and proud people who benefited from a kind man who saw the true value in a bunch of poor, rag-tag kids who most people didn't even want around.

Chapter One: Mean Clouds

Chapter One: Mean Clouds Summary and Analysis

The farmers of the 1930s in the Oklahoma Panhandle, the area wedged between Texas, Kansas, and New Mexico were "dry farmers". They had no irrigation system or water reservoir. When there wasn't sufficient rain, the farmers had to depend on bank loans or money they could get for selling their farm equipment to survive on. In 1931, there was a drought that seemed unending. Cornstalks and other crops wilted in the oppressive sun and heat. The farmers in the region were already economically strapped from the Great Depression, two years before. Even before the drought, most farmers had a tough time paying their bank loans. When the prices for crops fell, a thousand families a week were losing their farms to banks.

Remarkably, by 1936, it had only rained a few times in the prior five years in the Oklahoma Panhandle. In 1936, there was a change in the weather which only made matters worse. The wind began to blow, and blew incessantly. On most days the sun could only be seen through the filter of the red clay dust that filled the sky. The area was appropriately dubbed the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl encompassed the area in the "Panhandle near Goodwell, Oklahoma to the western half of Kansas, the eastern half of Colorado, the northeastern portion of New Mexico, and northern Texas" (p. 5). From 1936 through 1940, the winds blew unmercifully. The wind, sometimes blowing fifty miles per hour, devastated the farms—taking away the topsoil and leaving only the hard, clay behind.

When a dust storm blew up, it could be seen as far as thirty miles away. When the animals became spooked and would start to scatter, the farmers knew the winds would soon be picking up. They had to hurry and put their livestock in the barn, tie down their machinery and supplies and run for the cellar. The farmers were not safe from the dust even inside their homes. The red dust would penetrate their houses through cracks and crevices. People would sleep with wet rags on their faces to protect themselves from the dust. In the morning, the floors and furniture would be covered with dust. Small farm animals, like chickens, could be buried alive by the dust. Children of farmers were often given the responsibility of cleaning the nostrils of the family's cows several times a day.

The farm families had to be cautious about touching anything metal during the storms due to the static electricity in the air created by the wind and rain. Storms killed people who stayed outside in them too long. Others became sick from "dust pneumonia", which was a condition caused by severe damage to the lungs by the inhalation of dust. Many people who lived in the dust bowl became depressed due in part from the relentless dust storms that blocked the sun. The dust invaded the air to such a degree that most days were dark from morning until night. If there was any hope of farming, the storms took that hope away. To survive, many farmers lived on a diet of biscuits and jackrabbits. Some farmers made money by hunting coyotes for their bounty.

From 1930 through 1940, the number of dust bowl farmers declined by 400,000. The unemployment rate in that region spiked to thirty percent in 1937 and the majority of Okies lost their farms during that time period. If a farmer refused to leave their property, the bank would send a tractor to knock down his house as a not so gentle reminder that the family was required to vacate the premises. When this happened, a farmer was considered, "tractored-out".

Chapter Two: Mother Road

Chapter Two: Mother Road Summary and Analysis

To the Okie farmers in the Panhandle, talk of California inspired magical images. In California, thousands of farm hands and harvest workers were needed. The crops were unlimited and grew throughout the year—tomatoes, peaches, pears, apples, oranges and more. Lush orchards were everywhere—there was enough food and jobs for all. On top of that, no one ever got sick in California! The thousands of handbills sent by growers in California confirmed the need for workers. Everyone talked about going to California.

As a result of the bad times in the Panhandle and the promises that were luring them to California, the biggest migration in US history occurred between 1935 and 1940, when over one million people left Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas for California. Although there were some black families, most of the migrant workers were white. Of the million people who migrated to California, 375,000 were Okies. Many families sold everything they had to buy an old jalopy and pile the whole family in it for their journey. Any possessions the families had left would be tied to the top of the cars. Those would couldn't scrape enough money together to buy a car would hop a free ride on a train or hitchhike their way to the coast.

For one leg of their journey, the Okies traveled on Route 66, which they called Mother Road. Travel down the Mother Road was risky and dangerous. The road itself was filled with many perils, including washed out roads, and the families faced hunger and uncertainty during the long drive. There were plenty hardships to remember. One family, the Masters, had four flat tires in the first fifty miles of their trip. Scores of families got caught in floods, causing them to wait out the waters, delaying their journey for weeks until the waters subsided. Along the way, the Okies worked when the could. Some picked cotton in Texas and helped with harvests in Arizona. When the families ran out of gas along the way, the men in the family would hitchhike to the nearest town, earned fifty cents or a dollar at some odd job which would be enough to buy some gas, find their way back to refuel their cars and start out again. The families would camp at night by a stream or creek so they could bathe, wash their clothes and cook. Food was scarce. Most meals consisted of bacon and potatoes. When they had nothing but coffee, the adults would drink the coffee and the kids would take spoons and eat the coffee grounds.

