CHAPTER THREE

Tuesday

> And the rain fell steadily, and the water flowed over the highways, for the culverts could not carry the water. Then from the tents, from the crowded barns, groups of sodden men went out, their clothes slopping rags, their shoes muddy pulp. They splashed out through the water, to the towns, to the country stores, to the relief offices, to beg for food, to cringe and beg for food, to beg for relief, to try to steal, to lie. And under the begging, and under the cringing, a hopeless anger began to smolder.

JOHN STEINBECK looked like hell. He felt even worse. He had arrived back home from Hollywood on this day, August 22, 1939, "suffering arthritis and nervous exhaustion," according to one news dispatch. His wife, Carol, told reporters that he'd been overworked in L.A., where he had been conferring with producer Darryl Zanuck on the movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath.* But Steinbeck's weary state was the result of much more than one strenuous business trip. The writing of the "big book," as he called it, had left him completely spent—"I'm almost dead from lack of sleep . . . . My stomach went to pieces yesterday. May have been nerves," he noted in his journal, just before finishing the manuscript ten months earlier, in October 1938—and he hadn't really felt right since the novel's completion. He'd had his tonsils out in July, and his throat ached. An infection in Steinbeck's leg, which would continue to beleaguer him through the rest of the year, caused him to walk with a limp; broad-shouldered and normally proud of his physicality, the thirty-seven-year-old had to be helped down the stairs and into cars, as if he were an old man. "Jesus, how I hurt," Steinbeck informed a friend. "Can't smoke, can't drink." All the while, the requests for his time kept rolling in—a never-ending stream of invitations to lecture or take part in this or that civic organization. Fifty to seventy-five letters a day crowded his mailbox, "all wanting something," he said. The phone rang nonstop, forcing Steinbeck to unlist his number. "Why do they think a writer, just because he can write, will make a good after-dinner speaker or a club committee man—or even a public leader?" he said in a rare newspaper interview, granted earlier in the summer to the *Los Angeles Times*. "Just because Henry Ford made a good car, they wanted him to run for president. That's silly—unless he happened to be equipped for the other job as well.

"I'm no public speaker, and don't want to be," he continued. "I'm not even a finished writer yet. I haven't learned my craft. A writer, anyway, is just one step above a buffoon—an entertainer. If the public makes him think he is really somebody it destroys him. He pontificates, and that's the end of him. They're not going to lionize me . . . . That's one reason you're not going to get a photograph of me—nobody is going to exploit me. I don't want my face to be known. As soon as I get over this condition, I'll be out on the road again, sleeping in a ditch or somewhere, getting material for another yarn."

The *Los Angeles Times* story described Steinbeck as having adopted a siege mentality, sequestering himself near Los Gatos in his canyon home, "inaccessible to friend and enemy alike." Even inside this citadel, however, peace was elusive. He and Carol had drifted apart, and Steinbeck could sense that the end of their life together was coming nearer.

"The simple fact of the matter is that Carol doesn't like me," he wrote to Elizabeth Otis, his agent, the weekend before his return from L.A., and "she suppresses that feeling until such times as the pressure of her dislike (usually when she has been drinking) breaks free and comes out . . . . I want her to be, if not happy, at least a little contented and it seems that I personally am not able to make that true."

John and Carol had been together since the late '20s, and from the start he saw her as an alter ego of sorts. She is "lovely and clever and passionate," Steinbeck once wrote, while "I am pettish and small and sullen." As an author, Steinbeck depended on Carol to type his handwritten manuscripts, correct his bad spelling and slipshod punctuation, and make editorial suggestions that could be hugely significant. It was she, for example, who had thought up the title for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even more crucial was that Carol "pulled him up when he was down, revived him when he was out," as Steinbeck's biographer, Jackson Benson, has described it. "As he got older, Steinbeck tended to lose some of his ability to enjoy; occasionally, his sense of humor faded under the strain. Carol brought humor back to his consciousness; she wouldn't let him feel sorry for himself."

For a long time—before John and Carol began boozing it up too much; before she had an affair with Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of mythology; before he started having an affair with a long-legged band singer, eighteen years his junior, in L.A.; before all the hangers-on were intruding into their lives; before the fighting got too bad; before she had gotten pregnant and he insisted she have an abortion; before an abject loneliness had set in for both of them—they were happy. Broke, but happy. During the worst of the Depression, the young couple had found a certain romance in their struggle to get by, stealing fruit after going days without a meal, downing thirty-five-cent jug wine with their friends, and dreaming of success for John as a novelist. "John and Carol were good together when they were poor," his sister Elizabeth said. "It was only when the money started coming in, and when John became more famous, that things really went sour." His first financial breakthrough came in 1935 with *Tortilla Flat,* a national best seller. Then in 1937 he finished *Of Mice and Men,* a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection whose adaptation on Broadway, followed by a cross-country tour of the play, generated a steady flow of royalty income. Suddenly, there was enough money ($10,000 to be exact) to buy the forty-seven-acre Biddle Ranch in the mountains above Los Gatos, where he'd build a brand new house complete with a swimming pool. It was there that he'd correct the galleys for *The Grapes of Wrath,* his days as a destitute artist clearly over.

All of that, though, paled with what was happening now. "What an awful lot of money" *The Grapes of Wrath* was throwing off, Steinbeck remarked in April. "I don't think I ever saw so much in one place before." Other proletarian literature from the '30s—Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited,* Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty,* Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road,* and James Farrell's trilogy, *Studs Lonigan*—would command the attention of the critics, but *The Grapes of Wrath* alone would become a true commercial phenomenon, with Steinbeck on pace to sell 430,000 copies by the end of 1939. He also had sold the film rights for $70,000—equal to nearly $1 million today and, at the time, one of the highest prices the studios had ever paid for a novel.

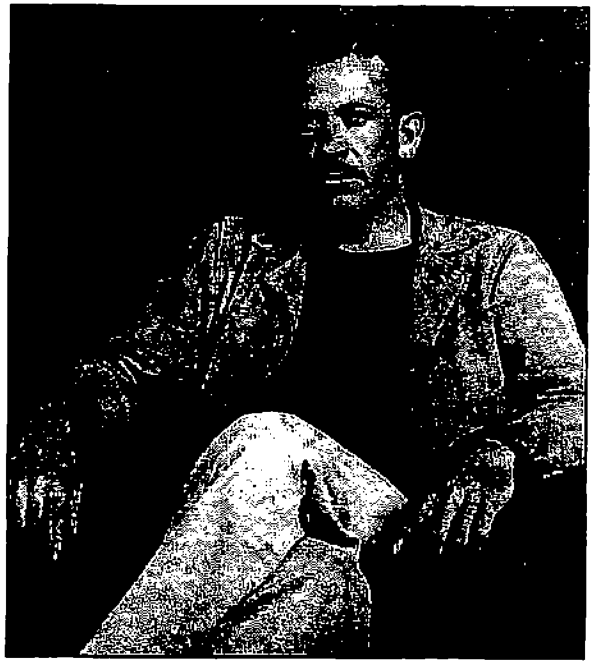
The riches, however, seemed as much a burden as a boon. Desperate strangers contacted Steinbeck, hoping for a handout. And on some level, he felt guilty over becoming wealthy from a story about the needy. "I simply can't make money on these people," he once said. Earlier, with Hollywood offering to toss him a pile of cash for *Of Mice and Men*—another tale of the down-and-out—Steinbeck hatched a plan to give three thousand migrants $2 each. Pascal Covici, his publisher, talked him out of it. This time, Steinbeck's windfall provided his most rabid challengers with just the target they were looking for. Ruth Comfort Mitchell's group, Pro America, printed this ditty, titled "Migrant to John Steinbeck":

You've written a best seller,
That stands on every shelf.

We hear you've sold the movie rights
With profit to yourself.
Now, just to clear the record,
And this is meant for you,
Most of us don't think or talk
The way you say we do.
But since your pity for us
Has swelled your bank account,
Why don't you give us migrants
A generous amount ? ? ? ? ?

A little doggerel was the least of it. On top of all the unrelenting demands on him, on top of his sickness, on top of his crumbling marriage, Steinbeck faced a kind of get-even from those insulted by *The Grapes of Wrath* that few authors, before or since, have been subjected to. It wasn't just the public carpers, such as Ruth Comfort Mitchell, who were tormenting him. It was the prospect of something far more serious. "The Associated Farmers have begun an hysterical personal attack on me both in the papers and a whispering campaign," he said. "I'm a Jew, I'm a pervert, a drunk, a dope fiend." When Lewis Milestone, who was working on the screenplay for *Of Mice and Men,* came to central California to scout locations for the movie, Steinbeck escorted him. But he'd never stop at any ranches, driving swiftly on and off each property. When Milestone asked why he didn't pull over and get out so they could look around, Steinbeck talked straight: "Because I'd get my ass full of rock salt. They hate me around here." One friend, the undersheriff of Santa Clara County, warned Steinbeck not to stay in a hotel by himself. "Maybe I'm sticking my neck out, but the boys got a rape case set up for you," he told him. "You get alone in a hotel and a dame will come in, tear off her clothes, scratch her face and scream, and you try to talk yourself out of that one. They won't touch your book, but there's easier ways."

