Tenor of Our Times

Volume 9 Article 13

Spring 4-8-2020

"A Poor Man's Heaven": How Denominational Growth and Change Reflects the Spread of Okie Culture in California

Kaylee J. Rice
Harding University, krice3@harding.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation

Rice, Kaylee J. (Spring 2020) ""A Poor Man's Heaven": How Denominational Growth and Change Reflects the Spread of Okie Culture in California," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 9, Article 13.
Available at: https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol9/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tenor of Our Times by an authorized editor of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.

HARDING
UNIVERSITY

Author Bio:

Kaylee Rice is a senior History major from Liberty Township, Ohio. During her time at Harding she has been involved in the women's Cross Country and Track teams, as well as being involved in Phi Alpha Theta and HUmanity. After graduation, she will return to Ohio where she will work as a naturalist-interpreter for Great Parks of Hamilton County. She hopes to eventually attend graduate school in the Cincinnati area.

(Top) This photograph was taken by an unknown photographer and depicts farm machinery which was buried in a barnyard by dirt during a dust storm in Dallas, South Dakota in May 1936.

(Bottom) *Image courtesy of Arthur Rothstein*. This photograph was taken in April 1936 and depicts a father and his two sons walking toward an outbuilding in a dust storm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.

"A POOR MAN'S HEAVEN": HOW DENOMINATIONAL GROWTH AND CHANGE REFLECTS THE SPREAD OF OKIE CULTURE IN CALIFORNIA

By Kaylee J. Rice

Churches." *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (1944): 348-55. The San Joaquin Valley of California may be in the heart of the state, but it is distinctively different from the rest of California. The landscape is agricultural, the radio plays country music, the people speak with a southern accent, and the churches are largely made up of evangelical Protestants. In many ways, the Central Valley resembles Arkansas and Oklahoma more than it does California. This is largely due to the mass migration that followed the Dust Bowl, when hundreds of thousands of Okies moved from the windblown plains states to the land of promise in the west. Throughout the Great Depression, they struggled to gain footing in California as they were rejected by society. Like any cultural group, they found different methods of coping, specifically within the confines of one of their most long-lasting cultural contributions: the evangelical Protestant church. Their adjustment to California society can be traced through the history of these institutions, especially within certain denominations. The expansion of certain denomination in California reflects three of the ways that southwesterners adjusted to their new home: by spreading their own culture, by forming their own communities, and by adapting their old ways of life to fit their new circumstances.

The suffering of the Great Depression was both deep and widespread. Most historians estimate that that by 1933, one-fourth of Americans were unemployed, and it was estimated that over 34 million people had no income at all.[1] This suffering was perhaps most severe for the farmers who endured the Dust Bowl on the great plains of the United

[1] D.J. Tice, *Minnesota's Twentieth Century: Stories of Extraordinary Everyday People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 75.

States. While the rest of the country watched their banks close and their savings disappear, these farmers saw the land which was their home and livelihood dry up and blow away. Many of these families were left with nothing except the opportunity to do what Americans have always done when times get hard: move west.

Just like the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl had its roots in the economic boom of the first part of the 20th century. During and after World War I, crop prices shot up across the nation due to high demand. The crop in highest demand was wheat, and so many farmers on the plains took advantage of this opportunity and plowed up the native short prairie grasses to plant wheat instead.[2] For about a decade, this decision was incredibly profitable. Ten years of above-average rainfall coincided with the rise in the price of wheat, making the prairies of the western South the perfect place to grow the cash crop of the 1920s. For example, in western Kansas, the heart of the wheat belt, average yearly rainfall is 18.09 inches a year; but in the years leading up to the Great Depression, yearly averages hovered around 19.97 inches—almost two inches above the normal average.[3] This made conditions unusually favorable for growing wheat, encouraging farmers to plow up even more prairie grasses and plant even more wheat. Unknowingly, they were setting themselves up for an even greater disaster when the rains stopped and the economy crashed.

Drought cycles have always been part of the ecology of the western South (a region also called the southwest, and usually defined as Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and parts of Texas and Kansas), but the one that hit in 1930 was particularly ill-timed. That year, right after the stock market crashed, rain levels fell dramatically and did not reach

---

[2] Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "In God We Trusted, in Kansas We Busted.....Again," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 2 (1989): 191-192.

[3] Ibid.

normal levels again until 1939.[4] This decade was marked by unusually high temperatures paired with disastrously low rainfall. For example, average rainfall in western Kansas fell to 15.25 inches a year throughout the decade, with the low being 11.14 inches of rain in 1934.[5] Without adequate rainfall, the wheat could not hold down the soil like the native grasses could, and the Great Plains experienced massive soil erosion and horrible dust storms. The worst of these occurred on April 14, 1935, when the swirling dust turned the sky so dark that it became known as "Black Sunday."[6]

For those who lived through it, the Dust Bowl was the pinnacle of hopelessness and terror. One resident of Kansas wrote that "the prairies in all directions must be a seething, swirling world of dust . . . . The darkness and stillness are intense. This is the ultimate darkness, so must come the end of the world."[7] Woody Guthrie, a resident of western Texas who would later become a voice for Dust Bowl migrants as a famous folk singer in California also described the dust storms, saying "when the dust kept whistling down the line blacker and more of it, there was plenty of everything sick, and mad, and mean, and worried."[8]

But the dust storms were only part of the unfortunate amalgamation of disaster that led so many residents of the western South to migrate to California. In an effort to help farmers affected by the dust storms, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933 as part of the New Deal. It offered subsidies to farmers who agreed to take portions of their farmland out of production, in an effort to bring crop prices back up. As a result, by the end of the 1930s, the amount of land

---

[4] Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016): 87-88.

