

Chapter Eight

WHEN THE FARMS BLEW AWAY

§ 1

**I**T WAS on Armistice Day of 1933 that the first of the great dust storms swept across South Dakota.

"By mid-morning a gale was blowing, cold and black. By noon it was blacker than night, because one can see through night and this was an opaque black. It was a wall of dirt one's eyes could not penetrate, but it could penetrate the eyes and ears and nose. It could penetrate to the lungs until one coughed up black. If a person was outside, he tied his handkerchief around his face, but he still coughed up black; and inside the house the Karnstrums soaked sheets and towels and stuffed them around the window ledges, but these didn't help much.

"They were afraid, because they had never seen anything like this before. . . .

"When the wind died and the sun shone forth again, it was on a different world. There were no fields, only sand drifting into mounds and eddies that swirled in what was now but an autumn breeze. There was no longer a section-line road fifty feet from the front door. It was obliterated. In the farmyard, fences, machinery, and trees were gone, buried. The roofs of sheds stuck out through drifts deeper than a man is tall."

I quote from an account by R. D. Lusk, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, of the way in which that first great storm of blowing dust hit the 470-acre Karnstrum farm in Beadle County, South Dakota. But the description might apply equally well to thousands of other farms on the Great Plains

all the way from the Texas Panhandle up to the Canadian border, and to any one of numberless storms that swept the Plains during the next two years. For the "great black blizzard" of November 11, 1933—which darkened the sky in Chicago the following day and as far east as Albany, New York, the day after that—was only a prelude to disaster. During 1934 and 1935 thousands of square miles were to be laid waste and their inhabitants set adrift upon desperate migrations across the land.

Long afterward, an elderly farm woman from the Dust Bowl—one of that straggling army of refugees whose predicament has been made vivid to hundreds of thousands of readers in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—told her story to Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange in California. She described how her family had done pretty well on their Arkansas farm until the Depression, when prices had fallen and they had found themselves in hard straits. "And then," said she, "the Lord taken a hand."

To many others it must have seemed as if the Lord had taken a hand in bringing the dust storms: as if, not content with visiting upon the country a man-made crisis—a Depression caused by men's inability to manage their economic affairs farsightedly—an omnipotent power had followed it with a visitation of nature: the very land itself had risen in revolt. (To other people, omnipotence may have seemed to be enjoying a sardonic joke at the expense of the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment program: "So it's crop-reduction you want, is it? Well, I'll show you.") Yet this was no blind stroke of nature such as that of the hurricane which, wandering far from the paths usually followed by hurricanes, tore across New England in the fall of 1938, swamping towns, ripping up forests, and taking nearly seven hundred lives. There was a long story of human error behind it.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century the Great Plains—a region of light rainfall, of sun and high winds, of

waving grasses, "where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day"—had been the great cattle country of the nation: a vast open area, unfenced at first, where the cowboys tended the cattle-kings' herds. Before the end of the century this range had been badly damaged by over-grazing, according to contemporary Federal reports, and the land was being heavily invaded by homesteaders, who tried manfully to wring a living from the semi-arid soil. But it was not until the Great War brought a huge demand for wheat, and tractors for large-scale machine farming became available, that the Plains began to come into their own as a crop-producing country, and the sod-covering which had protected them was plowed up on the grand scale. Throughout the nineteen-twenties the area devoted to big wheat farms expanded. A new power era had come, it was said, to revolutionize American agriculture; factory methods were being triumphantly applied to the land.

To be sure, there wasn't much rain. The mean annual rainfall was only between 10 and 20 inches on the Plains (as compared with, for example, 20 to 40 in the Mississippi Valley region, 40 to 50 in the North Atlantic region, 40 to 60 in the Ohio and Tennessee basins, and 75 and more in the Pacific Northwest). But there was a pretty favorable series of years during the nineteen-twenties and the farmers were not much disturbed.