When the families reached Kingman, Arizona, they faced more challenges. The roads climbed higher and higher into the Black Mountains. The roads were full of hairpin turns and had no guardrails. After making it through the mountains, the next survival test was the 143 miles through the Mojave Desert, between Needles and Barstow, California. Temperatures would reach as high as 120 degrees. Most families traveled through the night during this leg of the trip so they and their cars wouldn't burn up in the oppressive heat. Despite all the challenges and hardships, the Okies maintained the hope that they

would make it. All they wanted was the chance to get to California to hopefully get jobs and support their families.

Chapter Three: Dead Time

Chapter Three: Dead Time Summary and Analysis

Another milestone the convoy of jalopies reached was Tehachapi Grade in the Tehachapi Mountains, which led directly to the San Joaquin Valley. Once the Okies made it through this pass, they felt their problems were all behind them and that the future held out great promise. Looking down upon the valley, they could see green farmland and orchards as far as the eye could see. Many families headed to the towns of Delano and Bakersfield, where they had gotten word that grape pickers were needed. In Wasco and Shafter, farmhands were needed to harvest potatoes, and in Arvin and Lamont, help was needed on cotton and vegetable farms. The families began to see alarming signs that their dreams may turn into nightmares. Posted in these towns were signs that announced there were no jobs available and to keep going because there were ten men for every job.

The farmers had over-advertised and the influx of migrant workers flooded the job market. The excess of workers was good for the farmers since it drove wages down. Cotton pickers were paid as little as 25 cents per hour. The average migrant farmhand worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, and made as little as four dollars for their backbreaking work. The Okies were no better off in glorious California than they were in the heart of the dust bowl. The people lived in cardboard shacks and under bridges and in dry lake beds. These squatter communities came to be known as Okievilles, or Little Oklahomas. The squatter diet consisted largely of boiled cabbage and corn bread. Many cruel farmers would pour oil on surplus food or burn it rather than give it to the starving Okies. The starvation diets and unsanitary conditions of the Okie communities led to disease including tuberculosis, pneumonia and dysentery. Sick children were turned away from hospitals because they didn't take "Okies", resulting, in some cases, in their deaths.

The Federal Government stepped in for the suffering Okies. In 1936, The Farm Security Administration, a division of the Department of Agriculture, began the construction of twelve farm-labor camps, where those migrants looking for work could stay until they found a job. One of the camps was located near Tehachapi Grade. Although it was officially named the Arvin Federal Camp, it was known as the Weedpatch Camp because it was located near the Weedpatch Highway. John Steinbeck also referred to it as the Weedpatch Camp in his book, The Grapes of Wrath.

To get to the camp, many of the Okies headed back to one of the first regions of California they had passed through when they reached California. Families lived in one-room tin shacks or tents that were raised off the ground with platforms. The cost to stay in the camp was $1 per week per family. If the family couldn't pay the rent, they could do maintenance jobs around the camp in exchange for their rent money. Hot showers, food and flushing toilets were available for a family for an additional penny a day. When it rained, the camp would become a muddy swamp. One spot that brightened the lives of

the Okies was a large building where they could gather on Saturday nights and sing and dance and forget their problems for an evening.

Chapter Four:

Chapter Four: Summary and Analysis

The Okies who lived on the federal camp began to be ostracized by Californians. They were treated like "scum" and "ignorant and filthy people". Headlines screamed that hordes of Okies were invading California. People made the observation that there were more Okies than there were white people, although the vast majority of Okies were white people.

The same arguments that rage about modern immigration issues were common complaints during the influx of the Okies—Californians were hostile to the migrant workers because they claimed they were taking jobs from them and bitterly resented having to support them with their tax dollars. The migrant workers were increasing the state and county costs for medical care and education. In some towns, they were met with signs in stores announcing that Okies were not allowed. On the rare occasion that an Okie would have enough money to go to a theater, signs would point them to the balcony. People would call out to them on the street to go home.

Okies were identified by their poor appearance and the twang they spoke with. While some Okies just took the abuse, others got into fights, defending their honor and their people and would often wind up in jail. As with most situations of bias and prejudice, the Okie children suffered the most. They believed the harsh words that they weren't as good as the other kids—that they were dumb and sub-human. Even some teachers segregated the Okie children from the rest of their classes—making them sit on the floor while the well-dressed children sat on chairs at desks. The Okie children were poked fun at and called names because of the meager lunches they brought and the shabby clothing they wore. But there was hope for the Okies in the form of a kind man named Leo Hart.