[5] Riney-Kehrberg, 188.

[6] Cohen, 88.

[7] Riney-Kehrberg, 187.

[8] Cohen, 88.

being worked in the cotton belt had shrunk from 25 million acres to 12.5 million acres—a 50% difference.[9] This may have seemed like a good idea in theory, but in practice, it was fatal to the economy of the Dust Bowl states. This was because most of these states (60% of farms in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas) operated off of the tenant farming system—a system somewhere in between sharecropping and ordinary leasing, where farmers relied on the owners of the land for equipment, and used their crops to pay a portion of their rent.[10] In this system, when the government incentivized landowners for not farming their land, they responded by evicting many their tenant farmers, who were no longer necessary. This left the poorest contingent of that society homeless and unemployed.[11]

The state governments tried to offer some help in terms of relief payments, but when the state economies were so bad already, there was very little that they could do. With over 20% of the region's population collecting relief payments during the trough years of 1934-1935, relief payments were still less than half of the national average.[12] Under these conditions, many families had to move away from their homes in order to survive.

The result was the Dust Bowl migration, in which 350,000-400,000 Americans moved from the heartland to California, mostly to the San Joaquin Valley.[13] This movement has been recorded and stereotyped in popular culture multiple times, most notably in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* Although these stereotypes and

---

[9] James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 11-12.

[10] Gregory, *American Exodus*, 11-12.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Gregory, James N. "Dust Bowl Legacies: The Okie Impact on California, 1939-1989." *California History*, 68, no. 3 (1989): 76.

dramatizations are not always accurate, the Dust Bowl migration was distinct from other mass migrations in several key ways.

First of all, the Dust Bowl migration was different because it was completely domestic; it was a movement of Americans moving to a different region of America. It was also somewhat homogenous. For example, 95% of the Dust Bowl migrants were white.[14] The Dust Bowl migration was also different from most domestic migrations in that only 53% of the migrants were male.[15] Ordinarily, migrations are much more heavily male than female, because they often consist of single men, or husbands and fathers who move temporarily to find work. However, the economic and environmental catastrophes that ignited the Dust Bowl migration left families with nowhere to live and nowhere to turn, so almost all the migrants moved as families rather than as individuals.[16] For this same reason, the population was also skewed toward the younger end of the spectrum, with 60% of the adult migrants being under the age of 35.[17]

That being said, the term "Dust Bowl migration" is in some ways a misnomer, and many of the stereotypes associated with it are untrue. Dust Bowl scholar James N. Gregory points out that there really was no Dust Bowl mass migration, since technically speaking, dust storms only hit a small strip of the wheat belt that was sparsely populated anyway: specifically, the Dust Bowl region is only a small area of land touching parts of Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado.[18] In reality, those who historians typically term "Dust Bowl migrants" were largely from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri and Texas, which is why these migrants received the derogatory nickname "Okies," regardless of which state they were from. These states were greatly affected by droughts and suffered

---

[14] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 17.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Gregory, *American Exodus*, 17.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid, 11.

economically, but were not generally a part of the dust storm phenomenon.[19] Many scholars, including Gregory, attribute the misnomer to journalists who heard about the dust storms, saw the migration, and conflated the two issues.[20]

It is also important to note that this migration was not a trend limited to the Great Depression. Census records show that about 250,000 people from this region migrated to California in the 1920s, as compared to the 350,000-400,000 who came during the Great Depression. This number was drastically eclipsed by the 600,000-700,000 who came during World War II to work in the defense industry.[21] If anything, the Dust Bowl migration was a continuation of a pattern rather than a sudden upheaval.

The stereotype of all migrants as poor farmers from Oklahoma (like the Judd family in *The Grapes of Wrath*) was also largely untrue. Only 43% of migrants were involved in agricultural labor immediately prior to their migration, and one in six was some sort of proprietor or white-collar worker.[22] Although many who moved were desperate farmers cast into poverty by an unfortunate combination of circumstances, there were plenty of people from other professions who also suffered from the economy's collapse and saw in California an opportunity for a better life.

This desire for a better life led them to California. Ever since the Gold Rush of 1849, California had enjoyed a reputation as the place where people went to make their fortunes. The media of the times influenced this reputation as well. Times may have been tough during the Great Depression, but for the most part, anyone who could afford it continued to go to the movies, and these movies often painted California

---

[19] Gregory, *American Exodus*, 11.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Gregory, *American Exodus*, 15.

as a lush paradise, promoting the concept of the "California Dream."[23] One song popular among Dust Bowl migrants referred to the San Joaquin Valley as a "poor man's heaven."[24]

Although not all migrants found their paradise in California, this reputation had some truth from an economic standpoint. During the mid-1930s, California was actually experiencing something that was unprecedented for the Great Depression—a shortage of labor. A portion California's agricultural labor population had recently been repatriated to Mexico due to more strict enforcement of immigration laws, so there was a need for agricultural workers growing one of the crops the Okies knew best: cotton.[25] Many migrants doubtless shared the sentiment of Tom Palmer, who relocated to California in 1936, when he said "I knew if there was cotton to pick, I wouldn't starve to death."[26] This familiar crop is what first led many migrants to the San Joaquin Valley, the region of California most associated with the Dust Bowl migration.

Even for those who were not looking for agricultural work, California held certain incentives. California had a per capita income that was about 40% above the national average. Even though unemployment was high (29% in 1933), it recovered quickly once New Deal programs took effect, and living conditions there were generally better than in the rest of the country.[27] The relief system was also better—for example, 1933 and after, the California State Relief Administration gave checks of about $40 a month to a family of four (if they were eligible and unemployed) which was at least double what was available in most other areas.[28] These higher relief payments gave families the reassurance that even if it took them a while to find work, they would be taken care of, which helped to mitigate some of the risks of moving across the country.

