

Surveys of rural white children of migratory agricultural workers living in California, conducted during 1936 and 1937, revealed that over 27 percent had nutritional problems:

10½ percent of school age children “were getting 1½ to 2 pints of milk daily, the amount considered optimum for growth and development, while 15.8 percent were getting no milk. . . . [such nutritional deficits cause the] mental dulling which occurs with constant inadequacy of food and frequent lack of it” (United States 2433).

Along with hunger and poor health, skipping school adversely affected academic performance among migrant children. They were forced to miss school so that they could follow their parents while they bounced from one job or crop to the next, or they spent school days working alongside their parents in fields. Bobby Glen Russell recalls attending three Kern County schools in one year (Russell 10). Frank Manies remembers that he attended 22 schools in Oklahoma and California (Manies 2) ...

To the Okie newcomer, school was an alien place where they were treated as outsiders. Being perceived as an outsider challenged their sense of self, causing them to become very self-conscious of their family and cultural heritage. Billie Pate, originally from Texas, described what many migrant children must have felt about being suddenly dropped into a new geographical and cultural landscape:

“It's kind of interesting when you only know one way of life and for the first ten years you grow up in an environment and that's the only thing you know and that's the only thing you've ever experienced. Then, that's a good way of life because you don't know anything differently. And then, one day at the age of ten [you move to California and] you're called trash” (Pate 13).

On school grounds, these newcomers were ridiculed for what they ate, what they wore, and how they spoke. Lunch was often humiliating because they either had no lunch money, or they brought “foreign” food that consisted of fried potatoes, biscuits, and beans instead of the typical sandwich. Migrant Joyce Seabolt remarked: “[P]erhaps even the fact that a child wouldn't have enough money for lunch and therefore didn't participate in luncheon activities make him a target of ridicule” (Seabolt 34). And William Rintoul, as a young child growing up in Taft, recalls, “. . . a lot of kids I know, came to school without any money to buy a candy bar or anything else. I know one family . . . who existed pretty much on oatmeal mush. It was all they could afford. Times were genuinely hard” (Rintoul 5).

Citation for Referenced Government Report: United States. Cong. House of Representatives. Committee to Investigate Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. Interstate Migration. Hearing. 24-25 Sept. 1940. 76 Cong. 3rd session, Part 6. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941.

-Christy Gavin, “A School of Their Own: Educating Okie Children in 1930s California” (2013) excerpt