

Migrations

Since the 1880s, Americans had primarily associated migration with the massive immigration from Europe. But in the early 1920s, in response to anti-immigrant hysteria, new restrictive laws cut off most of the immigration from southern and eastern Europe and all of it from Asia, shrinking the pool of mobile labor that had driven the economy for five decades. Employers looked south, to Mexico and the American South and Southwest, and to the American possessions of Puerto Rico and the Philippines for workers to fill industrial and agricultural positions. Two internal migrations—one of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and another of white and black southerners—pulled workers north and west.

In one of the era's most abrupt transitions, the depression of the 1930s curtailed economic opportunities for all Americans, including the new migrants. Southwestern states compelled or "repatriated" many Mexican immigrants and their American-born children to Mexico, even as desperate white sharecroppers and tenant farmers from the South headed west to California in search of work. Lumped together with others fleeing the Dust Bowl drought, these "Okies" symbolized the hard times of the depression. The outbreak of World War II revived the US economy and stimulated new migrations north and west to take advantage of the new jobs offered by wartime industries.

Questions to Consider: As the three interview excerpts below reveal, the changing economy, from expansion to depression to wartime boom, uprooted many Americans.

1. What links the migration experiences of the three narrators?
2. What was the impact of migrations on families?
3. How did moving to new places represent new economic and social opportunities, and how did these migrations challenge family, educational, and cultural traditions?
4. How did individuals adjust to their new circumstances?

North to the United States for "a Steady Job" — *Emiliano*

Source Note: This
Oral History