---

[23] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 20.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, 25.
[27] Gregory, *American Exodus*, 21.
[28] Ibid, 25.

This influx of families looking for seasonal agricultural work created a problem in California as the state government struggled with how to deal with these large numbers of impoverished and somewhat nomadic people. In 1935, Paul Taylor, who was Field Director for the California Division of Rural Rehabilitation, and his wife Dorothea Lange, who was a photographer, surveyed, documented, and photographed living conditions at the roadside camps where migrants lived when they could find nowhere else to go.[29] Lange's photographs quickly became some of the most iconic images from the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression.[30] This survey also inspired Taylor to ask the State Emergency Relief Administration for $140,000 to build 40 migrant labor camps in California.[31] The state approved his request, and in September of 1935, construction began on the first two camps, one in Arvin and one in Marysville.[32]

The construction of these camps presented a unique challenge, because the goal was to provide cheap but livable housing to a work force with a high turnover rate, since agricultural workers tended to follow whatever crop was in season next. To solve this problem, "FSA designers devised an overarching formal typology: a permanent institutional core surrounded by impermanent dwellings."[33] For example, the Arvin camp opened in December of 1935, and was composed of 96 tent spaces, a building equipped with laundry sinks, a building that doubled as an office and community center, a small building that

---

[29] Greg Hise, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 5 (1995): 245.

[30] Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion in the Thirties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

[31] Hise, 245.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Hise, 245.

functioned as a first aid center and nursery, and a house for the federally employed camp manager.[34]

Life at these camps was far from luxurious, but it did come with many benefits. The government provided clean water and wood for heating and cooking, as well as free medical care that ran the spectrum from basic first aid, to classes in preventative care, to well-baby and well-child clinics.[35] There was also a community aspect to these camps that was very attractive to the wandering Okies who had left their homes behind. The camp managers often organized community events such as "sings," baseball games, and dances; additionally, there were seasonal activities, such as Christmas parties for the children.[36]

Besides just providing a place to live and some semblance of comfort while they lived there, part of the design of the migrant labor camps was to help the migrants get back on their feet economically. Workers were allowed to develop small business and advertise in camp newspapers. If they were there for a while, they were allowed to grow vegetables on small garden plots.[37] Camp managers also did their best to mediate between the migrant laborers as California's lowest social class and the landowners as its highest social class. They had administrative workers help the laborers secure jobs with local growers, and even occasionally settled disputes with their employers, such as arguments over unfair weight and measure systems.[38] It was a system designed to help migrants make gradual economic improvements until they would not need to live at the camps, and it worked.[39] The Okies were soon

---

[34] Brian Q. Cannon, "Keep on A-Goin': Life and Social Interaction in a New Deal Farm Labor Camp," *Agricultural History* 70, no. 1 (1996): 6.

[35] Ibid, 6-9.

[36] Ibid, 11.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Cannon, 11-12.

[39] Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies," 78.

integrated into society in the San Joaquin Valley, while still maintaining a distinct subculture of their own.

This subculture has manifested itself in various ways over the years. One of the more subtle distinctions is restaurants and food preferences; for example, restaurants in the San Joaquin Valley tend to serve more southern dishes, such as chicken fried steak. Dr. Pepper is also more popular in this area than either Coke or Pepsi, which is another trademark of the western South.[40]

There is also a unique political climate in the San Joaquin Valley. One scholar, Ronald D. Cohen, has described it by saying "Southern California had deep political fissures between a growing conservative movement and the left- wing alliance of labor unions, Communist and Socialist Party members, and others on the liberal-left."[41] The Conservative element has expressed itself through "Plain-Folk Americanism," a political philosophy that is stereotypical of Okie thought. This viewpoint rests on the principle that the ordinary working class of people is the heart and backbone of society. It emphasizes an individualistic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality. Plain-Folk Americanism also contains an element of ethnocentrism that can either manifest itself positively as patriotism or negatively as racism.[42]

However, although the San Joaquin Valley does tend to vote more conservatively than California as a whole, there is a side of the Okie influence that has manifested itself in more left-leaning ways. Part of this dates back to the Farm Security Administration camps themselves, which were actually partially designed to facilitate community cooperation, organization, and negotiation. The FSA organizers believed that they were trying to care for the "disadvantaged and dispossessed labor force" who were the "casualties of unregulated corporatism and unrestrained capitalism."[43]

---

[40] Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies," 79.
[41] Cohen, 92.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Hise, 243.

The element of Okie culture that caught on the fastest in popular culture, however, was not their voting patterns, but their music. Gregory writes that country music serves as "the essential language of the Okie subculture," inspiring both loyalty in transplanted southwesterners and spreading southwestern values to other Californian groups.[44] Country music did not catch on immediately, though. In fact, through the 1930s, country music was looked down upon in California—until Hollywood became fascinated with cowboys later in the decade. Soon, there were plenty of southwestern-born film stars playing cowboys in Hollywood, including Bob Wills, Tex Ritter, Jimmy Wakely, Eddie Dean, Spade Cooley, and most famously, Gene Autry.[45]

Besides the few of them who actually made careers in the country music industry, country music was important to Okies because it gave them a point of pride that was recognized by popular culture. Migrants from the plains states were often seen as poor, dirty wanderers who lacked the commitment to see their work through. This was largely an unfair reputation thrust upon them because of the nature of seasonal agricultural labor, but the fact that their reputation was undeserved did not do anything to mend the massive rift that split California society between the land workers and the landowners. Gregory writes that "what Frank Sinatra was to Italians, and Paul Robeson was for blacks, Gene Autry and Bob Wills were to Okies: standard bearers for a group looking for symbols of success and pride."[46] Country music singers embodied the California dream for migrant laborers.