If the allegation of a sex crime wasn't to materialize, Steinbeck wrote Elizabeth Otis. "I began to wonder if . . . a drunk driving charge or



John Steinbeck found himself under tremendous stress and strain in August 1939. (Photo by Sonya Noskowiak, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University)

something like that might not be in the offing for me. You must understand that the Associated Farmers absolutely control the sheriff's office in this state. I went to my attorney, and he said there was no way of stopping a charge but advised me to keep a diary containing names of people I saw and when so that I could call an alibi if I had to. I don't think they would dare attack me but they have done as bad . . . . Please keep this letter with the dated envelope. This group is the same that put Mooney . . . in prison for life on trumped up charges. They are capable of anything."

In such an environment—with so many enemies real and imagined—it was hard to know whom to trust. Steinbeck adopted an alias when staying in Los Angeles ("Mr. Brooks" he called himself at one point), used a friend's house for a mail drop, and secreted away records on the mistreatment of migrants in safety deposit boxes. In late June, he alerted a friend that he had "placed certain information in the hands of J. Edgar Hoover in case I take a nose dive." But it was Hoover's FBI that would

keep an inch-thick file on Steinbeck. And it was Hoover's FBI that apparently had sent agents into a bookshop in Monterey, where Steinbeck once lived, asking questions of the owner, Miss Smith. "When she asked why," Steinbeck recounted, "they said they were investigating me for Mr. Hoover—that Mr. Hoover considered me the most dangerous subversive influence in the West . . . . Miss Smith didn't think it was a joke."

Yet of all the stresses and strains, one rumor may well have gotten to Steinbeck the most: the migrants themselves, it was said, hated him and had threatened to kill him for lying about them. When the *Los Angeles Times* reporter visiting his ranch raised this issue, Steinbeck couldn't hide his exasperation. "Show you the letters from my friends, the Okies? No, I won't do that," he roared. "But I've got them—lots of them! Here—I'll show you what some of the Okies think of me." And with that, he had Carol take out a stuffed dog made from scraps of colored cloth. A group of valley laborers had sent it to him as a gift. Around the critter's neck, a little tag hung down. "Migrant John," it said.

"Migrant John" was a hard-earned sobriquet—an appellation that came from years of traveling among the valley's farm workers, earning their trust, taking in their stories, and, eventually, feeling their anger and making it his own. But Steinbeck wasn't always angry. At the beginning, he was mostly just curious.

In large part through Carol, Steinbeck had in the mid-1930s started to socialize with a group openly supportive of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) and active in the John Reed Club in Carmel—an organization named for the American Communist leader who had imparted the drama of the Bolshevik Revolution in his firsthand account, *Ten Days That Shook the World.* Steinbeck didn't share the group's devotion to Marxist dogma or obeisance to the Comintern in Russia. Steinbeck possessed a relentlessly probing mind, and the strict discipline demanded by the Communist Party—"Discussion of questions over which there have been differences must not continue after the decision has been made"—was anathema to him. Still, Steinbeck found the Red crowd stimulating, and he was happy to be around them, listening more than he talked, sometimes even taking notes. "We were just human background reference material," joked Francis Whitaker, a blacksmith and John Reed Club participant who was close to Steinbeck during this period.

Besides, there was no shortage of others willing to take up the slack and pontificate. Several of the most famous names from the radical Left—Lincoln Steffens, Ella Winter, Langston Hughes, Anna Louise Strong, Mike Gold, Marie de L. Welch—were part of the scene. Some regarded Steinbeck as a bit of an oddity because, in an era of political and ideological extremes, he seemed intent on occupying the middle ground. "He did not want to be connected with any one side," Winter said, "lest people thought he was writing propaganda." Whitaker had a less flattering take on Steinbeck's attempt at neutrality: "He was very naïve of politics" in those early days.

Whatever the case, in the spring of 1934 Steinbeck received one of his first intimate lessons on the labor unrest that was gripping the Central Valley. Winter and others associated with the John Reed Club had been passionate advocates for the embattled pickers in the just-ended cotton strike, supporting the union and visiting the workers' tent city in the Kings County town of Corcoran, where more than three thousand "nomad harvesters," as the poet de L. Welch called them, were holed up, demanding higher wages. Now, two of the strike organizers—having watched some of their comrades jailed for their activism—were on the run and hiding in an attic in Seaside, about ten miles from Carmel. Steinbeck and Whitaker went to see the fugitives, and Steinbeck spent hours chatting with one of them in particular: Cecil McKiddy, who had functioned as a section secretary for Pat Chambers, one of the leaders of the CAWIU. Nobody knows precisely what McKiddy told Steinbeck, but the union man was in a great position to relate the nitty-gritty of how the cotton strike was put together, as he was the one who typed up instructions to the CAWIU leadership. What's more, McKiddy himself loved to read, so his eye for the telling little nugget that could enliven a story was probably better than most.

Steinbeck would ultimately pour many of these particulars into his novel *In Dubious Battle,* which was based on the cotton strike but set, fictitiously, in California's apple orchards. Published in January 1936, the book included some of the same kind of rough language that so many would protest a few years later in *The Grapes of Wrath.* And, as he would do then, Steinbeck defended his choice of words without hesitation. "A working man bereft of his profanity is a silent man," he told Mavis McIntosh, Elizabeth Otis's partner. "To try to reproduce the speech of these people and to clean it up is to make it sound stiff, unnatural and emasculated."

Unlike with *The Grapes of Wrath,* however, Steinbeck did his utmost to make this story completely apolitical. He was, he said, more interested in using *In Dubious Battle* to delve into the dynamics of group action than to take a stand for labor. And, in fact, the union leaders in the book, Mac and John, are not very likable. Neither are the big growers. Mostly, Steinbeck wanted his story to be believable. "I'm not interested," he said in January 1935, a few weeks before he sent off the manuscript, "in ranting about justice and oppression." Perhaps because of that, the book wasn't attacked with any real fervor from the right. Nor, though, did most of the left pillory the novel. *In Dubious Battle* "is a stunning, straight correct narrative about things as they happen," Lincoln Steffens told Sam Darcy, the district organizer for the Communist Party in California. "I think it is the best report of a labor struggle that has come out of this valley . . . . It may not be sympathetic with labor, but it is realistic about the vigilantes."

Most important for Steinbeck, the depth with which *In Dubious Battle* had been written turned him into an instant authority on farm workers and set him up for an assignment in the summer of '36 that would lay the foundation—in regard to facts and feelings—for *The Grapes of Wrath.* George West, the editorial page editor of the *San*

Francisco News, had been arguing in the paper for the federal government to erect more farm-labor camps in California to accommodate the migrants who were overwhelming the resources of the state. The Associated Farmers hated these facilities—"Communistic" was how Bill Camp referred to them—because its leaders feared, often accurately, that they were loci of union organizing. And West worried, rightfully, that "powerful influences" might be on the verge of stopping the camp-building effort "dead in its tracks." So he decided to go on the offensive. Impressed by *In Dubious Battle,* West recruited Steinbeck, whom he had met at Lincoln Steffens and Ella Winter's place, to explore the migrant situation and to write about the camp program for the newspaper. It's not clear why, or even whether, Steinbeck may have suddenly felt comfortable aligning himself with an ardent left-winger like West, who was married to Marie de L. Welch. But he didn't pull back when West had him begin his reporting by meeting with several federal officials who weren't exactly known for the kind of cold detachment that Steinbeck had maintained in *In Dubious Battle.*

Among his first stops was Frederick Soule, who oversaw the Resettlement Administration's information division out of Berkeley. The RA, which ran the labor camps (and a year later would be transformed into the Farm Security Administration), was the invention of Roosevelt "Brain-Truster" Rexford G. Tugwell. Its mandate was wide-ranging, its geographic reach widespread: Operating through the South and the drought-stricken plains states, the RA relocated impoverished families from farm and city alike, taught proper land use techniques, fought soil erosion and promoted forestation, and created "greenbelt communities"—suburban housing developments—outside Washington, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee. It extended its mission into rural California and the lives of the Dust Bowl migrants largely at the urging of economics professor Paul Taylor, with the help of his bride-to-be, photographer Dorothea Lange. "The trek of drought and depression refugees to California is the result of a national catastrophe," Taylor said. "The succor of its victims is a national responsibility."