Chapter Five: Mr. Hart

Chapter Five: Mr. Hart Summary and Analysis

Leo Hart, forty years old, got in the habit of stopping by Weedpatch Camp to play ball with the Okie kids and talk to them. He learned how the other children treated them at school, how little they had to survive on, and how they had suffered in the "terror wind" back home in Oklahoma. Hart served in the Army during World War I where he contracted tuberculosis. He was sent to a sanitarium in Arizona to recover, which he barely did after losing a lung and a kidney. After his hospitalization, he enrolled in the University of Arizona, where he earned a master's degree in education. He was a school counselor in Kern County, where he heard daily about the abuse and unfair treatment the Okie kids were made to endure. Hart decided to run for Kern County Superintendent of Education; however, because of the animosity that Californians had toward Okies, during his campaign he didn't mention his intention to help these children. What Hart wanted to do for these children is to help them adjust to their new lives and take their rightful places in society.

Hart knew he had a big job ahead of him. Many of the Okie children were illiterate, lacked many social skills and habits, and needed medical attention and decent diets. But he also knew that they were fundamentally ordinary kids. Hostility against the Okies was at a fever pitch when Hart became superintendent. Police and civilians formed "Bum Brigades", with the intention of keeping Okies out of their communities. A mob, headed by the sheriff, burned down an Okie migrant camp near the Kern River. Citizens, armed with pitchforks and clubs, attacked the Weedpatch Camp one night, trying to frighten the Okies away. Hundreds of Okies were arrested for defending themselves but not one local was jailed. John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath was banned from Kern County. Hart was met with stiff resistance when he tried to relocate some of the children to other school districts. Hart was called a Communist and was threatened with the loss of his position.

Due to the harassment Hart was receiving and the stubborn resentment of the public, Hart decided to form a school exclusively for the Okies. In addition to teaching them math and reading, he would teach them masonry, agriculture and other practical programs that would give them a better lot in life when they became adults. Hart also planned to teach the Okies to be proud of who they were and to help them build self-confidence in their own value and abilities.

Chapter Six: Weedpatch School

Chapter Six: Weedpatch School Summary and Analysis

Hart informed the President of the School Board that he was removing the Okie children from the public schools due to overcrowding. The school board president was jubilant and didn't care what reason was used to remove them, he was just happy that that the problem that had been plaguing him was over. Hart was granted permission to build an emergency school for the Okie children which would be constructed and operated at no cost to taxpayers.

Hart had become acquitted with Dewey Russell, who managed the Weedpatch Camp and who was a close friend of John Steinbeck. Hart was allowed to lease a ten-acre site of federal land next to the camp for $10. The school became known as Weedpatch School and began in a forlorn patch of dirt with two old dilapidated buildings that had been abandoned by the federal government. Fifty kids were initially enrolled in the school. Hart sought out the best teachers he could recruit from local colleges and universities. The group of teachers who agreed to teach at the new school all were aware that they'd be required to teach at the most basic of levels due to the relative illiteracy of the children. Hart also hired Lee Hanson who, in addition to teaching English, would teach plumbing, electric wiring, sports and aircraft mechanics. Others staff, like carpenters, counselors and masons, also came aboard.

Hart would beg for whatever free supplies and donations he could get for the school. Hart bought a truck that he donated to the school. He convinced farmers to donate livestock, machinery and vegetable plants so that the children could learn about raising animals and crops. He secured enough bricks to build a new school building and enough used books for the teachers and students to use in their classes. Either because they were glad the Okies weren't at the regular public schools or because they got into the spirit, people in the community began donating all sorts of items for the school. There was still resentment and resistance to the mere presence of the Okie kids in the community. There were incidents of vandalism—dead cats left where the kids would find them and the tires of teachers' and workers' cars were found slashed. The original school buildings were set on fire one day but the fire was extinguished with the help of the Okie kids before much damage was done. The hot summer before the school was to open, the Okie kids spent morning to night in the cotton fields, toughening up for the challenge of school that laid ahead.

Chapter Seven: Something to Watch

Chapter Seven: Something to Watch Summary and Analysis

In September 1940, Leo Hart met with the teachers he had hired and the fifty kids who would be the first students at the new Weedpatch School. They gathered in the field next to Weedpatch Camp where lumber and bricks sat in piles. Together, kids and teachers and Leo Hart built the school, brick by brick and beam by beam. On the first day, the kids built a trench where a water pipe was installed, which enabled the school to have running water. The teachers and newly named principal, Pete Bancroft, worked hand in hand with the kids and inspired a spirit of confidence and self-worth within them. The two old federal buildings were renovated into classrooms. The new building took three months to build and contained more classrooms and a cafeteria.