The most profound and long-lasting change that these migrants brought to California, however, was not politics or food or music: it was religion. The San Joaquin Valley is sometimes called "The California Bible Belt" due to its high population of evangelical Protestants. Even

---

[44] Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies," 80.
[45] Ibid., 81.
[46] Ibid., 82.

other denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, American (formerly Northern) Baptist, and Lutheran have all picked up more fundamentalist viewpoints and revivalistic tendencies within the San Joaquin Valley than is typical for those denominations in other parts of the country.[47] This is certainly partly to do with the heavy religious emphasis in the part of the country that the migrants came from, but it also has its roots in the very lack of acceptance that the Okies originally encountered. Gregory notes that "A migrating group does not just come into an already settled society and then recreate its old way of life. The host society leaves only certain limited venues for independent community life."[48] For the Okies, one of the only venues they were afforded was the church.

Since the migrants were moving into a community that already had an established religious climate, their religious lives were in some ways a reaction to what they encountered in California. One common reaction was to switch denominations. Although many of the Okies had been Southern Baptist or Southern Methodist back home, these denominations did not officially exist in California during the Great Depression. This forced the migrants to switch denominations; interestingly, they tended to gravitate toward some and not others. Much of this was due to the sharp class denominationalism that existed in California at the time. Sociologist Walter Goldschmidt describes this phenomenon in his article "Class Denominationalism in Rural California Churches," which analyzed how religion corresponded to social class in an unnamed town in rural California. The community that Goldschmidt analyzed was composed of eight churches that served the white Protestant population. He further divided these into four "nuclear" churches that served the established, insider group, and four "outsider" churches that catered primarily to migrants.[49]

---

[47] Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies," 80.

[48] Ibid, 79.

[49] Walter R. Goldschmidt, "Class Denominationalism in Rural California Churches," *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (1944): 349.

By looking at which occupational groups attended each denomination, Goldschmidt was able to identify which churches tended to attract the migrant population: the Church of Christ, and three “holiness” groups, which were the Assembly of God, the Nazarene church, and the Pentecostal church.[50] This conclusion was understood and confirmed by those in both classes. One member of the socially elite Congregational church stated that “[Farm laborers] don't come here because they feel uncomfortable. They are more at home in the Church of Christ because it is more like their homes. They can live in a tent and feel comfortable there."[51] This sentiment was shared by those in the outsider community, including one woman who stated of the nuclear group that “[t]hey are good members, but we are poor people and everybody that goes there is up-to-date.”[52] In short, the migrants were poor and often felt out of place attending denominations which, in California, were attended mainly by middle-class or wealthy congregants.

For these reasons, Goldschmidt directly connects this class denominationalism with the economy of California, which was sharply divided between those who owned the land and those who worked the land. He explains the denominational changes by saying that “in a society which makes overt expression of the hierarchy of its members in terms of traditional and invidious social values, the individual seeks the companionship of those who reinforce his own position.”[53] In other words, people are more comfortable worshipping with those who belong to their own social class, even if they must switch denominations to do so.

For some migrants who came to California, the answer to the denominational problem wasn’t to switch churches, but to abandon

[50] Goldschmidt, 350.
[51] Ibid., 354.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

church attendance entirely. Part of this was due to the lifestyle that was necessary for seasonal agricultural labor. Many Okies were constantly moving from place to place, following whatever crop was in season, so that steady church attendance was impossible. This was also partially due to poverty. Many families were so destitute that they could not afford to take the time away from work to attend a worship service.[54] For all of these reasons, California earned a reputation as a place where it was difficult to keep the faith. Of the population that Goldschmidt surveyed, roughly one-quarter of the migrants stopped attending church completely after they arrived in California.[55] One popular joke of the time featured a cowboy on his way west kneeling at the state border and solemnly praying, "Goodbye, Lord, I'm goin' to California."[56]

Although there was quite a bit of denomination-jumping and even abandoning church attendance entirely, it remained that the Okies were a very religious people who were determined to carry that heritage into their new home. New churches sprung up all over California in the decades following the Dust Bowl migration. The spread of these churches demonstrates the Okie reaction to the culture of California. This can be most clearly seen in three of the denominations most popular with southwesterners: The Southern Baptist Church, Churches of Christ, and the Pentecostal Church.

The Southern Baptists, much like the Okies in general, spread quickly through California bringing a strong sense of southern identity with them; and like the Okies, they came from humble beginnings. The Southern Baptist church was nonexistent in California for the first few decades of the twentieth century. This was due to an agreement they made with the Northern Baptists on September 12, 1894, called the Fortress Monroe agreement because it was signed in Fortress Monroe,

---

[54] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 194.
[55] Goldschmidt, 354.
[56] Gregory*, American Exodus,* 194.

Virginia.[57] The understanding from this agreement was that California was Northern Baptist territory; instead of Southern Baptist churches, there were independent Baptist churches that were not affiliated with either movement or part of a larger convention.[58] Specifically, the agreement states that the Northern and Southern Baptists agreed that for the purpose of maintaining "fraternal feeling and of the best interests of the Redeemer's Kingdom, it is inexpedient for two different organizations of Baptists to solicit contributions or establish missions in the same locality."[59] At the time, this was not much of an issue, because there were not many people who attended Southern Baptist churches in California anyway.