As sensible and straightforward as that may have sounded, the RA was among the most polarizing of New Deal agencies. Those on the left saw it as a heroic and humanistic institution that was helping to deliver a needed measure of social justice for the downtrodden. Those on the right viewed it as a dreadful and dangerous experiment by socialist dreamers. Fred Soule, a former Hearst newspaperman, was nothing if not a dreamer—a Jeffersonian Democrat who was helping to administer a farm-worker housing program in a state where the giants of agribusiness had made Jefferson's notion of the yeoman a joke. Tall and scrawny, Soule looked "like Abe Lincoln's ghost," recalled Helen Hosmer, who worked for him. "He used to clean his fingernails with a big paring knife and suck his teeth, *slurp, slurp.*" When Hosmer first went in to apply for her job, she found Soule with his shoes up on his desk—"one foot on the *New Republic* and one foot on the *Nation.*"

"The chickens are home to roost," he told her. "The land is stripped. The people are here."

When Steinbeck came through, Soule and Hosmer opened up to him their extensive files on the history of California agriculture—a trove that evidently included lots of information not just on the extent of the state's staggering bounty but also on the vanquishing of its field hands. The archive left a profound impression on him—though, for quite some time, Steinbeck would remain "scared to death of all these left-wingers swarming around," Hosmer later recalled.

From Berkeley, Steinbeck headed into the valley. His mode of transportation was an old bakery truck that he had purchased for the occasion. This "pie wagon," as he called it, was outfitted with a cot, an icebox, a chest in which to keep his clothes, and other accessories for living on the road. Accompanying Steinbeck was Eric Thomsen, an RA official who had recently been put in charge of the migrant camps in California. Thomsen had started out in his native Denmark as a prosperous businessman, becoming president of his own steamship company in his early twenties. But he always had a soft spot for the workingman. During World War I, when the sailors' and stokers' unions requested a special bonus in the form of double pay, Thomsen brushed aside the hard-line stance of the Ship Owners Association and agreed to what he regarded as their "reasonable demands." "Why not?" he asked. "We are making plenty of money." By the early 1920s, Thomsen had tired of commerce altogether and set out to teach himself about philosophy, sociology, psychology, and science by studying in the libraries of London, New York, and Chicago. A bit later, he enrolled in the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, intending to become a minister. By the 1930s, Thomsen had moved into government work, serving for a spell as religious and educational director of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Driven by a strong conscience, Thomsen believed "that the burdens of migratory laborers" were "inexcusable and unnecessary in the modern world"—and he did his best to convince Steinbeck of those things.

First, he presented the inexcusable. As Thomsen guided Steinbeck through the valley, he made sure to stop at various squatters' camps and ditch-bank settlements, exposing the writer to a level of poverty that was truly startling: families scrunched in cardboard boxes and large drain pipes, some of them so famished that they were eating rats and dogs. Next, Thomsen attempted to show his companion why such hardship was all so unnecessary. Their final stop was the RA's Kern Migratory Labor Camp outside Arvin, just south of Bakersfield on a piece of land that Bill Camp had once owned. It was a simple complex of tents laid out over a twenty-acre tract, but an absolute sanctuary compared with the Hoovervilles they had seen on their way. For one thing, the Arvin camp was clean despite the name that many knew it by: Weedpatch. For another, its residents were treated with a kind of respect that they hungered for nearly as much as a square meal; they were allowed to make their own rules and govern the camp as a democracy.

The architect of this arrangement was Thomas Collins, who had led

Born out of wedlock near Baltimore in the mid-1890s, Collins grew up in a Catholic orphanage, went off to boarding school, and, from there, attended a Maryland seminary to train for the priesthood. He quit after two years, though, got married and then, after the birth of his second child, ran off with the sixteen-year-old daughter of a blue-blood family. They met at a train station, eloped, and hightailed it to Puerto Rico, with private detectives hired by the bride's father in pursuit. The couple soon fled to Venezuela and then to Guam. In 1929, they returned to the United States, where Collins established a school for delinquent boys near San Diego. But the school went bankrupt after a couple of years, leaving Collins deeply in debt. He again abandoned his family and later was divorced by his second wife. After that, he found a job running government soup kitchens in San Diego, and in 1935 joined the RA.

Kind, gentle, witty—and a hard drinker—Collins empathized with the migrants' grim situation, perhaps because of his own topsy-turvy past. Whatever it was, he proved to be the ideal camp administrator: sensitive of the residents' feelings, mindful of their rights—and a keen observer of their ways. In the weekly (and sometimes biweekly) reports he sent back to RA headquarters, Collins compiled copious information on camp life: the migrants' comings and goings; the wages they managed to scrape together in the nearby farm fields; their diets ("Menu: beans, baking powder biscuits, jam, coffee"); their health status ("Number cases illness—one, tonsillitis"); their baseball scores; their song lyrics; their religious practices; whether they were driving Model As or Ts; even their unvarnished voices, in a regular section he called "Bits of Migrant Wisdom":

> In Texas, a falla kin git fer wurkin all he wants, cept a littl money. In Cliforny he kin git a littl money but nuffin he wants.
>
> Gawd is good to us farm lab'rs. When we aint got wuk and everything luks blue he sends us a new baby ter keep us happy.
>
> Us farm workers starv ter def ter raise our kids. When the kids grows up we all starves.

Tom Collins, who ran the federal government's migrant labor camp in Arvin, just outside Bakersfield, compiled copious information that Steinbeck put to good use in his novel. (Photo by Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress)

The details and dialect that Steinbeck gleaned from Collins's reports would become invaluable as he crafted his series of stories for the *San Francisco News* and, later, *The Grapes of Wrath.* Indeed, whole scenes in the book appear to have been formed from Collins's sketches of the Arvin camp. That the Joads found the indoor plumbing at the government camp where they settled to be some exotic contrivance, for example, echoes Collins's entry about a migrant who mixed up the toilet and the shower, while his wife confused the crapper with a laundry tub. The regulation of the camp where the Joads stayed mirrored the self-governing setup in Arvin. And Collins's compassion certainly infused the government-camp manager in the novel, Jim Rawley. Some believe, as well, that the chairman of the Camp Central Committee at Arvin, an Oklahoma transplant named Sherm Eastom, was the basis—or at least a basis—for Tom Joad. (Likely a composite character, Joad may well have had a little Cecil McKiddy in him too.) In his reports, Collins also kept tabs on the non-government lodging available to migrant laborers in the area—in many cases unclean, unsanitary housing provided by local farmers. Once again, the contrast with the RA's encampment was glaring, giving Steinbeck another thread to weave into *The Grapes of Wrath.*

During the period that Thomsen and Steinbeck were guests at the Arvin camp, more than four hundred people were living there. Of the 150 men, Collins noted, 135 were employed—many of them picking, packing, and loading grapes—all of them at thirty cents an hour (or less than half the nation's average manufacturing wage). Grape season was just about to give way to cotton, and tensions were running high. Wrote Collins:

> From a very reliable source . . . we were informed that the Associated Farmers had a secret meeting in one of the rooms of the Kern County Court House, Bakersfield. Most of the large growers were represented there. We were also informed that the sheriff of Kern County attended the meeting.
>
> The topic of the meeting seems to have been "Are we law abiding and liberty loving citizens ready and prepared for a strike? Have we sufficient arms and ammunition?" . . . .
>
> A contributing factor to the fright of the Associated Farmers is their knowledge of attempts of the workers to form a union . . . .
>
> To those of us interested in the welfare of the worker we believe these fears to be unfounded . . . .
>
> This meeting, with its prenatal secrecy . . . is a damnable attempt to besmirch . . . hard-working men and women. In their search for a haven—the opportunity to start anew—they have arrived from their scorched homesteads, hearts alive with hope, souls overflowing with faith, demanding work, seeking work, praying for work. Little do they know that about them stalks the ghostly dirge of the machine gun in the hands of . . . selfishness and greed.

Collins's imagery may have been overwrought, but the allusion to "arms and ammunition" was no mere rhetorical flourish. Steinbeck would soon find that out firsthand, as he left Arvin and headed to the central California coast and his hometown of Salinas.