By October, the kids helped to till the field next to the school where they eventually would plant vegetables. The kids were given the responsibility of raising their own livestock. Edna Hart, Leo's wife, helped cook meals for the kids and set up the cafeteria. The teachers not only taught the students history and math and geography, they taught them practical skills they could use to make their lives better. In addition to history and math, Jim McPherson taught the kids shoe cobbling so they could repair their parents' shoes. Rose Gilger taught the kids science and sewing so they could make more attractive and better fitting clothes for themselves. Principal Bancroft bought an airplane from a military surplus facility for $200, so he could teach the kids airplane mechanics. Bancroft showed his total support for Weedpatch School by enrolling his own children there. He brought in doctors and nurses to care for the sick children. Fred Smith was hired as a music teacher. When he received a check for a year of services, he donated it back to the school. Leo surprised and excited the children when they learned that a new hole that was being dug was for a swimming pool. They kids happily helped with that project.

Chapter Eight: Our School

Chapter Eight: Our School Summary and Analysis

The students of Weedpatch School faced many challenges. In addition to helping building their school and swimming pool, they attended classes, tended to their gardens and livestock, had heavy homework loads and had to devote study time for tests. By May 1941, the student body population had increased to nearly two hundred. The students were separated into two main groups. One group attended classes in the mornings and worked on the buildings and pool in the afternoons. The other group had the opposite schedule.

The kids faced challenges that were not usually part of a child's life. Walls would collapse from strong winds, forcing suspension of classes; other kids would miss weeks of school because their parents found work miles away and moved their kids with them; and still others had to stay home with younger siblings when their parents were working dawn to dusk in the fields. Progress was slow and sporadic because many of the children had little or no formal education. But the teachers were professionals and saw every minor step as a victory and one on which the next level of learning could be based. The impact of their education was apparent in many children almost immediately. Twelve-year-old Joyce Foster lost her father to a lung disease. She openly grieved over him, which didn't miss the attention of her teacher who suggested she write a letter to her relatives back in Oklahoma about his death—Joyce was the only person in her family who could write. That letter was expanded and turned into an essay and read aloud at a gathering of Okie parents in the Weedpatch Camp auditorium.

There were rewards for the children who did well scholastically. The kids with ninety-percent or better averages were occasionally taken on field trips organized by their teachers. These outings included fishing expeditions to locals streams and rivers. Doyle Powers got a ninety-two percent on his math test and was allowed to taxi the C-46 airplane down the road and back. When the school made money on its potato crop, some of the money was used to take over one hundred students to a fair where they had their first rides on a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round—and had their first tastes of ice cream.

There was still resentment from the community at the presence of the Okies and their kids. Eddie Davis' hog placed third at the county fair. When a local boy started calling him names, the boy punched him in the nose and knocked him in the hog pen. Eddie was the leader of his fellow students when three carloads of local high school boys drove onto the Weedpatch School grounds, harassing and threatening the Okie students. After Eddie and other students stood up to the insurgents and bloodied a few noses, they soon backed down and hightailed it out of there.

Okie parents were thrilled with the transformation they saw in their children, compelling many of them to stay in Weedpatch Camp longer than they had planned. The school

meant so much to the children—it was the first time people had focused on them and their personal values and abilities. It gave them dignity and self-confidence. The school's population grew to some four hundred students several years after its establishment.

Chapter Nine: Sunset School and Afterword

Chapter Nine: Sunset School and Afterword Summary and Analysis

Gradually word spread in the larger community about the success of the Weedpatch School. The school offered benefits that weren't available in other schools in the region. The kids were able to learn practical skills like airplane mechanics and farming. Hot breakfasts cost a cent, lunch two cents and for those students who couldn't afford that, meals were free. The teachers at Weedpatch were considered the best in the county, as was its chemistry lab. The kids were treated to special outings and had their own swimming pool to boot. The school was commended for its lack of disciplinary problems. Equipment and supplies were left lying around in the open—but none of the students stole anything. The students had a vested interest in the school—it was their school. No only were they students, they helped build it, earned money for it and helped to maintain and sustain it.

After the school's reputation began to grow, it wasn't long before local parents wanted to enroll their children in the school. The Arvin Federal Emergency School ended in 1944 since the state's attorney general issued a legal opinion that a school that had the status of "emergency school" could not operate for more than five years. The school was incorporated into the Vineland School District. In 1952, all but one of the original buildings were destroyed in an earthquake. It was rebuilt and was renamed the Sunset School and enrollment was no longer limited to Okie children. But the Weedpatch School had done its job by creating a bridge between the community and the migrant workers.

The rag-tag kids that attended the original Weedpatch School fared well. Willard Melton became a college professor. Robert Faulkner and John Rutledge both became class presidents of their local high schools' senior classes. Joyce Foster, who wrote the essay about her father, became a school teacher. Bill Johnson owned two supermarkets in Kern County. Tommy Ross and James Peel both owned constructions companies in Hawaii and California. There were hundreds of other examples of the successes that the kids enjoyed as adults all of which would not have been possible had someone not believed in them and went the distance for them.