Because of this agreement, there were no Southern Baptist churches in California until the 1930s. In 1936, the Orthodox Missionary Baptist Church of Shafter was founded in Shafter, California, by the Mouser family, a staunchly Southern Baptist family originally from Oklahoma. In 1938, the Shafter church became even more closely affiliated with the Southern Baptist movement when they hired Sam Wilcoxson, a Southern Baptist preacher from Paragould, Arkansas. However, the Shafter church was not officially a part of the Southern Baptist movement until April 13, 1939, when the San Joaquin Valley Missionary Baptist Association was formed.[60] The Constitution of the San Joaquin Valley Missionary Baptist Association was written by Wilcoxson and W.R. White, the preacher at the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, and was based off the Baptist Constitution of Arkansas. The Southern Baptist Church in California was truly a transplant of churches that the migrants knew from back home.

---

[57] "First Appeals for Southern Baptist Aid to Western States." *The California Southern Baptist*, May 1943.

[58] Elmer L. Gray, *Heirs of Promise: A Chronicle of California Southern Baptists*, 1940-1978 (Fresno: The California Baptist Press, 1978): 16.

[59] "First Appeals for Southern Baptist Aid to Western States."

[60] Ibid.

Although it took Baptists in California several decades to form an Association, once they did, their growth was aggressive. When the San Joaquin Valley Missionary Baptist Association was initially formed, only four churches joined: the churches in Shafter, Oildale, Lamont, and Taft. By the time the Association had their first meeting, however, there were eight churches in total. By the second meeting, there were fourteen churches and over a thousand members.[61] This rapid expansion was due to the vision and the organization of the Southern Baptists. Elmer Gray, a historian of the Southern Baptist Church, writes that "The association leaders knew what they wanted to see Southern Baptists become, and believed their dream was possible. They foresaw the rapid increase of the churches and the forming of additional associations."[62] This rapid increase came even faster than many anticipated. By November of 1941, the Southern Baptist General Convention of California had its first meeting, and by May of 1942, the Southern Baptist Convention had voted to recognize this convention, fully accepting the California Southern Baptists into the denomination.[63]

Although this denomination was spreading, it experienced quite a few hardships and setbacks. Rather than struggling, though, these only fueled its rapid expansion. This was partially due to the crusade-like quality that Southern Baptist work in California soon adopted. Gregory writes that "[Preachers] told of former Southern Baptists hungry for religion, and raised heroic images of the pioneering struggle ahead in a nearly pagan land dominated by secular values and apostate churches."[64] Southern Baptist preachers eager to capitalize on this ready harvest started migrating westward to California, seeking to regain their wandering flocks. In the end, this led to even more churches springing up all across California, in rural and urban areas alike.

---

[61] Gray, 19.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid, 23-27.
[64] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 207.

One of the main struggles faced by Southern Baptists in California was fierce competition with the Northern Baptists, who felt that the Fortress Monroe agreement had been violated by the Southern Baptist Convention's acceptance of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California. Southern Baptists published many articles in their newspaper, *The California Southern Baptist,* denying these accusations. For example, in the June 1943 edition of the paper, the editor took pains to refute Northern Baptist claims that Southern Baptist groups had "stolen" their churches, by saying "the California Southern Baptist Churches did not leave the Northern Baptist Convention. They were not members of the N.B.C. They did not withdraw. They were organized as independent churches, or Southern Baptist churches." [65]

At times, the Northern Baptists were openly hostile, accusing the Southern Baptists of going back on their word, and at times becoming outright violent, such as when the Northern Baptist Church in Calwa, California blocked the Southern Baptists' efforts at obtaining a building loan, and then set their meeting tent on fire in the middle of the night.[66] The Southern Baptists retaliated by taking doctrinal stances specifically aimed at separating themselves from the Northern Baptists; for instance, Southern Baptist groups in the San Joaquin Valley developed tighter baptism requirements, adopted an increased focus on evangelism, and chose to employ a more literal biblical curriculum for Sunday school classes.[67]

These measures may have started out as a way to differentiate Southern Baptists from Northern Baptists, but these churches soon took on this fundamentalist approach as an integral part of their identity, linking their Southern heritage with their doctrinal stance. An article from the November 1941 edition of *Southern Baptist Stamina,* an earlier

---

[65] "News Items," *The California Southern Baptist*, June 1943.
[66] Gregory*, American Exodus,* 208.
[67] Ibid, 209.

version of *The California Southern Baptist,* acknowledges this change when it says "the term 'Southern' used with the name 'Baptist' especially here in California, carries a far weightier meaning than simply that of geographical location. This word has come to take on a distinctly doctrinal coloring."[68]

Gregory explains this connection by saying that "to a greater extent than in any other definable sector of the Southwestern population in California, southern Baptists seem to maintain outlooks suggestive of an ethnic group."[69] Both the doctrinal message and the cultural affinity were instrumental in bringing in Okies and their children as the 1940s wore on. Southern Baptist churches were often very aware of this fact. They used it to their advantage, capitalizing on the nostalgia of migrants to their advantage with tactics such as potluck suppers featuring southwestern foods like chili and cornbread.[70]

Whether it was the cornbread or the focus on strict doctrine, the Southern Baptists were enormously successful in evangelizing California. Their numbers also grew due to the large numbers of Okies who continued to move West throughout the 1930s and 40s. By 1952, there were over 75,000 members of the Southern Baptist Church in California, a number than has only continued to grow in the intervening years.[71] However, not all of the denominations that were composed mainly of Okies had such great success. The Church of Christ, for instance, struggled to take hold.

The Churches of Christ in California struggled to grow due to a high amount of dependence on membership back east for support. However, where they did exist, they developed a tight-knit community and a feeling of family by maintaining these connections to their old homes. Like the migrants that made up these churches, this denomination

---

[68] "Southern Baptists," *Southern Baptist Stamina*, Nov. 20, 1941.
[69] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 214.
[70] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 213.
[71] Ibid.

was a small minority in a strange land, and each congregation depended heavily on the others to maintain its existence.