Salinas was not a place that engendered warm feelings in John Steinbeck, even though his turn-of-the-century childhood there seemed almost idyllic in some respects. The region was beautiful, with its redwoods and rolling hills and the salt spray of the Pacific nearby. His family was well known, and generally well liked, in town (population: about 2,500 at the time). Before he died in 1935, Steinbeck's father, also named John (though Jr. and Sr. weren't used), had worked as a bookkeeper in the local Spreckels Sugar plant and later became treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, Olive, who passed away in 1934, had been active on the Salinas social circuit. Steinbeck and his three sisters grew up in a solidly middle-class home, not as well-heeled as the town's lawyers, bankers, and industrialists but never wanting for much. The Steinbecks lived in a two-story, Victorian-frame house, complete with a white picket fence. But as comfortable as his upbringing was, Steinbeck had gone off to Stanford University in 1919 full of resentment toward Salinas and what he perceived as its prejudices and small-mindedness. If he had any hope of changing that opinion on his trip home now, with a reporter's notebook in hand, the timing couldn't have been worse.

California's lettuce belt was on edge during the early days of September 1936. The Fruit and Vegetable Workers' Union, looking to renegotiate its contract with the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association, was insisting on a preferential hiring clause for its members—a stipulation that would make them the first employed and last fired. The union had a sound reason to seek such a proviso: it had made strong wage gains, with those in the Salinas Valley's packing sheds earning up to seventy-five cents an hour. But now, migrants were descending upon Monterey County, just as they were in Kern, threatening to work on the cheap and undermine those good union jobs.

The grower-shipper association refused to accede to the Fruit and Vegetable Workers' demand, however, saying that to give in would be to surrender control of their business to the union. On September 4, about thirty-five hundred union members walked off the job, putting $11 million worth of fresh produce at risk. Ten days later, lettuce trucks carrying strikebreakers were seen on the outskirts of Salinas, which by now resembled a war zone. The sheriff had called upon all males between eighteen and forty-five to help him deal with the strikers, arming them with blue armbands, shotguns, and hickory clubs that, according to some reports, had been fashioned at the local high school. The sheriff's brigade was only one part of the army that had been arrayed; the Salinas police and state highway patrol were also marshaling officers, making for an antistrike force of about fifteen hundred in all. In the meantime, the local Citizens' Association had recruited Colonel Henry Sanborn to help coordinate this show of police power. Sanborn was an officer in the Army Reserve, a proud vigilante and publisher of the *American Citizen*, the San Francisco paper dedicated to stopping Communism from "becoming a reality."

Just how much the Communists had to do with supporting the union in Salinas is difficult to know. Fruit and Vegetable Workers Local 18211 was part of the American Federation of Labor, which had long had an uncomfortable relationship, at best, with the Communist Party. And the union went out of its way to distance itself from anything and anyone that could be construed as Red, decrying all attempts to paint it as a "non-democratic organization." It's also safe to say that most, if not all, of the rank and file were simply looking for economic protection, not a revolution. Yet it was during this stretch—between the demise of the Communist-led union that had carried out the cotton strike of '33 and the rise of the Communist-led union that would take to the fields of California in the last few years of the decade—that the party was eager to have its members infiltrate the AFL, "boring from within." The Communist newspaper, the *Western Worker*, praised the Salinas strike for giving the workers a "real political education."

Of course, whether the Communists were genuinely involved probably didn't matter much anyway. Sanborn and his "general staff" were bound to stick a Red label on the union, regardless of the facts. At one stage, the highway patrol chief seized hundreds of red flags along the road near town and held them out as proof of a Communist cabal in the area.

As it turned out, the flags were part of a routine traffic check being made by state officials. At another point, the town's fire sirens rang out with four sharp blasts as word spread that hundreds of Red longshoremen from San Francisco were headed for Salinas. None ever appeared.

Sanborn and his cronies were spoiling for a fight, plain and simple, and on September 15 they got what they wanted. Fruit and Vegetable Workers members shouting "Rats! Rats! Rats!" hoisted themselves onto trucks being driven by the strikebreakers as they made their way to the packing operation at the Salinas Valley Ice Company. George Griffin, the Salinas police chief, gave the union men ten minutes to disperse. When they didn't, he ordered his officers to fire their tear-gas grenades. "They stood there and kept firing the gas guns, and we ran into people's homes and anyplace we could find," recalled Otto Ables, one of the union men caught up in the combat. "They surrounded the block. Then the Highway Patrolmen came down six abreast, and they started using nauseating gas, shooting it everywhere." The violence crescendoed the next day when pickets pulled crates of lettuce off a convoy of trucks and threw them into Gabilan Street. The police response was more furious than ever—a salvo of tear-gas bombs that continued through the afternoon and into the evening. In many cases, groups of two and three were fired upon, with no apparent justification. When workers retreated to the Labor Temple, bombs were lobbed inside. Appearing at the head of a group of gun-toting sheriff's deputies was Hank Strobel, county chief of the Associated Farmers.

Brazen as ever, the Associated Farmers would maintain in the days to follow that most of the bloodshed in Salinas had come at the expense of the farmers, not the strikers. Strobel, for one, claimed that a mob of workers attacked him, slipped a rope around his neck, and prepared to hang him. He'd recall, as well, how razor blades were embedded in potatoes and apples and hurled at truck drivers. Some strikers, he added, tried to pour acid on the produce. But the National Labor Relations Board, while acknowledging violence on both sides, would later [illegible] by law enforcement and its citizen surro-

gates that had been completely out of line. What transpired in Salinas, the board found, was "inexcusable police brutality, in many instances bordering upon sadism."

John Steinbeck certainly saw it that way. He passed through Salinas at the beginning of the lettuce strike and would return toward the end of the month. What he witnessed and heard about broke his heart. "There are riots in Salinas . . . that dear little town where I was born," he told a friend. In early October, Steinbeck published a piece on the conflict in the *Literary Digest,* a popular newsweekly (that a couple of years later would fold into *Time* magazine). "The story is not laid in war-torn Spain, nor in Nazi Germany—but in the Untied States, in the once peaceful Salinas valley, Monterey County, California," he wrote. "It is the story of . . . a type of Fascist psychology of which Sinclair Lewis opined that 'It Can't Happen Here.'" But, Steinbeck quickly added, "It did happen."

The events in Salinas were pivotal for Steinbeck in a couple of ways. For one, what had started out at the John Reed Club in Carmel as honest curiosity was now turning into unbridled anger—anger over farm workers being "badgered, tormented and hurt," as he put it. For another, Steinbeck was beginning to make a connection between the poverty he had seen on his way to Arvin and the level of aggression that the big growers were willing to let loose to maintain their income. It was this nexus—linking one man's profit to another's privation—that would become a primary theme in *The Grapes of Wrath.*

First, though, there came his journalism, published in the *San Francisco News* in early October 1936. The writing in the seven-part newspaper series wasn't especially stylish. But it was full of pique and, in describing the migrants' wretched living conditions, Steinbeck left little to the imagination:

> The tent is full of flies clinging to the apple box that is the dinner table, buzzing about the foul clothes of the children, particularly the baby, who has not been bathed nor cleaned for several days . . . . There

> is no toilet here, but there is a clump of willows nearby where human feces lie exposed to the flies—the same flies that are now in the tent.
>
> Two weeks ago there was another child, a four-year-old boy. For a few weeks they had noticed that he was kind of lackadaisical, that his eyes had been feverish. They had given him the best place in the bed, between father and mother. But one night he went into convulsions and died, and the next morning the coroner's wagon took him away . . . .
>
> They know pretty well that it was a diet of fresh fruit, beans and little else that caused his death. He had no milk for months. With this death there came a change of mind in his family. The father and mother now feel that paralyzed dullness with which the mind protects itself against too much sorrow and too much pain.

Steinbeck went on to denounce "the large grower and absentee speculative farmer in California." And he painted a stark contrast between the squatters' camps, with their disease and death, and the federal government camps, where people entered "beaten, sullen and destitute" but before long found "a steadiness of gaze and a self-confidence that can only come of restored dignity." At the end of the series, Steinbeck served up a number of policy prescriptions, characterizing them as "a partial solution of the problem": he urged that federal lands be set aside as subsistence farms for migrants. And when seasonal demand for migratory labor pulled people away from these farms, he suggested that only the men take to the road, leaving the women behind to manage the homestead and the children to be schooled in one place. "The cost of such ventures," Steinbeck wrote, "would not be much greater than the amount which is now spent for tear gas, machine guns and ammunition, and deputy sheriffs."

He also recommended the regular publishing of reliable information about wage rates and labor requirements "so that the harvest does not become a great, disorganized gold rush with twice and three times as much labor applying as is needed." He called for the unionization of agricultural workers. And he pushed for turning the state's criminal syndicalism laws on their head, so that they'd be brought not against Communists and Socialists accused of trying to topple the capitalist system but against practitioners of "vigilante terrorism, which is the disgrace of California."