Reflecting on photographs of the school and the students, Leo Hart remembered details about each of the kids who touched his life. He recalled what each student excelled in and what their dreams for the future were. He was proud of the students at Weedpatch School who proved that, in life, it's possible to achieve anything no matter where or how one begins his journey.

Afterword

After the school officially closed, Leo Hart innovated another way to help the Okie children. He created a mobile outreach program that traveled to other parts of Kern County where migrant children and their families lived. This program focused on teaching the children practical skills like typing and mechanics that they could benefit from in their adult lives. Hart also established the first school for handicapped children in the county. In 1988, Hart attended the dedication ceremony for the Leo B. Hart Elementary School in Bakersfield.

Characters

Leo Hart

Leo Hart had served in the Army during World War I where he contracted tuberculosis. After a struggle to recover his health, he continued his education and eventually earned a master's degree in education. Hart became a school administrator and counselor in the Kern County school district in California. He became interested in the plight of the children of the Okie migrant farm workers. The families had moved from the Dust Bowl in the Oklahoma Panhandle due to the unbearable conditions they lived under there to a better life in California.

As a counselor, a day didn't go by when Hart didn't hear about the abuse that the Okie kids suffered under. The other students resented them and viewed them as almost sub-human. They were ridiculed for the way they talked and the shabby clothing they wore. Hart recognized that the kids were in the main illiterate and lacked the social skills that would enable them to assimilate into their new communities. But he also knew that fundamentally the kids were ordinary children who were just as smart as any other and, if given the chance, could become productive and respected members of society.

Hart got permission to build a school that would be exclusively for the Okie kids. Promising the director of the school district that the school would not cost the taxpayers a dime, Hart went on to build the school brick by brick and board by board with the help of the fifty students that would be the school's first students and the teachers he recruited for his staff. He campaigned for donations and found ways to get free supplies and equipment for the school.

The school, located next to the Weedpatch Camp, a federal community for migrant farm workers, became a huge success. When it was closed five years after it was founded, the student body population had grown to some four hundred. The children loved the school and flourished under an administration whose goal it was not only to teach the children math, history and science but also practical skills that they could use to better themselves and their families. The Okie children who were students at the school went on to have productive and satisfying careers and learned to have self-confidence thanks to the warm-hearted man who could not allow the abuse and neglect of these children to continue.

The Okie Kids

The Okie kids were the "stars" of this historical account of the building of the Weedpatch School in California during the early 1940s. Before the Okie kids got their own school, Ruth Criswell recalled how every day of their lives her children were ridiculed by the other students at the public school. Wayne Rogers remembered being humiliated when the school nurse checked the Okie boys for lice—repeating over and over that "Okie

kids have lice". Mae McMasters wished she had been born somewhere other than in Oklahoma and Shirley Cox wanted to be anyone other than an Okie.

But things changed for the Okie kids when Leo Hart decided they needed rescuing. After the Weedpatch School was built, the Okie kids enrolled there began to display signs of self-confidence, feelings of self-worth and talents and abilities even they didn't know they had. Joyce Foster, who lost her father to lung disease, expressed her grief in an essay which she read before a gathering of Okie parents. Doyle Powers earned a ninety-two percent average in math and was allowed to taxi the school's military airplane—used to teach kids airplane mechanics—down the school's "runway." Eddie Davis' hog won third place at the county fair. When he was ridiculed by a local boy, Eddie busted him in the nose and sent him flying into the hog "slop". Student Elyse Phillips recalled when the school's swimming pool was completed, she fell into the water, "crying because I was so happy" (p. 59).

Trice Masters summed up the feelings that the Okie students held for their teachers who "made us feel important and like someone really cared".

Edna Hart

Edna Hart was Leo Hart's wife. Edna helped her husband organize donation campaigns for the school. She cooked meals for the kids and helped setup the school's cafeteria.

Pete Bancroft

Pete Bancroft was the first principal of the Weedpatch School. He showed his support for the school by enrolling his own children there. Bancroft purchased an airplane from a military surplus store for $200. He used the plane to teach airplane mechanics to the kids.

John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck visited the Weedpatch Camp in his research for writing The Grapes of Wrath. The blockbuster novel was banned from certain parts of California when the conflict over the Okies was at a fever-pitch.

Edgar and Myrtle Masters

When Edgar and Myrtle Masters set off for a new life in California, they had four flat tires during the first fifty miles of their journey.

Dewey Russell

Dewey Russell was the manager of Weedpatch Camp. Leo Hart became friendly with Russell who helped in securing a ten-acre plot of federal land for the construction site of the Okie's school for just $10. Russell was a good friend of writer John Steinbeck.

Jim McPherson

Jim McPherson was one of the original teachers at the Weedpatch School. Along with teaching the kids history, math and science, McPherson taught them the skill of cobbling so they could repair their own and their parents' shoes.