The first congregation in California that went by the name “Church of Christ” preceded the Dust Bowl by more than 80 years.[72] It grew steadily throughout the second half of the 19th Century, although it never experienced the rapid growth of the Southern Baptist denomination. This came to an abrupt halt at the turn of the century, however, when issues such as the formation of organized missionary societies and the adoption of instrumental music split the Church of Christ off from other restorationist groups such as the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ.[73] From that point on, the Church of Christ was more associated with the southeastern part of the country than its northern-affiliated counterparts.

This “digression,” as it is often called, was observed by a preacher named N.L. Clarke, who came to Fresno in 1911 and observed “plenty of churches and very little New Testament Christianity.”[74] From the beginning, the Church of Christ was highly dependent on migrants from the east to maintain any growth at all, due largely to the lack of a central organizing body such as the Baptists and Methodists had. Despite these challenges, preachers from back east retained a prevailing interest in establishing a presence in the San Joaquin Valley. In the early 1900s, several churches were interested in establishing a “Christian colony” in the valley, but their plans never came to fruition.[75] In 1907, there were plans to establish a California Literary and Bible College in Hanford, with J.N. Armstrong as the president, but again, plans fell through.[76] The

---

[72]James L. Lovell, *History of the Churches of Christ in California* (Los Angeles: Lovell, 1959): 3.

[73] Lovell, *History of the Churches of Christ in California,* 4-5.

[74] Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement 1800-1918* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1979): 122.

[75] Ibid, 124.

[76] Ibid, 125.

few members of the Church of Christ who lived in California were zealous, but did not have the financial means or the membership backing to support ambitious plans.

For this reason, much of their growth came from preachers at existing churches seeking out those who had been faithful members back east and had fallen away after moving to California. Church of Christ historian Earl Irvin West describes this dependency by saying that "to discover the stray members and rekindle a spark of interest was imperative in establishing congregations in the state."[77] This was a trend that would continue for decades and would pay off much more once the Dust Bowl migrants arrived in California, bringing their restorationist roots with them.

One way in which Church of Christ ministers sought to find these "stray members" was through denominational newspapers such as *The Gospel Advocate* and *Firm Foundation.* Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, these papers were full of articles from ministers who had gone west, imploring others to follow them and preach to the people of California. For example, in an article written for *The Gospel Advocate* in 1939, California gospel meeting minister J.D. Tant urged church leaders "to put twenty to one hundred Texas preachers to work in destitute fields in California and Arizona."[78] He appealed to his readers to follow the Biblical example, saying "When the church was scattered at Jerusalem, those brethren did not wait for a located job with money pledged before they went. But they went everywhere preaching the word. Why not give it a trial today?"[79] As far as the Church of Christ was concerned, California was truly a "destitute field," and they needed all the support from back east that they could get.

Besides being full of appeals for ministers to come west, these papers were also full of pleas from ministers asking churches in the east

---

[77] West, 125.
[78] J.D. Tant, "Going West," *The Gospel Advocate*, June 3, 1937.
[79] Ibid.

to send them the names and addresses of former church members who had relocated to California. In the January 10, 1939 edition of *Firm Foundation*, Daly City, California minister Lloyd E. Ellis sent in an advertisement stating that "A great number of the members who are here came from the states farther east. . . . If you know of any one who has moved this way in recent years send me a card and I shall endeavor to find them."[80] In March of 1943, a minister from Venice, California urged his readership that "we must not lose a member if it can possibly be prevented. You can help by sending the name and address of any members you know are coming to this section."[81] Influential Los Angeles minister James L. Lovell repeated this plea, simply begging "Send us names of the members who move west."[82]

This type of internal outreach was also focused on members of the military who were stationed in California, which was common especially during World War II. San Pedro preacher Elton Dilbeck advertised in *Firm Foundation,* offering "If you have a boy stationed at Ft. McArthur or Roosevelt Base, Terminal Island, and would like the help of the church in locating him in the work here, get in touch with me."[83] These newspapers, besides being a vital source of connection for those on the west coast, also served as a means for them to reconnect with former members of the Church of Christ.

However, a far more telling display of the connection between the churches in the east and the Church of Christ in California was the development and cooperation between Church of Christ colleges—particularly between George Pepperdine College in California and similar schools in the eastern part of the United States. Pepperdine was formed out of a Christian academy in Graton, California that often acted as a "feeder school" to colleges like Harding College in Arkansas. J.N.

---

[80] Lloyd E. Ellis, *Firm Foundation*, Jan. 10, 1939.
[81] William S. Irvine, *Firm Foundation*, March 2, 1943.
[82] James L. Lovell, *Firm Foundation*, Feb. 16, 1943.
[83] Elton D. Dilbeck, *Firm Foundation*, March 2, 1943.

Armstrong, who was president of Harding College at the time, believed that Pepperdine College would enable more students than ever before to receive a Christian education. In 1937, he wrote "the long stretch of miles between us made it impossible for most of its graduates to come to us. So [Pepperdine] will be their opportunity and will enable them to finish their education in a Christian college."[84]

The connection between these schools was also strengthened by the students and faculty that they shared. Especially in Pepperdine's early years, it was common for Harding and Lipscomb graduates or faculty to move to California and teach at Pepperdine. Armstrong acknowledges this, noting that Basell Baxter, a graduate of Lipscomb, was to be the first president of Pepperdine. Additionally, two Harding graduates, Wade Ruby and Lelia Schrader, were to teach at Pepperdine in the English and Art departments.[85] As Armstrong stated, "surely, therefore, nobody away from the new campus can have more interest in the success and future of the George Pepperdine College than we here at Harding College have."[86] Similar to the sense of community generated among Dust Bowl migrants, the Church of Christ as a whole saw itself as a family, and the burgeoning church in California took great care to retain the close-knit community from back home.