In a recent report of the National Resources Committee there is a revealing map. It shows—by means of black dots scattered over the United States—the regions where there was an increase, between 1919 and 1929, in the acreage of land in harvested crops: in short, it shows the regions newly invaded by the crop farmer. Easily the most conspicuous feature of the map is an irregular blur of those black dots running from north to south just a little east of the Rocky Mountains—running from the Canadian border at the north-

ern edge of Montana and North Dakota, down through the Dakotas, western Kansas and Nebraska and eastern Colorado, and then into Oklahoma and northern Texas. This, very roughly, was the next region of promise—and the region of future tragedy.

Nineteen-thirty was a bad year in parts of this territory—and worse elsewhere; it was then, you may recall, that President Hoover was agitated over the question whether Federal money should be granted to drought-distressed farmers. Nineteen-thirty-one was worse in the Dakotas; 1932 was better. Then came 1933: it was a swinger, hot and dry. During that first summer of the New Deal, farmers in South Dakota were finding that they couldn't raise even enough corn to feed the livestock. In western Kansas not a drop of rain fell for months. Already the topsoil was blowing; there were places in Kansas where it was said that farmers had to excavate their tractors before they could begin to plow. That fall came the Armistice Day black blizzard.

But it was during 1934 and 1935—the years when Roosevelt was pushing through his financial reforms, and Huey Long was a national portent, and the languishing NRA was put out of its misery by the Supreme Court—that the thermometer in Kansas stayed week after week at 108 or above and the black storms raged again and again. The drought continued acute during much of 1936. Oklahoma farms became great dunes of shifting sand (so like seashore dunes, said one observer, that one almost expected to smell the salt). Housewives in the drought belt kept oiled cloths on the window sills and between the upper and lower sashes of the windows, and some of them tried to seal up every aperture in their houses with the gummed paper strips used in wrapping parcels, yet still the choking dust filtered in and lay in ripples on the kitchen floor, while outside it blew blindingly across a No Man's Land; roads and farm buildings and once green thickets half-buried in the sand.

It was in those days that a farmer, sitting at his window during a dust storm, remarked that he was counting the Kansas farms as they came by.

Retribution for the very human error of breaking the sod of the Plains had come in full measure. And, as often happens, it was visited upon the innocent as well as upon the guilty—if indeed one could single out any individuals as guilty of so pervasive an error as social shortsightedness.

## § 2

Westward fled the refugees from this new Sahara, as if obedient to the old American tradition that westward lies the land of promise. In 1934 and 1935 Californians became aware of an increasing influx into their state of families and groups of families of "Okies," traveling in ancient family jalopies; but for years the streams of humanity continued to run. They came along U. S. Highway 30 through the Idaho hills, along Highway 66 across New Mexico and Arizona, along the Old Spanish Trail through El Paso, along all the other westward trails. They came in decrepit, square-shouldered 1925 Dodges and 1927 La Salles; in battered 1923 Model-T Fords that looked like relics of some antique culture; in trucks piled high with mattresses and cooking utensils and children, with suitcases, jugs, and sacks strapped to the running boards. "They roll westward like a parade," wrote Richard L. Neuberger. "In a single hour from a grassy meadow near an Idaho road I counted 34 automobiles with the license plates of states between Chicago and the mountains."

They left behind them a half-depopulated countryside. A survey of the farmhouses in seven counties of southeastern Colorado, made in 1936, showed 2878 houses still occupied, 2811 abandoned; and there were also, in that area, 1522 abandoned homesites. The total number of drought refu-

gees who took the westward trek over the mountains was variously estimated in 1939 at from 200,000 upwards—with more coming all the time.