Barbara Sabovitch

Barbara Sabovitch was one of the original members of the Weedpatch School teaching staff. She taught chemistry but also taught the girls how to make face cream, rouge and lipstick.

Rose Gilger

Rose Gilger was a science teacher at the Weedpatch School. In addition to teaching the kids science and typing, she taught them how to sew so that they could make more attractive and better-fitting clothes for themselves.

Objects/Places

Oklahoma Panhandle

The majority of farmhands, known as Okies, who left Oklahoma for California for work, lived in the northwest region of the state known as the Oklahoma Panhandle.

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl was a region of the United States that was hit by drought and unrelenting winds. making it a next to unbearable place to live. The Dust Bowl encompassed the area in the "Panhandle near Goodwell, Oklahoma to the western half of Kansas, the eastern half of Colorado, the northeastern portion of New Mexico, and northern Texas" (p. 5).

California

Many California farmers sent handbills to the beleaguered Dust Bowl area offering jobs and the possibility of a bright future for those languishing in the region. California was thought of in mythic terms by the Dust Bowl farmers. There was food and jobs for all and no one ever got sick there.

The Mother Road

Route 66 was referred to as the Mother Road by the Okies who were making their way to California to look for work. The Mother Road was a long and often dangerous leg of their journeys.

Mojave Desert

The Okies who moved from Oklahoma to California to look for work had to cross the Mojave Desert. It was 143 miles of treacherous terrain that often was traveled at night to avoid the oppressive heat that would reach as high as 120 degrees.

Black Mountains

When the Okie families reached the Black Mountains of California, they faced a challenge of steep inclines as the road climbed higher and higher into the mountains. The road was filled with so much peril in the form of hairpin turns and no guardrails, that some family members chose to get out of the vehicles and walk.

Weedpatch Camp

The Federal community that was built for unemployed migrant farm workers was officially called the Arvin Federal Camp. It became known as the Weedpatch Camp because it was located near the Weedpatch Highway. John Steinbeck visited the camp and referred to it in his novel, The Grapes of Wrath.

Weedpatch School

The Arvin Federal Emergency School was the official name of the school that Leo Hart established for the Okie Kids. Since it was located next to the Weedpatch Camp, it became known as the Weedpatch School.

Sunset School

When the California attorney general issued a legal opinion that the Weedpatch School had to close after five years, it was later reopened as the Sunset School.

Bakersfield, CA

Leo Hart attended the dedication of the Leo B. Hart Elementary School in Bakersfield, CA, in 1988. The school honored the educator for his establishment of the Weedpatch School and the founding of the first school in Kern County for handicapped children.

Themes

The Scourges of Poverty

The Okie people lived under incredible strife beginning when they lived in Oklahoma. Most of the Okie people were dry farmers—farmers that had no water reservoirs or irrigation systems and had to depend entirely on rain. These farmers suffered in the late 1930s when the perfect storm of a five-year drought and high, unrelenting winds merged to create the uninhabitable Dust Bowl. The people who only survived on what they earned on their crops faced bankruptcy and foreclosure. The Okies suffered the devastation that is connected with poverty—illness, malnourishment and death.

No one could blame the Okies for bailing out of the awful region that was their homeland—especially since farmers in California were urging the people to move there. They advertised that there were jobs and the good life for everyone. Unfortunately, the publicity did not live up to the reality. In California, the Okies were met with signs that no work was available. Once again, they were faced with poverty, starvation, disease and death. These people could not afford to turn around and go home and frankly had no reason to since they faced no prospect for work or a good life there. Instead, the only choices the Okies had were to stay in cardboard shacks and leaking tents or live under bridges and on dry creek beds.

Fortunately, these people were given a helping hand by the federal government which established federal communities for unemployed migrant workers. Had the government not stepped in, the large percentage of these people would have surely perished.

Bias and Prejudice

The Okie people who moved to California with their families from the Dust Bowl in the Oklahoma Panhandle in the late 1930s and early 1940s to seek work, were ridiculed and looked down upon by the locals who resented their presence. The Okies who were most impacted by the derisive treatment were the children. The name-calling and the contempt that these children were subjected to by their peers were not just "kid" things. Being continuously under this type of abuse day in and day out resulted in what had to have been real psychological damage.

Before Leo Hart established the Weedpatch School, many Okie parents were aware of the cruel treatment their children were forced to endure at the public schools. But since the Okie parents had no standing in the community, they were helpless to defend them. These children were subject to lice checks by school nurses, who bitterly told them that Okie kids had lice. The humiliation resulting from an adult telling a child that he or she is crawling with insects just because of their heritage had damaging and lasting effects on the children. It was a common wish of the Okie kids that they had come from somewhere else or had been born as someone else.