It is impossible to fully understand the Churches of Christ in California without discussing the importance of black preachers such as A.L. Cassius, G.P. Bowser, R.N. Hogan, and Marshall Keeble. At the beginning of the 20th Century, most major denominations were still racially segregated.[87] It is true that in California, there was a far greater

---

[84] J.N. Armstrong, "The George Pepperdine College," *The Gospel Advocate*, June 17, 1937.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Armstrong.

[87] Calvin. H. Bowers, *Realizing the California Dream: The Story of the Black Churches of Christ in Los Angeles* (Las Vegas: DocMo Enterprises, 2002): 34.

degree of racial tolerance than there had been in the Dust Bowl states; there was a cordial relationship between black and white churches, but generally speaking, this polite regard did not cross over into integrated congregations and interracial fellowship.[88] Therefore, starting in the 1920s, when white southwesterners started to come into the state, black migrants also came from these states to California and began to start their own churches.[89]

Although the Churches of Christ in general were more prone to evangelize from within the church, the major exceptions to this were black evangelists such as Marshall Keeble, G.P. Bowser, and R.N. Hogan, who were tremendously successful in evangelizing to both black and white people in California. Keeble arrived in California in 1934, during the height of the Great Depression, and stayed from November to February, holding gospel meetings in Santa Anna, San Bernadino, Bakersfield, Los Angeles, Riverside, and Fresno.[90] His style of preaching and knowledge of the Bible resonated greatly with the people of California—he is said to have baptized as many as fifty people per year on his annual gospel meeting trips to California.[91]

R.N. Hogan was another preacher with impressive evangelistic abilities. J.E. Choate, a Church of Christ historian, reports that “over a six year period in the 1930s, R.N. Hogan started fifty new congregations and baptized more than fifteen hundred people.”[92] He was also incredibly influential as the editor of the *Christian Echo*, a newspaper that served the African American Church of Christ population.[93] James L. Lovell, a historian of California Churches of Christ, describes Hogan as “the

---

[88] Bowers, 288.
[89] Ibid, 40.
[90] J.E. Choate, *Roll Jordan Roll: A Biography of Marshall Keeble* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1968): 74.
[91] Bowers, 60.
[92] Choate, 90.
[93] Bowers, 55.

greatest preacher in the church. . . . He is educated, has a brilliant mind, and preaches like one sent from God, and yet is as humble as Brother Keeble."[94] In an era when Churches of Christ were struggling to gain ground in the west, black evangelists such as Keeble and Hogan were instrumental in converting both black and white people to the church.

Despite the influence of these African American evangelists, the Church of Christ carried one negative aspect of their Southern roots westward with them: racial segregation. They generally acted out of what has been called "aversive racism;" that is, white churches and black churches were not antagonistic toward one another (at times, they even cooperated) but instead were avoidant of one another.[95] There was a cooperative relationship between black and white churches that flowed both ways—George Pepperdine made a personal loan of $10,000 to help R.N. Hogan start the McKinley Avenue church, Lovell started a paper called *Hogan's Helpers* to aid him in his evangelistic work, and Cassius, Keeble, and Hogan all preached to and baptized many white people.[96] However, almost all congregations in California remained segregated, and the white population of the Church of Christ rarely made efforts to combat racism in society at large.[97] In this way, the Church of Christ retained the segregation of the American South, reflecting the way that the Okies in California sought to maintain the social pillars of their culture.

Unlike the Church of Christ, the Pentecostal Church actually began in California, but had wide appeal to southwesterners all around the country and soon became associated with that region. In the same way that many Okies learned to blend in to the culture of California, the Pentecostal Church thrived in California by assimilating to its surrounding circumstances and evangelizing to the margins of society.

---

[94] Choate, 89.
[95] Bowers, 264.
[96] Ibid, 289.
[97] Bowers, 280.

It is difficult to pinpoint a clear beginning of the Pentecostal movement, partly because it grew out of other "holiness" movements, including some with similar names and practices. At the turn of the century in California, there were already at least two holiness churches (the "Pentecostal" church of Joseph Smale and Phineas Bresee's Church of the Nazarene). However, the Pentecostal church as it is doctrinally defined today began in Los Angeles in 1906 at an event commonly referred to as the Azusa Street Revival.[98]

This revival started when W.J. Seymour, an African American preacher, came to Los Angeles in April of 1906 to be the pastor of a new "Negro holiness movement."[99] Seymour had received his training as a minister under Charles Parham, an apostolic teacher who strongly believed that speaking in tongues was the only mark of having received the Holy Spirit.[100] This influenced Seymour's own belief that a third experience of baptism by the Holy Spirit was what defined a true Christian.[101] It also, no doubt, influenced the events that followed a revival begun by Seymour on April 9, 1906, when he and seven of his followers fell to the floor and began to speak in tongues. Soon, this sudden outbreak of religious ecstasy had generated so much interest that Seymour moved the revival to the abandoned Methodist church building on Azusa Street, which gave the revival its name.[102]

The Azusa Street Revival may have started with only eight people, but it quickly exploded into the most influential single event of the Pentecostal movement. Thousands of people from all over the country poured into Los Angeles to see the religious ecstasy reported in

---

[98] Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971): 95-108.

[99] Ibid, 104-105.

[100] Ibid, 100-103.

[101] Ibid, 103-104.