The 1936 Salinas Lettuce Strike helped fuel Steinbeck's anger toward California's big agricultural interests. He said the violence in his hometown was the result of "a type of Fascist psychology." (Photo by Otto Hagel, Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California)

Not that all of Steinbeck's sentiments were necessarily the most progressive. Running through his *News* stories was an undercurrent of racism, showing that even someone as broadminded as Steinbeck was still, in many ways, a product of his time. Specifically, he contrasted the Okies with the Mexicans, Chinese, and other "foreign migrants" who had "invariably been drawn from a peon class" to work in the fields of California. "It should be understood that with this new race the old methods of starvation wages, of jailing, beating and intimidation are not going to work; these are American people," Steinbeck wrote. "Consequently we must meet them with understanding and attempt to work out the problem to their benefit as well as ours." Given this mindset, it was ironic that the name of the newspaper series—"The Harvest Gypsies"—would come back to bite the author. "I have heard that a number of migrant workers have resented the title," Steinbeck said in a letter that the *News* published October 20. "Certainly I had no intention of insulting a people who are already insulted beyond endurance."

Whatever hard feelings there may have been, they didn't last long, at least among those living at the labor camp in Arvin. There, the Camp Central Committee composed the following:

> Dear Mr. Steinbeck
>
> We saw your letter to the Editor of the San Francisco news . . . .
>
> We all understand just Why you found it important to use that word, we know there are lots of People who know from seeing just how Gypsies live, but we also Know that there are more people that don't Know how farm workers live, and never would know if it had not been for your trying to exPlain and Show them.
>
> We think you did a fine job for us and we thankyou. this is a big battle which cannot be won by ourselves, we kneed friends like you . . . .

And he needed them, as well—their voices and, for his own peace of mind, their validation. For, by this point, Steinbeck was bent on telling the migrants' story not just as a journalist but as a novelist, and doing so in a way that, in terms of ambition and artistry, would eclipse anything he had ever attempted. "Down the country," he told the writer Louis Paul in 1936, "I discovered a book like nothing in the world." It would, though, take quite a bit of time before Steinbeck could put his opening words onto the page—at least in a form that he felt good about. First he took a long trip abroad with Carol. They stopped in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Leningrad, and Moscow, a sojourn made possible by all the money Steinbeck had made off *Of Mice and Men.* Though this caused a many-months delay in tackling the new novel, the migrants and their problems never seemed to have left his thoughts, and the hiatus from the project may have even been by design. "The subject is so huge that it scares me to death," Steinbeck confided to Elizabeth Otis in early 1937. "And I'm not going to rush it. It must be worked out with great care."

Upon his return from Europe that summer, Steinbeck visited Farm Security Administration (FSA) headquarters in Washington and then, in the fall, hooked up once again with Tom Collins, who was now managing the government's labor camp in Gridley, about 360 miles north of Arvin in Butte County. Steinbeck's aim was to live among the migrants for a brief period, sleeping in their tumbledown colonies, and following them southward in his pie wagon along the fruit-and-cotton trail. He and Collins covered the length of the San Joaquin Valley, and Steinbeck came back home with enough material to embark on a book that he called "The Oklahomans." But that incarnation of the migrants' saga didn't get very far, and the manuscript would never be found.

In early 1938, Steinbeck took to the field one more time. Only now, things had taken a terrible turn. The rains that pelted the valley that winter were among the harshest on record, and Steinbeck felt obligated this time not only to observe but to help. "I must go to Visalia," Steinbeck wrote his agent. "Four thousand families, drowned out of their tents are really starving to death . . . . The newspapers won't touch the stuff but they will under my byline. The locals are fighting the government bringing in food and medicine. I'm going to try to break the story hard enough so that food and drugs can get moving." Collins, meanwhile, had joined other FSA personnel in the deluged region. Again, he and Steinbeck would join up—though Steinbeck was determined to remain as invisible as possible. Ever since the *San Francisco News* ran its series, he felt like a marked man. "Tom—please don't tell anyone I am coming," Steinbeck directed. "My old feud with the ass[ociated] farmers is stirring again and I don't want my movements traced."

In mid-February, Steinbeck and Collins spent about ten days together, doing what they could to assist those in need. "When we reached the flooded areas we found John's old pie truck useless, so we set out on foot," Collins would later recall. "For forty-eight hours, and without food or sleep, we worked among the sick and the half-starved people, dragging some from under trees to a different sort of shelter, dragging others from torn and ragged tents, floored with inches of water, stagnant water." The two men—Steinbeck "a mass of mud and slime"—found one family that had no food, leaving two kids to preside over their mother, who was so hungry she couldn't move. Steinbeck slipped out into the night, returning the next morning with some provisions. "John and I sat on the dirt floor," Collins said. "We sat there and the five of us ate the food which John had obtained from the little store some muddy distance away. We sat there and ate a bite—a bite that was a banquet . . . . Then names and ages of our new-found friends for delivery to the government agency which would succor the isolated family, and we were off again to find other mothers and children out there in that vast wilderness of mud and deep water."

The floods made Steinbeck even angrier than before—"I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this"—and he channeled his rage into a couple of pieces, including one in the *Monterey Trader* called "Starvation Under the Orange Trees" and another headlined "'Okies'—New Word and New Hate in California," which appeared in the Communist publication *People's World.* The magazines *Fortune* and *Life* also asked him to do articles on the migrants in early '38. He turned down the former, explaining "I don't like the audience," but he did agree to go on assignment for the latter, and was accompanied to Visalia by photographer Horace Bristol. Though Bristol's pictures ran, Steinbeck's story didn't, seemingly because the language was too bitter—and too far left—for the *Life* editors to bear.

That they reacted that way wasn't surprising. Steinbeck was by now so mad—apoplectic, really—that he couldn't get out of his own way. His long-simmering novel, which he titled "The Great Pig Sticking" and then "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," was as ham-fisted as anything he'd ever written. By May 1938, Steinbeck was on his way to a seventy-thousand-word draft, which he described as "a vicious book, a mean book." "I feel so ferocious about the thing," he confessed, "that I won't have much critical insight." Actually, he had just enough to know that it was time to stop and start over. Within days, he destroyed "L'Affaire." "It is a bad book and I must get rid of it," he told Otis. "It can't be printed. It is bad because it isn't honest. Oh! these incidents all happened but—I'm not telling as much of the truth about them as I know. In satire you have to restrict the picture and I just can't do satire . . . . My father would have called it a smart-alec book. It was full of tricks to make people ridiculous. If I can't do better I have slipped badly. And that I won't admit, yet."

The shedding of "L'Affaire" was a catharsis. It was now the last day of May 1938, and Steinbeck was finally ready to write the book he was meaning to write. And so he began: "To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth." For the next five months, he would diligently plug away, draining himself mentally, physically, and emotionally, until on October 26, 1938, he declared, "Finished this day—and I hope to God it's good."

It would take another six months until *The Grapes of Wrath* was published, leading to the firestorm in Kern County. And yet all that time, even as Steinbeck disappeared into his writing and then waited for his masterwork to come out, his name remained synonymous with the migrants and efforts to relieve their woe. The result was that by the time the big book hit, the Associated Farmers already considered Steinbeck a hazard to the existing order—a pest more perilous than any bug in the fields. Nor were they entirely off the mark. After witnessing the devastation of the winter floods, Steinbeck wrote to his friend, the filmmaker Pare Loretz, whose Dust Bowl documentary, *The Plow That Broke the Plains,* had helped inspire the novelist. "It might interest you to know but not to repeat just now," Steinbeck told him, "that a nice revolutionary feeling is the concomitant of this suffering. I mean it is something that I had hoped but was not sure of, that a certain amount of suffering is deadening, but a quick increase such as this storm shakes off the apathy.

"The thing," Steinbeck added expectantly, "is very dangerous now."

* * *

John Steinbeck was no glory hound. After *Of Mice and Men* was published, he told his agents that he'd gotten "sick to my stomach" when recognized on the streets of San Francisco. In general, he found fame "a pain in the ass." And so it was no small thing that he would allow himself to become a spokesman for those who wanted to help the migrants and vilify the big growers. They, in turn, clung to Steinbeck's emerging identity as a defender of the common man like mud to a field hand's boots. Before long, "Steinbeck" wasn't just a name on a dust jacket anymore; it was a symbol, a shibboleth, for something much, much greater.