The Okies were victims of both tragic circumstances and the bias and prejudice that members of their new communities subjected them to. Only wanting to work and earn their way, the Okies and, of course their children, were met with signs that shop owners did not want their business. Signs told them to keep out. On the rare occasion that an Okie could afford a movie ticket, signs pointed to the balcony, the only place Okies were allowed to sit. A local boy told his father that Okies almost looked human when they stood on two legs. Another Californian made the comment that in some regions of the state, there were more Okies than white people—although Okies were white by a vast majority. When children are told they are not welcome in public places and learn that others think of them as sub-human or part of some undesirable race, the damage to that child's self-worth and self-image is undeniable and lingering.

Altruism

Without the empathy and kind heart of Leo Hart, the lives of the Okie children were poised to be ones of continued poverty and ostracization. The plight of the Okie children struck at the heart of Hart who heard daily about the ridicule and abuse that these children were forced to live under. But Hart, a man with a kind heart and empathetic nature, saw through the ragged clothing and Okie accent and recognized that the children were bright and talented and deserved to be treated with dignity and respect and be allowed to take their "rightful place" in society.

Once emotionally impacted by the tragedy and injustice of their plight, Hart's mind and heart were set on rescuing them. He was a professional educator—an administrator and counselor—who presumably earned an above-average income. There was no personal reason or advantage for Hart to help these helpless kids. His only rewards were the smiling faces and flourishing children who were the results of the school he created and built just for them. By giving the Okie children an identity and something that was their own, Hart literally saved the children from a life destined to be repeats of their own poverty-stricken and illiterate parents. Hart had no private agenda or personal motivations for coming to the aid of these children—Hart's acts were ones of sheer selflessness. Hart's altruistic spirit spread to the teachers of Weedpatch and ultimately to the community at large.

Style

Perspective

Children of the Dust Bowl - The True Story of the School at Weedpatch Camp, is written in the third person narrative. Author Jerry Stanley is a professor of history at Cal State University in Bakersfield and the author of many scholarly essays and articles for mainstream magazines. For his book, Stanley was able to interview many of the principals of the story of the Weedpatch School, including its creator, Leo Hart, its first principal, Pete Bancroft, and numerous former teachers and students. Through these interviews, the perspective of the story is taken from those who were actually part of this historical saga. By including the voices of those who participated in the school and went through the experience first-hand, the story takes on a genuine character and identity.

The incident is part of American history and the bias and cruelty that the Okie children had to endure is not a disputed manner. The accounts of the abuse of the Okies by members of the community who looked down on them and resented their very presence is made more poignant through the voices of those who suffered through the experience. The input of Mr. Hart and the teachers he recruited for the Weedpatch School staff tells the story of the building and development of the school and curriculum from a professional standpoint.

Tone

Although the story of the Okies of the Dust Bowl who began their lives in the Oklahoma Panhandle recounts an American tragedy, author Jerry Stanley provides a seemingly vivid and honest portrayal of this true story devoid of bitterness or over-the-top demagoguery. In truth, the anguish of the Okie people needs no embellishing.

The author includes bright spots, though they were few, in the lives of the Okies, lives which were dominated by hardships. The author describes the struggles and challenges they faced in their homeland in Oklahoma and the risk and perils they faced on their long journeys out west on the Mother Road to California where their lives proved to be only negligibly improved. Stanley includes songs that the Okies sang to lift their spirits. They sang a popular song about "old Sunny Cal" where "work is easy found". They wrote some songs themselves about keeping up their hope and about "goin' down the road" to a better place.

What sets the tone as much as the words, are the many actual photographs that were taken along their road trips and in their new lives in California. In photos of haggard and dirty young mothers who huddle with their children, the looks of anguish and fear on the mothers' faces are undeniable. The photos of their tent and cardboard shacks communities need no words to portray the misery and hopelessness that they surely endured.

In stark contrast to this misery is the story of the school built exclusively for the Okie children. The accompanying photos in this section show children who are flourishing and who have learned to have pride through the positive intercession of a very kind and giving man.

Structure

Children of the Dust Bowl, which chronicles the struggles of the Okies and their children when they left the Oklahoma Panhandle for better fortunes in California, is separated into nine chapters. Preceding the first chapter is a short Author's Note that explains that the term "Okie", which the author uses throughout the book, is one favored by the proud people of Oklahoma, although it had morphed into a word of derision when used by those who looked down on them. In the Introduction section, the circumstances surrounding famed author John Steinbeck's involvement with the Okies and the empathy he felt for them which resulted in the blockbuster novel, The Grapes of Wrath, are described. The Grapes of Wrath was banned in parts of California when the true story of the the establishment of the Weedpatch school for the Okie kids was taking place. Steinbeck visited the Weedpatch Camp when doing research for his book. There are scores of photographs that accompany the story, depicting the Okies in Weedpatch Camp and Weedpatch School as well as photos of some of the families on their journeys to California.