[102] Synan, 106.

the newspapers. Vinson Synan, a historian of the Pentecostal movement, describes way that "men and women would shout, weep, dance, fall into trances, speak and sing in tongues, and interpret the messages into English. . . . there was an abundance of religious enthusiasm."[103] This religious enthusiasm quickly spread all over the country, as the travelers who had come to Los Angeles to participate returned home. The Azusa Street Revival was the birth of the Pentecostal movement. Synan goes so far as to say that "practically all of the Pentecostal groups in existence can trace their lineage to the Azusa Mission."[104]

One such group was started by G.B. Cashwell, a former Methodist preacher from North Carolina who switched to the holiness movement in 1903. Three years later, he travelled to Azusa Street to see the revival for himself and to receive "the baptism of the Holy Ghost."[105] What he experienced in California influenced Cashwell to join the Pentecostal movement and even lead his own revival in an abandoned tobacco warehouse when he returned home to North Carolina. Thousands came from across the South to see what it was all about.[106] From that point on, Cashwell became known as the "Apostle of the Pentecost to the South," leading revivals all over the South between 1906 and 1909.[107] Due largely to Cashwell's efforts, Pentecostalism soon was engrained in the religious fabric of the southern United States.

The spread of Pentecostalism to the American South meant that some of the Dust Bowl migrants coming to California in the 1930s and 1940s already had a Pentecostal background. The movement would gain even more followers in the years following the migration. According to Goldschmidt's study, the Pentecostal denomination in rural California belonged to the poorest demographic, with 82% of its membership

---

[103] Synan, 108.
[104] Ibid, 114.
[105] Ibid, 122-123.
[106] Ibid, 124.
[107] Ibid, 122-126.

finding their employment as unskilled laborers.[108] Many of those in this group were Okies who performed seasonal farm labor for their living. The Pentecostal church was so attractive to the migrants because, like them, it was new and on the fringes of California society.

Middle-class society in the San Joaquin valley tended to look down on evangelical churches and see their revivalistic worship, fundamentalist beliefs, and "excessive religion" as backward.[109] To the migrants, however, the Pentecostal church welcomed them with open arms when few other denominations were willing to do the same. The emotionally-intense worship services served as one of the few outlets they had in a life of poverty and hardship.[110] Pentecostalism also had a heavy focus on specific blessings, such as speaking in tongues or faith healings, as markers of faith. This allowed the Okies to be a part of the elite "society of the saved" within the church, whereas they were rejected in California society as a whole.[111]

Another similarity that the Okies and the Pentecostals shared was their resilience. Many religious scholars call the decade from 1925-1935 a "religious depression" which left most major Protestant denominations "unable to deal with the needs of the time in a fresh and creative way."[112] The Pentecostal movement, however, experienced some of its greatest growth during this time. Since it drew much of its membership from the poorest segments of society, the Pentecostal church was accustomed to poverty in a way that many of the more mainstream denominations, such as the Congregational Church or the Methodist Church, were not.[113]

---

[108] Goldschmidt, 353.
[109] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 210.
[110] Ibid, 209.
[111] Goldschmidt, 354.
[112] Heather D. Curtis, "'God is not Affected by the Depression": Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s," *Church History* 80, no. 3 (2011): 579.
[113] Curtis, 584-585.

Of course, this was not a universal rule for all Pentecostal churches, but many Pentecostals chose to see the Great Depression as an opportunity for greater trust in God. For instance, an editorial in the paper *Pentecostal Evangel* explained the Depression by saying "it is the kindness of the Lord to take away the riches of some, because He knows they are inclined to trust in them."[114] Because of this attitude and their willingness to make due when others were cutting back, giving actually increased for many Pentecostal churches and subgroups during this time.[115] The Pentecostal movement had a lot going against it in the 1930s, but one of its greatest strengths was the way it adapted to hardship. In that way, it was very similar to the Dust Bowl migrants themselves.

More than the Southern Baptists or the Churches of Christ, the Pentecostal Church adapted to their new surroundings in California; one of the most notable examples of this adaptation was their view towards race and gender. Gregory notes that the Pentecostal and Holiness congregations were “among the only groups to welcome female preachers . . . a few of the sects also allowed racially mixed congregations.”[116] This relative racial acceptance had its roots at the very beginning of the Pentecostal movement, with the revival on Azusa Street—Seymour, the leader of the revival, was an African American man preaching to an integrated group of people, which was unusual in most church settings for the time.[117] Synan notes that “people of every race and nationality in the Los Angeles area were mingling in the crowds that pressed into the mission from the street. There was no racial prejudice in the services.”[118] Although these integrated services certainly weren’t universal, they were evidence of a powerful truth: religiously as well as culturally, migrants were leaving behind some of the ways of

---

[114] “Editorial,” *The Pentecostal Evangel,* Jan. 1934.
[115] Curtis, 585-586.
[116] Gregory, *American Exodus,* 200.
[117] Synan, 104.
[118] Ibid, 109.

their former homes and taking on some of the values of California society.

Eventually, it rained in the western South again, the Great Depression ended, and the county made incredible economic progress, largely due to increases in production caused by World War II. Gradually, the Dust Bowl migrants moved out of government camps and roadside shacks and attained middle-class standing in California.[119] Over time, the term "Okie" even lost its derogatory connotation and became a point of pride. Over time, the Dust Bowl migrants have overcome poverty and their diminished social standing; with these changes, the socioeconomic lines that divided denominations have also faded into the background. Just as the prominence of certain churches reflected the spread of Okie culture, their distinguishing lines have blurred as the southwesterners became an accepted element in California society. Once living as outcasts in a strange new land, the Okies are now well established, to the point that their culture is the culture of the San Joaquin Valley.

---

[119] Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies," 78.