

## Birth of the Dust Bowl: Who was to blame?



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In 1909, Congress passed the **Enlarged Homestead Act** to induce people to settle in the western Great Plains. Eastern settlers followed the old Santa Fe Trail westward, jumping off to *prove-up* and own 320 acres. In

flat areas like No Man's Land in the Oklahoma Panhandle, **nesters** found expanses of grassy ground that were free of rocks. Farmers simply needed to file an application, improve the land, and file for a deed of title to establish a homestead.

Nester families carved small dugouts into the prairies—dark, dirt dwellings heated with cow chips—whose walls and floors spawned fresh crops of insects every spring. The people worked the land, turning over acre after acre of grass-filled topsoil, replacing it with grain. Technological advances made it possible to plant and harvest a single acre in three hours. Farmers' diligence was rewarded with dollars at harvest; wheat paid \$.80 per bushel in 1910.

By 1915, with the Turkish Navy blocking the Dardanelles and halting Russia's grain supply to Europe, the United States government guaranteed the price of wheat at \$2.00 per bushel. *Plant more wheat to win the war!* **Suitcase farmers**—people looking to make easy money—went west, plowed, planted, left, and returned at harvest.

In 1917, farmers harvested almost 45 million acres nationwide; by 1919, the acres increased to over 75 million. When the war ended, the farmers produced a bumper crop, but no one needed it. **A bushel of wheat** was worth less than \$.75, so unsold grain overflowed the silos, and rotted in huge piles. Suitcase farmers abandoned their fields, leaving them dry and bare. Nesters plowed and planted twice as much to make up for their monetary loss.

## Then the rain stopped and the wind started.

Without crops to hold the land in place, the rich topsoil took flight and blew across the land and out to sea. For nearly ten years, the people of the plains witnessed drought, destruction, death, depression, delirium, and **dust**.

What caused the environmental harm that we now dub the **Dust Bowl**? Consider legislation, farming practices, war, greed, and weather. Could it happen again? KG

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# The Grapes of Wrath

Music by Ricky Ian Gordon • Libretto by Michael Korie  
Based on the novel by John Steinbeck

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera



Minnesota Opera Production Photo for The Grapes of Wrath by Michael Daniel, 2007

## The Grapes of Wrath | Great American Novel by John Steinbeck Great American Opera by Gordon and Korie

In Oklahoma, farmers watched as their crops withered and died. The farmers watched the sky rain dirt; it was soil set free by the fierce winds. This was the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In desperation, some sharecroppers migrated to the fertile lands of California's Central Valley, and moved their families to a place that promised opportunity, jobs, and dignity.



Ricky Ian Gordon, composer Michael Korie, librettist

A fictional account of the poor Joad family, migrating from Oklahoma to California, forms the core of the powerful 1939 novel by John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature, the book has since served as a catalyst for other artists longing to add their voices to the chorus of true American artists, all yearning to explore themes of kinship, perseverance, prejudice, greed, and hope.

Steinbeck used a powerful literary model; he alternated descriptive and narrative chapters to balance the story. However, opera is a very different art form; it's not an easy task to change narration into sung conversation. In addition, librettist Michael Korie and composer Ricky Ian Gordon "wanted to be faithful to the full narrative." Their music and lyrics for *The Grapes of Wrath* not only include more of the novel's story than the film, but the team also crafted a masterful work of art that can withstand a side-by-side comparison to Steinbeck's great American novel. The Joad family's story is a great American story told through opera in a wholly American way. LG

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:  
He is trampling out the vintage where **the grapes of wrath** are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.  
from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"  
by Julia Ward Howe

# The Grapes of Wrath Synopsis

Setting: Oklahoma, Southwestern United States, and California in the mid-1930s.

**PROLOGUE** The sharecroppers recall the devastation of their native Oklahoma lands, brought about by drought and economic depression.

**ACT ONE:** Tom Joad is paroled from McAlester Prison after serving four years for killing a man in a fight. After hitching a ride, he runs into Jim Casy, an ex-preacher, and together they come upon the nearly deserted Joad farm. The Dust Bowl has ravaged the farm and the family is gone; Tom learns his family is at Uncle John's. The family is surprised to see Tom out of jail, and he agrees to relocate with them to California, where there are rumors of work, even if it means he must break his parole.

The next day, the family loads up a worn-out truck with their few remaining possessions and heads down the "Plenty Road", with Casy along for the ride. Though all remain optimistic, traveling along Route 66, Tom and the others experience their first disparaging remarks, as they are now labeled "Okies". As the Joads set up camp for the night, they meet other travelers who have handbills. One ragged man has already been to California and reports that there is no work left. Elsewhere, dangling their feet off a highway overpass, Connie and Rosasharn watch the passing traffic. Connie admires the Lincoln Zephyr, while Rosasharn dreams of a home for their baby. The next day the Joads soberly bury Grampa, who has died during the night. The family then continues its journey.