The story is laid out in basically a chronological order. The first chapter explains the hardships that the Okies suffered in the region of the US known as the Dust Bowl. Because of the bizarre weather conditions, these farming people found it impossible to farm and make a living in their home state so they traveled to California which held out the promise of a bright future. Their migration is covered in chapter two. Chapter three covers their utter disappointment when, after giving up their homes and most of their possessions, that there were after all no jobs available for them in California.

The next two chapters cover the ostracization that the Okies, especially the children, felt from the Californians who resented their presence. The next three chapters describe the educator Leo Hart's idea to build a school just for the Okies and how Hart, the teachers and the kids helped in building and developing a school, a school that the Okie kids could call their own. The last chapter describes the successes that the Okie children have realized as adults thanks to the start they got in the school that Mr. Hart built just for them.

Following the last chapter is an afterword which provides an update on the life and career of Leo Hart who founded the Weedpatch School for the children of the Okie migrant workers. There are also acknowledgment and index sections.

Quotes

"As a child, Horace walked to school backward to keep the dirt from scraping him in the face."
Chap. 1, p. 6

"'The dust storms scared us to pieces,' Bessie said. 'It was dark as the middle of the night, and it stayed that way all day.'"
Chap. 1, p. 8

"For those with their own vehicles, an old car with three mattresses lashed to its roof was called 'rich.' a car with two mattresses was said to be 'mediocre.' and if someone saw a car with just one mattress, they'd say, 'There goes a poor Okie.'"
Chap. 2, p. 13

"And then it rains, with insufficient food, the children develop colds because the ground in the tens is wet. I talked to a man last week who lost two children in ten days with pneumonia. His face was hard and fierce and he didn't talk much."
John Steinbeck, Chap. 3, p. 25

"The bad sanitary conditions and inadequate diet led to epidemics of dysentery, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. 'Even if we found work,' one squatter said, 'the people starved. We lived like animals.'"
Chap. 3, p. 26

"When a father identified a man in a field as an Okie cotton picker, his son said, 'Daddy, them things look almost like people when they stand on their legs, don't they.'"
Chap. 4, p. 36

"The boys were humiliated when the school nurse checked them for lice. Wayne Rogers remembered, 'As she looked through our hair and our ears she would tell us, Okies have lice, Okies have lice.'"
Chap. 4, p. 39

"Leo knew that many of the Okie kids were illiterate. He knew that they ate with their fingers and went to the bathroom outdoors and needed, as Leo put it, training in manners, morals and etiquette....He also new that they were ordinary kids with the same hopes and dreams the rest of us have."
Chap. 5, p. 41

"And so Weedpatch School started with no grass, no sidewalks, no playground equipment, no toilets, no water, no books, no teachers. It started...with two condemned buildings that had been in the field for years and with 'fifty poorly clad, undernourished, and skeptical youngsters.'"
Chap. 6, p. 45

"The hot months of July and August made the cotton crop exceptionally good and meant that Okie families were needed from sunrise to sunset for three to four days a week to pluck the white bolls from their razor-sharp hulls. The long days of working in the cotton fields hardened the hands of the Okie children and gave them physical strength for the work ahead."
Chap. 6, p. 49

"The newly hired principal of the school, worked side by side with the teachers and the Okie kids, building the school and instilling in the Dust Bowl children a spirit of confidence and self-worth. There was no partiality, no embarrassment or ridicule. Instead, there was friendship, understanding, guidance and love."
Chap. 7, p. 50

"When we started to build the school, it gave the parents hope. They could see what the school meant to the children. They could see it every day in their faces, in their laughter."
Chap. 8, p. 67

Topics for Discussion

What geographic region of the United States was called the Dust Bowl? How did the region get the name Dust Bowl? What part of Oklahoma was in the Dust Bowl?

What author wrote the book The Grapes of Wrath? Why was the book The Grapes of Wrath banned in parts of California?

Why did the Okies want to move from their homes in Oklahoma? Why did they think that California would provide them with a better way of life? Why were many of the Okies unable to find work when they arrived in California?

What kind of work were the Okies looking for when they arrived in California? What were the living conditions of the Okie children and their families after they arrived in California? Why did their living conditions lead to illness and even death among the Okie families?

Why were Okies mistreated by California residents? What opinion did many Californians have of the Okies? Why did Californians resent the presence of the Okies?

What type of classes were taught at the Weedpatch School? How was Leo Hart able to build the new school for the Okie kids? How did Leo Hart get most of the supplies and equipment for the new Okie school?

What benefit did the Okie kids have from having their own school? Why did the Okie kids feel that the school belonged to them? Why did having their own school, give the Okie kids more self-confidence and the prospect of a better future?