

Discussion Questions for *Factories in the Field* by Carey McWilliams

1. Were your perceptions of the “Okies” relocated by the Dust Bowl transformed or reinforced by *Factories in the Field* and *The Grapes of Wrath*? Have your notions of poverty and prosperity changed since reading the book?
2. Did you think about the book we read, *Nickel and Dimed*, when reading this book or *The Grapes of Wrath*? Any comments on the two?
3. Has anyone here ever harvested crops for pay? What was your experience like?
4. How do you think the real-life experiences of people who lived through the Dust Bowl years shaped them?
5. Does anyone have any relatives who were dislocated by the Dust Bowl? Any stories to tell?
6. Did you think about the recent dislocation of Americans by Hurricane Katrina while reading *Factories in the Field* or *Grapes of Wrath*? In what way if so?
7. What parts of either *Factories in the Field* or *The Grapes of Wrath* really struck you?
8. On p. 26, the author of *Factories* writes:

A theory was evolved at an early date to rationalize the existence of these countless tramps: They were “tramps,” shiftless fellows who actually *preferred* “the open road” and the jolly camaraderie of the tramp jungle to a settled and decent life; chaps who adored lice and filth and vermin, and long marches (in pre-hitchhiking days) through scorchingly hot valleys, and in the drizzle and cold of early fall rains. ...Responsible farm groups in California, at meetings which I have attended, have protested the installation of private privies and showers in labor camps on the ground that they are a needless luxury for the farm laborer.”

If you also read *Grapes of Wrath*, how does this theory mesh with the situation of the Joad family and real families like them?

9. In Chapter nine, the author talks about violence and vigilantism in California. This is also a recurring theme in *Grapes of Wrath*. Any thoughts on this? Any personal stories to tell?
10. What shaped the experiences of Dust Bowl emigrants, both before they left the Great Plains and after? Who was to blame for the difficult situation they found themselves in?
11. Did reading this book give you insight as to why the communist movement appealed to some Americans during the 1930s?
12. On p. 275 in *Factories in the Field*, the author writes, “Agricultural labor, as distinguished from urban industrial labor, has long been discriminated against. It is still generally assumed that farm labor is not entitled to the same protection which various types of social legislation have accorded labor in general.” Do you think that is still true today? Why or why not?
13. On p. 116, the author talks about the Japanese in California. He ends the section with the sentence, “The Japanese have made their peace with the Californians but at a heavy price.” This was of course written before the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Any comments on this?