As these wanderers moved along the highways they became a part of a vast and confused migratory movement. When they camped by the wayside they might find themselves next to a family of evicted white Alabama sharecroppers who had been on the move for four years, snatching seasonal farm-labor jobs wherever they could through the Southwest; or next to tenant families from the Arkansas Delta who had been "tractored off" their land—expelled in order that the owner might consolidate two or three farms and operate them with tractors and day labor; or next to lone wanderers who had once held industrial jobs and had now for years been on relief or on the road—jumping freights, hitchhiking, panhandling, shunting back and forth across the countryside in the faint hope of a durable job. And when these varied streams of migrants reached the Coast they found themselves in desperate competition for jobs with individuals or families who for years had been "fruit tramps," moving northward each year with the harvests from the Imperial Valley in southern California to the Sacramento Valley or even to the apple-picking in the Yakima Valley in Washington.

Here in the land of promise, agriculture had long been partly industrialized. Huge farms were in the control of absentee owners or banks or corporations, and were accustomed to depend upon the labor of migratory "fruit tramps," who had formerly been mostly Mexicans, Japanese, and other foreigners, but now were increasingly Americans. Those laborers who were lucky enough to get jobs picking cotton or peas or fruit would be sheltered temporarily in camps consisting typically of frame cabins in rows, with a water line between every two rows; they were very likely to find in their cabin no stove, no cots, no water pail. Even

the best of the camps offered a way of life strikingly different from that of the ruggedly individualist farmer of the American tradition, who owned his farm or else was preparing, by working as a resident "hired man," or by renting a farm, for the chance of ultimate ownership. These pickers were homeless, voteless nomads, unwanted anywhere save at the harvest season.

When wave after wave of the new migrants reached California, the labor market became glutted, earnings were low, and jobs became so scarce that groups of poverty-stricken families would be found squatting in makeshift Hoovervilles or bunking miserably in their awkward old Fords by the roadside. Being Americans of native stock and accustomed to independence, they took the meager wages and the humiliation bitterly, sought to organize, talked of striking, sometimes struck. At every such threat, something like panic seized the growers. If this new proletariat were permitted to organize, and were to strike at picking time, they might ruin the whole season's output of a perishable crop. There followed anti-picketing ordinances; the spectacle of armed deputies dislodging the migrants from their pitiful camps; violence by bands of vigilantes, to whom these ragged families were not fellow-citizens who had suffered in a great American disaster but dirty, ignorant, superstitious outlanders, failures at life, easy dupes for "red" agitators. This engulfing tide of discontent must be kept moving.

Farther north the refugees were likely to be received with more sympathy, especially in regions where the farms were small and not industrialized; here and there one heard of instances of real hospitality, such as that of the Oregon town which held a canning festival for the benefit of the drought victims in the neighborhood. The well-managed camps set up by the Farm Security Administration were havens of

human decency. But to the vast majority of the refugees the promised land proved to be a place of new and cruel tragedy.

### § 3

These unhappy wanderers of the West were only a small minority of the farmers of the United States. What was happening to the rest of them?

We have already seen the AAA beginning the colossal task of making acreage-reduction agreements with millions of farmers in the hope of jacking up the prices of crops and thus restoring American agriculture to economic health. We have seen it making credit available to farmers and trying, through the Farm Mortgage Moratorium Act and other legislation, to free them of the immediate hazards of debt. Just how successful the AAA program could be considered was still, at the end of the decade, a subject of ferocious controversy, if only because one could not separate its effect upon prices from the effects wrought by the drought and by the general improvement in economic conditions after 1933. But certainly farm prices rose. For example, the farmer who had received, on the average, only 33 cents a bushel for wheat in 1933 received 69 cents in 1934, 89 cents in 1935, 92 cents in 1936, \$1.24 in 1937, and 88 cents in 1938. The cotton farmer who had received an average price of 5.6 cents a pound for his cotton in 1933 received between 10 and 13 cents during the next four years, and 7.9 cents in 1938. And certainly there was a general improvement in the condition of those farmers who owned their own farms—and lived outside the worst drought areas. A survey of 3,000 farms in various parts of the country—mostly better-than-average farms—made by the Department of Agriculture in 1938 showed a distinct gain in equipment and in comfort; more of these farms had electricity than in 1930, more had tractors and trucks, more had bath-



rooms, automobiles, and radios. But this was not a complete picture of what had happened.