In the spring of 1938, as the author prepared to immerse himself in his new novel, a group known as the Simon J. Lubin Society began selling for twenty-five cents apiece a reprinting of "The Harvest Gypsies" series from the *San Francisco News,* supplemented by a handful of Dorothea Lange photographs. Helen Hosmer, whom Steinbeck had first met when she worked for the government's migrant resettlement program, was the firecracker who ran the Lubin Society, and she planned on using the money she raised from selling the pamphlet "to help the cause." Steinbeck, for his part, "didn't ask for a dime," Hosmer said. "He gave us every penny." She called the booklet *Their Blood Is Strong* after a line from one of Steinbeck's *News* articles on the migrants' fortitude in the face of affliction: "They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong." The title caused a little confusion, as officials in Nazi Germany mistakenly thought it had something to do with the purity of blood and ordered several copies. But the real effect of the Lubin Society publication was unambiguous: it allied Steinbeck closer than ever with the Far Left.

Hosmer was a member of the Communist Party who had left the FSA in 1937 because, as much as she wanted to help establish more migrant labor camps around California, it wasn't acceptable for her to flaunt her beliefs while in the government's employ. Even in the Roosevelt administration, she had to watch herself. "Helen, they're out to get you," the FSA's regional director, Jonathan Garst, cautioned. "Now it's not going to help when you . . . come running around here with your hair loose and a copy of *New Masses* sticking out of your purse. I can't protect you if you do things like that." Frustrated that she couldn't explicitly support the unionization of farm workers and the organization of small dirt farmers—and advance the idea that "unless they got together, they were doomed" to both be victims of the big growers—Hosmer struck out on her own. She solicited a bunch of donations (most of them quite modest), bought a mimeograph machine, rented an office in downtown San Francisco, and christened her group in honor of one of her heroes.

Simon Lubin, a Sacramento native who had worked with the poor in Boston's South End and on New York's East Side after graduating magna cum laude from Harvard, had served as the first president of the California Immigration and Housing Commission in 1913. In that post, he became known as a devoted guardian of farm workers' rights. He remained active in matters involving agricultural labor for the next twenty years, and before he died in 1936, he arrived at some strong conclusions about who was responsible for all the turmoil in California's farm fields. Lubin—who after his death would be falsely accused before the Dies Committee of having been a member of the Industrial Workers of the World—did not deny that there were lots of "radicals" and "agitators" running around the countryside. But what allowed them to make inroads there, he argued, were the "social, economic and political evils" being perpetrated by some of the state's largest farming interests. "Can the radicals capture the farms of California?" Lubin asked. "If unfairness, inhumanity, injustice and illegality are permitted to persist, sanctioned by some of our 'best people' and by popular opinion, and if we continue to walk in economic darkness—then shall we have open season for all who would disrupt our society. . . . But if the rotten conditions attendant upon these wicked sentiments are eradicated or sufficiently mitigated . . . then will our society become so sound that no mere 'agitator,' whatever his motive or whatever his method, will be able to make even a dent in our economy. . . . It is a fact that we do need a socio-economic house-cleaning. Are we going to encourage the 'Reds,' the 'radicals,' the 'Communists,' the 'outside agitators' to do the job for us? Or are we ourselves going to do it?"

As hard-hitting as Lubin was, the organization that carried on his name was even tougher. It distributed used clothing and blankets to the migrants. And it lobbied for legislation that would improve the lives of agricultural laborers. But above all, the Lubin Society loved to needle the big growers through a little newsletter called the *Rural Observer,* written and edited by the intrepid Hosmer with the help of volunteers. In issue after issue, she excoriated the Associated Farmers, exposing the industrial interests behind the group—utilities, banks, and railroads—and rapping its leaders for lying and hypocrisy. She called them "the big boys," contrasting their wealth and power with that of the small farmer, who was straining "to maintain a decent, debtless standard of living."

Hosmer had an extraordinary knack for hitting a nerve. After she reported on the interlocking farm and business holdings of Bill Camp's buddy, Joseph Di Giorgio, he reacted just the way she'd hoped he would: he was fuming. "Well, I read this article by Simon J. Lubin," Di Giorgio said. "Anything that is in there that refers to me is an absolute lie . . . I don't like it. I am not used to having people lie about me. If somebody wants a punch in the nose, he is going to get it, and it is too bad if I know anything about it. I pay these people good salaries and I give the best of everything, and then they allow something like that to be printed."

In a file that Camp kept of alleged Communist front groups, the Lubin Society was described as "the channel through which the . . . party conducts its bitter fight against the farming industry." Actually, Hosmer griped that the Reds never did enough to support her organization, despite her Communist membership. "The party just neglected us," she said. "I finally got so I just ignored them all the time because they were not being helpful." Plenty of others, though, did step up. The Lubin Society's Sponsor Committee and Advisory Committee read like a Who's Who of the California Left, with Culbert Olson, Carey McWilliams, George West, Marie de L. Welch, and Kern County's own Ralph Abel taking part. Steinbeck wasn't on the roster, but Hosmer was more than happy to cite his work as well. "In between the business of smoking out the Associated Farmers, John Steinbeck's *Their Blood Is Strong* appeared, published and distributed by the Lubin Society," the *Rural Observer* boasted. "This pamphlet . . . showed that the same forces which oppressed the working farmers were oppressing the migrants" and "emphasized again that the migrants had once been working farmers and had been pushed out by big money."

Hosmer wasn't the only one making good use of Steinbeck's celebrity. He agreed to add his imprimatur, even more patently, to another group whose stated purpose was "to provide the necessary support, financial and moral, to help agricultural workers in California build a strong union." Its name: the John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization, with the author himself serving in the (largely ceremonial) role of state chairman. Others—including Carey McWilliams and the actress (and, later, congresswoman and political prey of Richard Nixon) Helen Gahagan Douglas—did more of the actual spadework. But having Steinbeck out front was a clear plus. "Will You Join My Committee . . . ?" he asked in one mailer, seeking $10 contributions.

In December 1938, the Steinbeck Committee and other groups worked with the FSA to hold a Christmas Eve party at the federal farm labor camp in Shafter. Helen Gahagan's husband, actor Melvyn Douglas, chaired the nationally broadcast event, which brought a constellation of Hollywood stars to Kern County: Edward G. Robinson, Gene Autry, Edie Cantor, Henry Fonda, Virginia Bruce, Miriam

Hopkins, and others. Steinbeck endorsed the gala—but warned what would happen if this was a one-shot deal. "Candy and food today—and starvation tomorrow," he wrote in *People's World.* "The children will be unhappy tomorrow. The gifts will only serve to emphasize the poverty of the recipients.

"This can make for hatred," he added, "unless one thing—if the gifts can be a symbol of support, not of charity, if the meaning of this party can be, 'We are working with you, not for you, to the end that the good life which is your right will not be longer withheld. These gifts and food are a promise that you are not alone.'"

The Steinbeck Committee's real goal, needless to say, was influencing policy—not planning parties. A few months before the soiree in Shafter and three days after the last words of *The Grapes of Wrath* had been put to paper—"She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously"—the organization convened a conference on health, housing, and relief in Bakersfield. Steinbeck didn't attend, but a legion of others looked upon with fear and hatred by Bill Camp and the rest of the town's power brokers participated in the October meeting. On the list were McWilliams, Ella Winter, and a cadre of organizers from UCAPAWA, the agricultural workers' union. The program the conferees advocated was hardly startling considering their view of the world: They pressed for thirty new FSA camps in California, on top of the nine already up and running; more inspectors to enforce health and sanitation standards at growers' camps; and additional funding to erect schools for migrant children. They also demanded the state liberalize its welfare program to put more money into migrants' pockets, and they called on the government to intervene in the marketplace and set agricultural wages.

All in all, it was pretty pie-in-the-sky stuff given that Frank Merriam was still the governor and the big growers clearly had the upper hand. If anybody had any doubt about that, they needed only to consider the swiftness with which, just a few days earlier, a cotton strike in Kern County had been stamped out. The kerfuffle had been brewing since late September, ever since three hundred workers at a ranch belonging to Bill Camp's brother, Sol, walked off the job demanding ninety cents for every hundred pounds of cotton they'd scoop into their threadbare sacks. The farmers were paying seventy-five cents, and they argued they couldn't afford more, what with cotton prices in the dumps.

By early October, the number of strikers had grown to seven hundred, and UCAPAWA rushed in an organizer from San Francisco to help the workers further their agenda—as well as the union's own. UCAPAWA set up a strike committee, which upped the workers' formal demand by a dime, to one dollar per hundred pounds picked. In addition, it insisted on having drinking water made available in the fields, the testing of all cotton scales to ensure that pickers weren't being bilked, and an arbitrator at every ranch to help settle any disputes that might arise. The union also dispatched "flying squadrons"—automobile caravans filled with pickets—across the county.