## Intermission

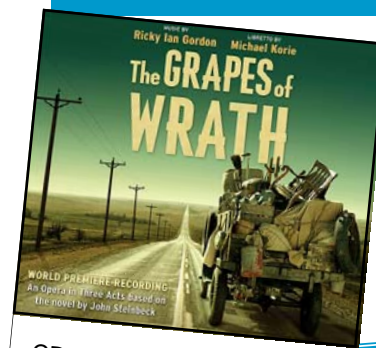
**ACT TWO:** At a diner, a waitress chats with truckers. Pa enters with Ruthie and Winfield; the waitress looks at them with contempt. They try to buy bread for Granma (who is now sick) as they prepare to cross the Mojave Desert, but they only have a dime. At the urging of her husband, the waitress gives the Joads a loaf at a discount.

As they cross the desert, the men drive the truck while Ma rests with Granma. The old woman has died, but only Ma knows it. The next morning, the awful truth is revealed and they bury Granma in a green place.

At the Endicott Farm, growers tell the Joads that there's no work—the crop has already been picked. The locals protest; their wages have been slashed due to the influx of Okie laborers. Nearby, plums are being burned. The farmers grew too many, and they destroy the excess to drive up the price, rather than give them to hungry 'croppers.

The Joads settle in a Hooverville, a squalid shantytown by the railroad tracks. The family is disgusted by their new surroundings. Al reproaches his slow-witted brother Noah for being more of a burden than a help. Al wants to break off on his own, but Ma takes charge, insisting the family stay together. Connie regrets leaving what little he had in Oklahoma and derides Rosasharn's hopeless dreams of home and family. He storms off, never to return.

The next day a contractor and a deputy show up with more handbills offering work. Casy asks to



CD for *The Grapes of Wrath*  
World Premiere Recording, © 2008

see the contractor's license, causing a stir. When the squatters refuse to go, the situation becomes agitated. The deputy tries to cuff Tom, but he escapes, and the ensuing bullet meant for him hits a nearby woman, killing her instantly. In the growing scuffle, the deputy is knocked unconscious and the contractor runs for safety. As the deputy regains consciousness, Casy takes the blame. Noah goes to the creek to fetch a bucket of water and instead submerges himself.

## Intermission

**ACT THREE:** Newly relocated at a government settlement camp, Ruthie and Winfield marvel at the first flushing toilet they have ever seen. Being in the camp makes the family feel human again. The women gather as they wash clothes, instructing Ma on the rules of the camp. Rosasharn is now very pregnant and despondent over Connie's departure. Ma tries to comfort her with sage advice.

Later, at the camp hoedown, the Joads joyfully take part in a square dance. Vigilantes try to cause a disturbance, but the crowd, aware of their plan to create a riot, makes the expulsion of the intruders part of the dance.