To begin with, quantities of farmers had lost their farms during the hideous early years of the Depression—lost them by reason of debt. These farms had mostly fallen into the hands of banks or insurance companies, or of small-town investors who had held the mortgages on them, or were being held by government bodies for non-payment of taxes, or had been bought in at tax sales. As early as 1934, the National Resources Board stated that nearly thirty per cent of the total value of farm land in the West North Central States was owned by “creditor or government agencies which have been compelled to take over the property.” At the small prairie city, the local representative of a big New York insurance company was a very busy man, supervising the management of tracts of property far and wide. The tentacles of the octopus of metropolitan financial control reached more deeply than ever before into the prairie country—though one must add that this octopus was a most unwilling one, and would have been only too glad to let go if it could only get its money back. (As time went on, the Metropolitan and other insurance companies made determined efforts to find buyers for their farm properties, financing these buyers on easy terms.) In the callous old Wall Street phrase, the farms of the United States had been “passing into stronger hands”; and that meant that more and more of them, owned by people who did not live on them, were being operated by tenants.

For over half a century at least, farm tenancy had been on the increase in the United States. Back in 1880, only 25 per cent of American farms had been run by tenants. Slowly the percentage had increased; now, during the Depression, it reached 42. The growth of tenantry caused many misgivings, for not only did it shame the fine old Jeffersonian ideal of individual landholding—an ideal in which most

Americans firmly believed—but it had other disadvantages. Tenants were not likely to put down roots, did not feel a full sense of responsibility for the land and equipment they used, were likely to let it deteriorate, and in general were less substantial citizens than those farmers who had a permanent share in the community. In 1935, less than two-thirds of the tenant farmers in the United States had occupied their present land for more than one year! In the words of Charles and Mary Beard, "Tenants wandered from farm to farm, from landlord to landlord, from region to region, on foot, in battered wagons, or in dilapidated automobiles, commonly dragging families with them, usually to conditions lower in the scale of living than those from which they had fled."

The passing of farms into "stronger hands" was accompanied by another change. More and more the farm owner, whether or not he operated his own farm, was coming to think of himself as a business man, to think of farming as a business. He was less likely to use his farm as a means of subsistence, more likely to use as much of it as possible for the growing of crops for sale. He was more interested in bookkeeping, more alert to the advantages of farm machinery, and especially of operating with tractors on the largest possible scale. A striking example of this trend was the appearance of the "suitcase farmer"—a small-town business man who bought a farm or two, cleared them of houses and barns, spent a few weeks of each year planting and harvesting them (using his own tractor or a hired one), and otherwise devoted himself to his business, not living on the land at all. A Kansas banker told Ladd Haystead, toward the end of the decade, that he estimated that between twenty and thirty per cent of the land in western Kansas was owned by suitcase farmers. This was what was happening to the territory whence the victims of drought had fled!

In certain parts of the South and Southwest this trend

toward making a mechanized business of farming took a form even more sinister in the eyes of those who believed in the Jeffersonian tradition. In these districts farm tenancy was becoming merely a way station on the road to farm industrialism. The tenants themselves were being eliminated. Furthermore, the AAA, strangely enough, was unwittingly assisting the process.

