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 suddenly, 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.