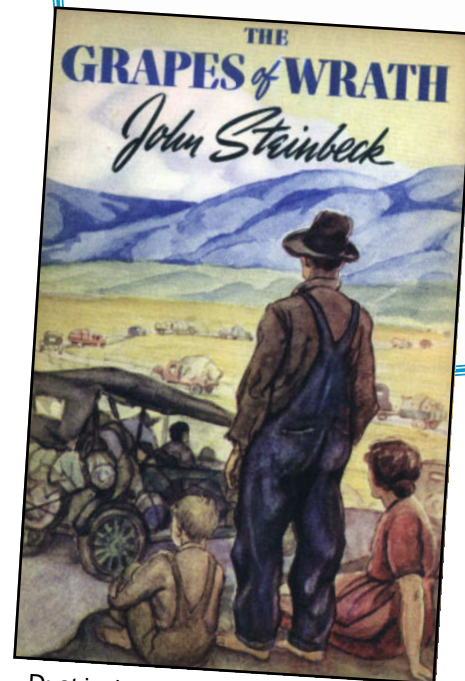
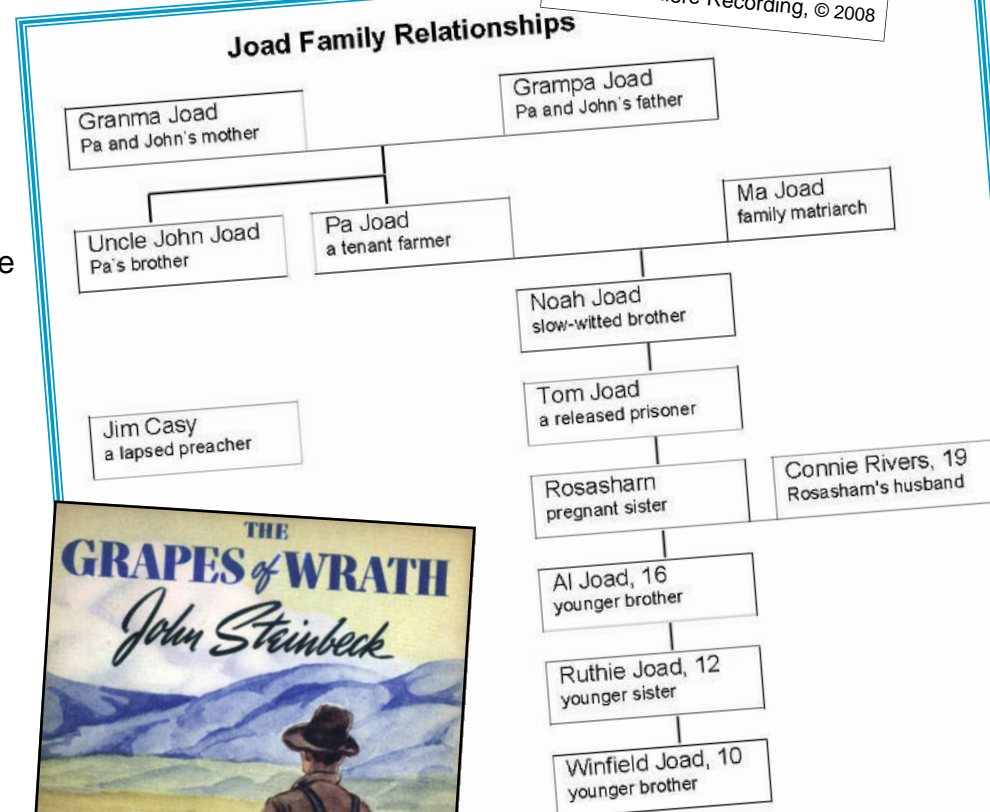
The local farm owners are clearly unhappy with the camp's growing autonomy. Pa shows everyone a new handbill with great enthusiasm, but the crowd responds dishearteningly. Nonetheless, they prepare to pack—as good as the camp may be, there is still no way to make money for food as long as they reside there.

At Hooper Ranch, a strike is in progress, but the Joads and others are quickly ushered past the line, unaware they are "scabs". As they pick the peaches, Tom questions what is happening beyond the fence and is quickly silenced. Though thrilled to finally have some money, Ma soon discovers how inflated the prices are at the local commissary. The family is barely better off than they were before.

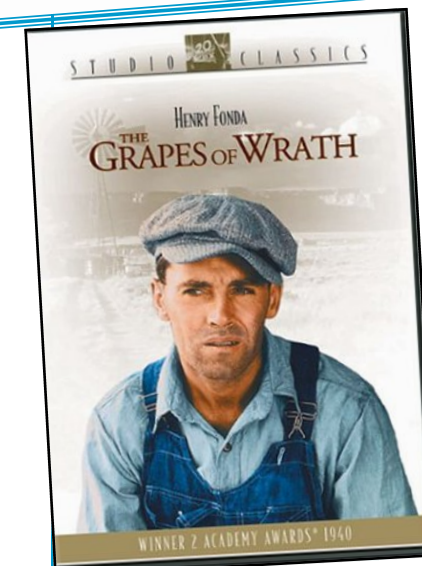
Later that night, Tom takes a closer look at what is going on beyond the fence. He discovers a group of men, one of whom is Casy, who leads the strike over poor wages. Vigilantes soon arrive and bludgeon Casy to death. Tom interferes and is slashed on the face; he bashes his assailant, killing him. Now a marked man, Tom goes into hiding and Ma smuggles him some food. He announces his plan to go off on his own, and they share a tender moment.

The remaining Joads find work picking cotton and find shelter in a box-car. Just as the rainy season begins, Rosasharn goes into labor and delivers a stillborn child. The raging river floods the Joads out of their home. Only Ma, Pa, Ruthie, Winfield, and a very weak Rosasharn remain, and they seek refuge inside a barn. They find a boy and a starving, nearly dead man. Ma knows what Rosasharn must do, and ushers everyone else outside. Rosasharn nourishes the man with her breast.

Adapted from Michael Korie's synopsis for *The Minnesota Opera*



Dust jacket for *The Grapes of Wrath*,  
1939 novel by John Steinbeck



DVD for *The Grapes of Wrath*,  
1940 film starring Henry Fonda