How easy for an owner of farm property, when the government offered him a check for reducing his acreage in production, to throw out some of his tenants or sharecroppers, buy a tractor with the check, and run his farm mechanically with the aid of hired labor—not the sort of year-round hired labor which the old-time “hired man” had represented, but labor engaged only by the day when there happened to be work to be done! During the nineteen-thirties large numbers of renters and sharecroppers, both black and white, were being displaced in the South—to the tune of angry protests by the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, equally angry retaliation by the landlords and their allies, and a deal of the sort of barbarous cruelty which we have noted in California. In the areas where large-scale cotton farming with the aid of machinery was practicable, tenants were expelled right and left. *Fortune* told of a big Mississippi planter who bought 22 tractors and 13 4-row cultivators, evicted no less than 130 of his 160 sharecropper families, and kept only 30 for day laborers. During the years 1930-37, the sales of farm tractors in ten cotton states increased no less than ninety per cent—and the indications were that at the end of that period the increase was accelerating. While the number of farms operated by tenants was growing elsewhere in the country between 1930 and 1935, it actually declined a little in the West South Central States. In two cotton counties of the Texas Panhandle, studied by Paul S. Taylor in 1937, it declined sharply. And here was the reason: “Commonly, the landlord who purchases a

tractor throws two 160-acre farms operated by tenants into an operating unit, and lets both tenants go. Sometimes the rate of displacement is greater, rising to 8, 10, and even 15 families of tenants."

Where did the displaced tenants go? Into the towns, some of them. In many rural areas, census figures showed an increased town population and simultaneously a depopulated countryside. Said the man at a gas station in a Texas town, "This relief is ruining the town. They come in from the country to get on relief." Some of them got jobs running tractors on other farms at \$1.25 a day. Some went on to California: out of farming as a settled way of life into farming as big business dependent on a large, mobile supply of labor.

So far this new pattern was only fragmentary and was confined mostly to the South and West, though the number of migratory farm workers was growing fast even along the Atlantic seaboard. Perhaps the onrushing agricultural industrialism would prove as short-lived as the earlier epidemic of tractor farming which had promised so much for the Great Plains during the nineteen-twenties—would lead once more to depletion of the soil and thus to its own undoing as well as the land's. Perhaps those agrobiologists were right who believed that the trend of the future would be toward smaller farms and more intensive yields. The relatively new science of farm chemurgy was revealing all sorts of new industrial uses for farm products; du Pont, for example, was using farm products in the making of cellophane, Duco, motion-picture film, rayon, pyralin, plastecele, fabri-koid, sponges, window shades, hair ornaments, handbags, alcohols, and a lot of other things which one would hardly associate with the old-fashioned farm. Yet even if the farmer of the future who applied new methods to the growing of specialized crops for specialized uses would be able to operate best with a small tract of land, as some people expected,

would he be able to operate without more capital than most farmers possessed? That question was still unanswered.

Meanwhile large-scale tractor farming was spreading fast, and was repeating the harshnesses of mid-nineteenth century industrialism—as if America had learned nothing in the interim.

How far would the new trend go? Would great mechanized farm corporations, perhaps controlled from the metropolitan cities, gradually put out of business the smaller farms of those rolling areas, such as abounded in the Old Cotton South, where tractors could not readily be used? Would the cotton picker invented by the Rust brothers of Memphis accelerate this change? What would become, then, of the already miserable sharecroppers? Were other parts of the country destined sooner or later to go through the same sort of transition that was taking place in the South and West, producing a huge, roving, landless proletariat of the land, helpless if unorganized, menacing if organized because it had no stake in the land and its settled institutions? These questions, too, waited for answers.

#### § 4

For a generation or more the conservationists had been warning the country that it was squandering its heritage of land and forests and fields and minerals and animal life: that in effect it was living riotously on its capital of national resources. But to most citizens the subject had seemed dull, academic. Now, in the Dust Bowl, the Lord had “taken a hand” in instruction. And hardly had the black blizzards blown themselves out when—as if distrustful whether the country properly realized that droughts and floods were not incompatible phenomena, but were associated results of human misuse of the land—the Lord drove the lesson home. The rivers went on a rampage.

