Historical Context

- Troubles for Farmers
- The Great Depression
- The Dust Bowl
- Migrant Camps
- Labor Unions
Troubles for Farmers

• Troubles for American farmers had begun years before the story of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

• Crop prices were high and favored American farmers when supplies of food were short and European markets were disabled.

• American farmers borrowed heavily from banks to invest in land and equipment.
• After the war, however, prices for wheat, corn, and other crops plummeted as European farmers returned to their businesses, and American farmers were unable to repay their loans.

• Thus, in the 1920s, while much of the country was enjoying economic good times, farmers in the United States were in trouble.
• Banks began to foreclose on loans, often evicting families from their homes.
• Families who rented acreage from landowners who had defaulted on loans would, like the Joads, be evicted from their homes.
• The situation, of course, became much worse after the stock market crash of 1929.
The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl

• In October, 1929, stock prices dropped precipitously, causing businesses and banks to fail internationally and wiping out the savings of many families.

• Over the next few years, unemployment rates soared up to twenty-five percent.

• Forty percent of the working population in America at the time were farmers.
• When low crop prices made it difficult or impossible for consumers to buy items such as radios and refrigerators, it had a significant impact on the economy.

• Goods began to pile up in warehouses with no customers to buy them, leading to the sudden devaluation of company stocks.
• The resulting pressure on banks to collect on loans caused them to evict many farmers.
• However, this wasn’t the only problem that plagued farm families.
• Six years of severe droughts hit the Midwest during the 1930s, causing crops to fail.
• This, compounded by poor farming practices such as overgrazing and failure to rotate crops, caused the land to wither and dry up.
Great dust storms resulted that buried entire communities in sand.

More than five million square miles of land from Texas to North Dakota and Arkansas to New Mexico were affected.

The Midwest came to be called the Dust Bowl.

Although no one escaped the economic pain this caused, small farm families similar to the Joads were the hardest hit.
• Of these states, Oklahoma was especially hard-pressed.
• Dispossessed farming families migrated from their state to California by the thousands.
• These people were called “Okies,” although many of the migrant workers were from states other than Oklahoma.
Migrant Camps and Labor Unions

• Upon taking office in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a comprehensive agenda of government programs to combat the Depression.
• Collectively called the New Deal, these programs included new federal agencies designed to create employment opportunities and to improve the lot of workers and the unemployed.
• Among the many such agencies, the one that most directly touched the Okies’ lives was the Farm Security Administration (FSA).
• Operating under the authority of the Department of Agriculture, in 1936 the FSA began building camps in California in which the homeless migrants could live.

• Ten such camps were finished by the following year.

• Steinbeck visited several in his research for *The Grapes of Wrath*.
• He had the Joads stay at one—the Arvin Sanitary Camp, also called the Weedpatch Camp, in Kern County.

• The intention was that the orchard owners would follow this example and build larger, better shelters for their migrant workers.

• This never came about, however, and many families ended up staying at the uncomfortable federal camps for years.
• In an attempt to defend their right to earn living wages, migrant workers tried to organize labor unions.

• Naturally, this was strongly discouraged by the growers, who had the support of the police, who often used brute force.

• In Kern County in 1938, for example, a mob led by a local sheriff burned down an Okie camp that had become a center for union activity.