The growers fought back by closing off roads, while the Associated Farmers collected license-plate numbers and compiled a blacklist of strikers. The employers' strongest weapon, though, was pure intransigence. Associated Farmers officials refused to negotiate with UCAPAWA representatives, reiterating over and over that they couldn't meet the union's demand on wages. End of story. Still more maddening to the union, the Associated Farmers wouldn't even acknowledge that a walkout was underway. Part of this was an effort to control public perception. And in this regard, the growers had an advantage: Although as many as three thousand pickers took part in the strike, the labor market in Kern County was so swamped with people willing to work, gins in the area were receiving close to the same quantities of cotton that they always did. When the farmers said that things were just about "normal," they weren't totally blowing smoke.

Yet there was another reason, as well, for the farmers to deny that a strike was actually occurring. If those staying off the job were deemed not to be on strike—and were thus simply refusing to accept work that was being offered them—they wouldn't be eligible for government handouts. That, obviously, would ratchet up the pressure to return to the fields. After a review, the State Relief Administration (SRA) agreed with the growers that no strike was happening, and it removed from its rolls those involved in the labor conflict. Union supporters were aghast at the decision by SRA chief Harold Pomeroy, saying that it left farm workers with an appalling choice: scab or starve. Nonetheless, he stuck to his position.

The federal government, however, had a different policy. The Works Progress Administration provided cash assistance and the FSA offered food—$4.41 worth of flour, shortening, evaporated milk, beans, cornmeal, sugar, and coffee—to any farmhand who said he was in need. "All we ask is, 'Are you an agricultural worker and are you hungry?'" the FSA's Jonathan Garst explained, much to the consternation of Bill Camp.

Camp told Garst that his agency was, knowingly or not, feeding union organizers—"paid agents of the Communist Party"—and without Uncle Sam's sustenance, they would have surely packed up and left the county. "They were ready to go away if not for the FSA," Camp said. "They go up and down the road and beat their tom-toms, scare people out of the fields because of this pork and beans that you give them."

Garst's own temper then flared. "I think it's better the issue be settled without cutting people off and making them go hungry," he replied. "You cannot settle it by saying that you either starve or go to work. That is worse than war."

To the degree the cotton strike of '38 was anything like a war, it turned out to be a rout for one side. On October 25, four days before the Steinbeck Committee conference in Bakersfield, more than one hundred pickets in a thirty-car caravan were arrested. The Kern County Sheriff said that the horde had entered a ranch near Arvin and assaulted those working the rows with stones and clubs. Eighty-four wound up being arraigned and charged with, among other things, inciting a riot. By early November, nearly all of them had been released through a dismissal of the charges or guilty pleas followed by the granting of suspended sentences—but not before the judge in the case had delivered a good chewing out.

"You have been mixed up in something you don't know anything about," Justice Oral Parish said from the courthouse in Weedpatch—that splendidly named spot to which Steinbeck would refer in his novel. "The farmers pay all they are able to pay; this has been proven. You people were just used as tools for something that did you no good at all but just got you into a lot of trouble." Parish added that "this union business is all bunk," leaving no doubt about whose side of the fight he was on. "I want you to get this distinctly," he lectured the workers. "There is no cotton strike!" The union attorney, Raymond Henderson, tried to keep the pickets' spirits up, telling them that Parish's comments were his personal views—not a legal opinion. But about a week later, with wages still stuck at seventy-five cents, the workers folded. The walkout was over with nothing to show for it.

That, though, was 1938. Nearly a year had passed since then, and in many ways it felt as if the world had turned upside down in the months in between. With a new cotton harvest approaching, the union and the growers were in the same place they always were—at odds over wages. But now, there was a book that had given voice to the workers' concerns in a way that nothing had before it—not the Lubin Society's newsletters, not the star-studded party in Shafter, not the well-intentioned conference in Bakersfield. There was, in addition, a new governor in Sacramento and a forceful new head of the Division of Immigration and Housing who thought of the big farmers as "fascists." Seventy-five cents for picking a hundred pounds of cotton may have been acceptable in 1938. But this was 1939, the year of Culbert Olson, the year of Carey McWilliams, the year of *The Grapes of Wrath.*

As John Steinbeck hunkered down in his home outside Los Gatos on this Tuesday in August, sick and tired of being famous, the apparatus of

Carey McWilliams, who had called for the Soviet-style collectivization of agriculture in California before becoming a state official, held hearings in 1939 to set a "fair wage" for farm workers. (Photo by Will Connell, Will Connell Collection, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California at Riverside)

the state pushed forward—an activist, interventionist, New Deal attitude come to California at long last. Over at the governor's office, an aide typed a letter to Carey McWilliams informing him that yet another petition from a group of agricultural workers had been received, this one from Kern County, asking Governor Olson to hold a hearing and help set a proper wage for picking cotton.

"We believe that a wage hearing will avert many struggles and will allow both sides to present their views," the workers had written, attaching to their entreaty hundreds of supporting signatures. Such an incursion by the state into the marketplace would have been unimaginable a year earlier. But under Olson and McWilliams, the rulebook was being rewritten. The first such hearing had been held in May in Madera County, under McWilliams's direction. His primary charge was to draw up a new policy for the State Relief Administration, overturning its past practice of kicking people off welfare as long as there was work available—no matter the pay they'd been offered. McWilliams's belief was that, rather than force workers to be beholden to an industry's "prevailing wage," the government should set a "fair wage" and not force anybody off relief for refusing to work for less than this amount.

In this case, valley farmers had decided that they'd shell out twenty cents an hour for chopping cotton—a task that involved thinning the small plants and clearing away weeds. The rate was established by the Agricultural Labor Bureau (ALB) of the San Joaquin Valley, a group representing the state's largest growers, which had gathered every season since 1926 to determine compensation for the region's field workers. Farmers who weren't part of the ALB could theoretically pay more, but many of them were scared to buck the system because they often depended on ALB members to provide their financing. McWilliams found the whole arrangement detestable, as well as two-faced. The big growers, he noted, kicked and screamed whenever their workers wanted to organize and bargain collectively. But they had no problem coming together collectively on their side of the table, colluding to keep wages down. "Because of the one-sidedness of the bargaining and the very considerable economic and social power represented" by the ALB, McWilliams said, "it is apparent that the prime purpose in fixing . . . rates in this manner is to prevent competition between employers, which might have the effect of raising" workers' pay.

For Madera's laborers, the hearing at the local Memorial Hall was a rare opportunity to openly express the anger that was burning inside them, having worked so hard for so little for so long. One man, Archie Hughes, testified that at twenty cents an hour he could barely afford to eat, despite dragging a hoe all day long, especially when he had to supply his own transportation to and from the fields. Nobody can "drive eight or ten miles out to work and back and make anything on $2 a day," he said. "Everything you eat, even a loaf of bread, is 12 cents." Then he added, "A working man can eat a loaf of bread by himself." At that, the audience broke into applause.

The wage committee acknowledged that the growers' ability to pay was not unlimited. But the notion that twenty cents an hour was all they could afford was roundly rejected. "That does not even represent a subsistence wage," McWilliams concluded, before recommending a rate of twenty-seven and a half cents an hour. McWilliams couldn't force any farmer to pay this much. Yet unless this sum was met, the SRA would no longer drop people from relief—a change in state regulations that would carry over from chopping cotton to picking it, leaving workers jubilant and also a little slack-jawed. "Has anyone ever heard tell of such a thing?" asked the *Tow-Sack Tattler*, the newspaper published by residents of the FSA's Arvin labor camp. "Always before the Growers have set the price and the Pickers never had a chance to get in their two-bits worth. They either picked it, or else. If they were on Relief, they were cut off. . . . But this year, the man who has to pick the cotton has been heard." McWilliams noted that casting a spotlight on what the farmers paid had another effect, as well: it kept them from trimming rates any further. "The growers were afraid," he told the governor, "that if they did make wage cuts, another hearing would be held."

The fair-wage policy was immediately condemned by the Associated Farmers, whose new leader had just come whirling through the revolving door: Harold Pomeroy, the man who'd run the SRA under Governor Merriam, was now executive secretary of the big growers' group. In the coming months, the Associated Farmers tried its best to keep McWilliams's policy from spreading, as it argued that every wage hearing did nothing more than offer a "Roman holiday for people loafing on relief" and a way for labor organizers to disrupt agricultural production. But such protests didn't register nearly as much anymore. For the first time ever, the balance of power was shifting toward the side of the workers—and to those trying to unionize them. "We used to say that when Culbert Olson was elected governor, socialism came to California," Elizabeth Eudey, a UCAPAWA official, recalled later. "It was a joke, of course, but it did make a big difference." Even though the wage levels that McWilliams blessed weren't binding, "we found we could use them" to help carry out a strike, "and we'd settle with individual growers if they'd put this wage into effect. It was a very different atmosphere from before. It was a Culbert Olson atmosphere. It was a Carey McWilliams atmosphere."