"In 1936"—I quote from Stuart Chase's summary—"the Merrimac, Connecticut, Hudson, Delaware, Susquehanna, Potomac, Allegheny, and Ohio all went wild. The Potomac was up twenty-six feet at Washington and long barriers of sandbags protected government buildings. . . . Pittsburgh was under ten to twenty feet of water and was without lights, transport, or power. The life of 700,000 people was paralyzed. The food supply was ruined, the steel industry at a standstill." The following January, the unseasonably warm and rainy January of 1937, the Ohio River produced what was perhaps, all things considered, the worst flood in American history.

The bare facts of that flood are impressive. The Ohio rose 7.9 feet higher than it had ever risen before at Cincinnati, 6.8 feet higher than it had ever risen before at Louisville. Nine hundred people were estimated to have lost their lives by drowning or by other casualties resulting from the flood. The number of families driven from their homes was set at 500,000; the number still homeless a month after the worst of the crisis was set by the Red Cross at 299,000.

But these figures give no impression whatever of what men and women experienced in each town during the latter days of January as the swirling waters rose till the Ohio seemed a great rushing muddy lake full of floating wreckage, and the cold rain drizzled inexorably down, and every stream added its swollen contribution to the torrent. Railroad tracks and roads washed away. Towns darkened as the electric-light plants were submerged. Business halted, food supplies stopped, fires raging out of control, disease threatening. The city of Portsmouth, Ohio, opening six great sewer valves and letting seven feet of water rush into its business district, lest its famous concrete flood wall be destroyed. Cincinnati giving City Manager Dykstra dictatorial powers. The radio being used to direct rescue work and issue warnings and instructions to the population as

other means of communication failed: a calm voice at the microphone telling rescuers to row to such-and-such an address and take a family off the roof, to row somewhere else and help an old woman out of a second-story window. Breadlines. The Red Cross, the Coast Guard, the WPA aiding in the work of rescue and reorganization. Martial law. Churches above the water line being used as refuges. Dead bodies of horses and cattle—yes, and of men and women—floating through the streets, along with tree branches, gasoline tanks, beams from collapsed houses. Mud everywhere, as the waters receded—mud and stench. Most dramatic of all, perhaps, the triumphant fight to save Cairo, Illinois: men piling more and more sandbags atop the levee, standing guard day and night, rushing to strengthen the wall of defense wherever it weakened, as the waters rose and rose—and did not quite break over.

By this time everybody with any capacity for analysis was ready to begin to understand what the government technicians had long been saying in their monographs; what Stuart Chase and Paul B. Sears and David Cushman Coyle, the Mississippi Valley Committee and the National Resources Committee, and Pare Lorenz's very fine films, "The River" and "The Plough that Broke the Plains," were repeating in more popular terms: that floods as well as dust storms were largely the result of reckless misuse of the land. Indeed, as early as the beginning of 1936, when the Supreme Court threw out the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Congress took account of the new understanding in revamping its farm program. The new law was labeled a Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, and the new crop adjustments were called "soil-erosion adjustments."

Already at many points the government was at work restoring a deforested and degraded and eroded countryside. In the CCC camps, young men were not only getting healthy employment, but were renewing and protecting

the forest cover by planting trees, building firebreaks, removing inflammable underbrush, and building check dams in gullies. The experts of the Soil Conservation Service were showing farmers how to fight erosion by terracing, contour plowing, rotation of crops, strip cropping, and gully planting. After the dust storms, for example, they demonstrated how the shifting dunes of Dalhart, Texas, could be held in place by planting them with milo, Sudan grass, and black amber cane. Under the supervision of the Forest Service, the government between 1935 and 1939 planted 127,000,000 trees to serve as windbreaks on the Great Plains. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 stopped homesteading on the great range and gave the Department of the Interior power to prevent over-grazing on eighty million acres.

PWA funds were going into the construction of dams which would aid in flood control (and also extend navigation), such as that at Fort Peck in eastern Montana, which was to create a lake 175 miles long. The TVA—that most combative and most remarkable of New Deal agencies—was not simply creating a new electric-light and power system in competition with privately owned utilities (though this part of its work stirred up ten times as much excitement as all the rest put together); its dams were also controlling floods, and it was showing farmers how to deal with erosion, how to use phosphates. (In 1937, during the Ohio River flood, the Tennessee River did not misbehave.) Other PWA funds were providing a better irrigation system for parts of Utah where water was running short. The colossal dam at Grand Coulee, Washington—the biggest thing ever built by man—was getting ready to pump water for the irrigation of 1,200,000 acres of desert land, as well as to provide hydro-electric power in quantity (like its sister dam at Bonneville) for the future development of the Northwest. These were only a few of the numerous enterprises going ahead simultaneously.



Nor was the government undertaking these enterprises in a wholly piecemeal manner: through its National Resources Committee and other agencies it was making comprehensive studies of the country's resources and equipment, so that the movement of restoration and regeneration could proceed with a maximum of wisdom.

### § 5

With the aid of these studies—and of the lessons taught by drought and flood—more and more Americans, during the latter nineteen-thirties, were beginning to see the problem of their country's future in a new light. They were beginning to realize that it had reached maturity. No longer was it growing hand-over-fist.

Immigration was no longer adding appreciably to its numbers: indeed, during the years between 1931 and 1936, the number of aliens *emigrating* from the United States had been larger each year than the number *immigrating*: the tide had actually been trickling in reverse. If, beginning in 1936, the incoming tide had increased again as Europeans sought to escape from the shadow of Hitlerism, even so the total remained tiny in comparison with those of pre-war years. Ellis Island was no longer a place of furious activity. The time was at hand when the number of foreign-born people in the United States would be sharply diminished by death, and the sound of foreign languages would be heard less and less in the streets of American cities. Already the schools, the manufacturers of children's clothing, and the toy manufacturers were beginning to notice the effects of the diminished birth rate (accentuated by the sharp drop during the early Depression years). Writing in the spring of 1938, Henry Pratt Fairchild reported that there were over 1,600,000 fewer children under 10 in the United States than there had been five years earlier. School principals, con-

fronting smaller entering classes of children, could well understand what the population experts were talking about when they predicted a slower and slower population growth for the country, with an increasing proportion of old people and a decreasing proportion of young ones. They could see the change taking place before their own eyes.

That the frontier was closed was not yet quite true, a generation of historians to the contrary notwithstanding; for the Northwest was still a land of essentially frontier possibilities. Yet for a long time past, young men and women bent on fortune had mostly been going, not west, but to the cities. If the victims of the Dust Bowl and the tractor had pushed west, their fate had been ironic. The brief return to the country of great numbers of jobless city dwellers during the early Depression years had only temporarily slowed down the movement from farm to city and town. For a long time past, the fastest-growing communities had been, by and large, not Western boom towns but the suburbs which ringed the big cities—and during the nineteen-thirties these suburbs were still adding to their numbers. Industry, by and large, was no longer moving westward; the great bulk of the country's manufacturing was still done along the north Atlantic seaboard and in the strip of territory running thence out through Pennsylvania and Ohio to Chicago and St. Louis—and some observers even believed they detected during the nineteen-thirties a slight shift back toward the East.

American individuals and families were becoming more nomadic. This was partly due to the omnipresence of the automobile; there were three million more cars on the road in 1937 than in 1929, for though fewer cars were sold, more old ones were still in use. Partly, as we have seen, it was due to the Depression search for jobs and to the eviction of farm tenants. But American *institutions* appeared, geographically, to be settling down.

Still there was a chance for a far richer development of the country, and the chance was most visible west of the Great Plains. Yet if this development was to be durable, the new pioneering must be more disciplined than the old. The hard fact that the days were over when Americans could plunder and move on, stripping off forests, ripping out minerals, and plowing up grasslands without regard to the long consequences, was now penetrating the public consciousness—even while the men and women whose farms had blown away were still wandering homeless through the land.