UCAPAWA operated under the auspices of the CIO, which in 1938 had splintered completely from the AFL. The new labor alliance, led by John L. Lewis, was eager to barrel past the old federation's focus on representing skilled craftsmen and organize the nation's legions of unskilled and semiskilled workers. Whereas the AFL seemed slow-footed and top down in its organization, the CIO embraced a bottom-up brand of activism that reached out to minorities and wasn't afraid to sweep into its fold Communists, Socialists, and other radicals.

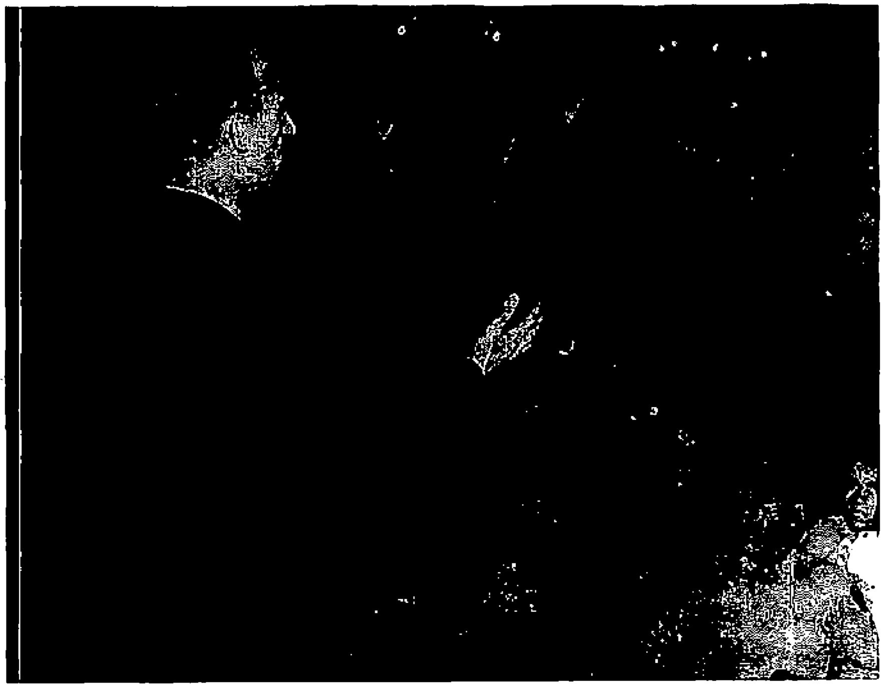
Even in this context, it was an unusually militant band that led UCAPAWA. The agricultural workers' godfather was Harry Bridges, the head of the longshoremen's union who also served as the CIO's leader on the Pacific Coast. An Australian native with a cockney accent, long face, hawk nose, piercing blue eyes, and a head of black hair brushed into a pompadour, Bridges saw America in unbending us-versus-them terms. "We take the stand that we as workers have nothing in common with the employers," he asserted. "We are in a class struggle." Having led the dockworkers through the Great Maritime Strike of 1934, Bridges had been smack in the middle of some of the decade's most unforgettable—and disturbing—events: the "Bloody Thursday" clash between unionists and San Francisco police that left scores injured and two workers dead; the funeral cortege that trudged along to the strains of Beethoven and helped build support for a general strike, leading to a virtual shutdown of the entire city; the deployment of nearly five thousand heavily armed National Guardsmen who helped bring the tempest to an end, but not before the longshoremen had achieved most of the gains they were seeking.

Bridges's vision was to take his success on the waterfront and broaden it through a "march inland," organizing mainly warehouse workers at first but, over time, others too. He considered agricultural laborers an essential part of the equation, if for no other reason than their extremely low wages and peripatetic lifestyle made them easy to recruit as strike-breakers in other industries. "It is difficult to recruit scabs among workers who are organized," he said. The longshoremen's union, "if only from a selfish standpoint, is concerned with the drive to bring organization to those who work in the fields." He then took the idea a step further, deciding to bring together farm, cannery, and packing workers into a single union. By using year-round cannery employees as a foundation, Bridges figured, he could then help seasonal workers find jobs through union-controlled hiring halls.

In 1937, UCAPAWA was born, adopting as its battle cry (just as the longshoremen had) the old Industrial Workers of the World slogan "An Injury to One Is an Injury to All." The union's president, Donald Henderson, was a young ideological soul mate of Bridges who had tried previously, without success, to organize agricultural workers for the AFL. Before entering the union movement, Henderson had been booted from his job as an economics professor at Columbia University, where he'd played guru to a budding group of campus Communists, drinking beer and singing revolutionary anthems with them. He swore that he'd since shaken any Communist Party ties, but many even within the councils of labor didn't believe him. "If he's not a card-carrying Communist," said one critic, "he's cheating the party out of his dues."

Henderson's radicalism made UCAPAWA an easy mark for the Associated Farmers, which described the union as "more Communistically controlled than any other." Henderson's response was to take a herring, paint it bright red, and then hold burial services for the little fish. "It's a sign and a guarantee that we're doing our job when they start calling us names," he said.

Bridges was also dogged by charges that he was a Communist. On this August day, as Steinbeck withdrew from the world and McWilliams busied himself with the state's affairs, the longshoreman sat in a San Francisco courtroom, facing possible deportation to Australia. The allegation: that Bridges was affiliated with an organization promoting the violent overthrow of the U.S. government.



A UCAPAWA organizer addresses a crowd in Kern County in 1938. (Photo by Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress)

But whether the union was led by Communists or not, it didn't seem to make much difference. Though UCAPAWA was weighed down by real problems, including finding sufficient funding to organize field workers and a nasty internal fight with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, it claimed 125,000 members by 1938. In the San Joaquin Valley, UCAPAWA foot soldiers such as Dorothy Healey didn't even bother to hide their convictions. "The first thing I would do is tell them I was a Communist," she said. "They didn't give a damn. They saw me as their organizer. There was nothing even vaguely threatening about me. They were far more likely to be wary of my gender than my politics. They weren't used to having women as leaders. But they soon got over that too. I was de-sexed."

The important thing for workers—and the frightening thing for the big growers—was that the union was trying to muck up the way business had been conducted in California agriculture for decades. When UCAPAWA came in, "they was mostly drilling us to be good labor people," remembered cotton worker Ollie Lewis, who in the late '30s joined Local 272 at the San Joaquin Compress Company in Bakersfield. "We voted in the union, struck for three days, and won a contract with better wages, overtime, holiday pay, seniority and a grievance system. After that we began to get very particular about the hours, gettin' time and a half and so on. And 100 bales an hour became the production standard. The boss might get 103 or 105 or 97, but he wouldn't be gettin' no 125 bales like he used to. He would get a fair day's work, that's all."

Others were clamoring for more than basic fairness. On this very same day, August 22, another letter was typed to Carey McWilliams. It was composed by a man named J. B. Ely, who had just finished reading *Factories in the Field* and was planning to pick up *The Grapes of Wrath* next—though he had "no idea when I shall be able to purchase it." His reason for contacting McWilliams was to encourage him to write another book as soon as possible, only this time one with less measured prose and more ire on every page. "Under a capitalistic government, such as we have, there is no hope for the poor man," Ely told him. "Like the fishes in the sea, the biggest ones are eating the less bigger ones, and the less bigger ones the next size down . . . . Try again, Mr. McWilliams. Write another book . . . . You can have it ready to follow the wave of popularity created by *The Grapes of Wrath.* And I will stoop along under you with my little butcher knife and cut his tail off while you behead the giant."

CHAPTER FOUR
Wednesday

"I knowed a fella. Brang 'im in while I was in the jail house. Been tryin' to start a union. Got one started. An' then them vigilantes bust it up."

FOR THE THIRD day running, complaints about the book ban poured into the main library in Bakersfield. Some patrons flocked downtown, determined to register their dissatisfaction in person. Others called, tying up the phone lines. At least a few people, frustrated that they couldn't borrow a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath,* asked in vain to buy one. So persistent was the protest, "We were scarcely able to do our regular work," Gretchen Knief would later say. By week's end, the remonstrance would grow only louder and sharper. From his home up the road in Fresno, renowned author and playwright William Saroyan would weigh in, defending the rights of the artist and ridiculing those with the inclination to gag him. Steinbeck "has not, despite criticism to the contrary, overemphasized profanity and obscenity," said Saroyan, whose Broadway production, *My Heart's in the Highlands,* made clear the folly of trying to silence a writer: "Go ahead. Fire your feeble guns. You won't kill anything. There will always be poets in the world."