

## **GRAPES OF WRATH BANNED IN KERN COUNTY**

By Elise Palos

*We learned about a very significant contribution to the recording of Route 66 history in California made by Elise Palos. Her winning paper was printed in Californian Historian June 1994.*

*In the 1993 State level competition in History Day in California, the author received the prestigious Heilbronn Award given to the California Historical Society for this paper. In addition she was the CCHS second place winner in senior papers. At the time she was a junior at East Bakersfield High School.*

When John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, it caused an uproar in this nation. The inside cover of the novel states, "It electrified an America still convalescing ideas that many people were, at the least, uncomfortable with this electricity caused the Kern County Board of Supervisors to ban the book in the county's public schools and libraries on August 22, 1939."

*The Grapes of Wrath* was mostly set in Kern County, California and illustrated the "corporate landowners'" cruelty towards the "exploited agricultural workers." These agricultural workers were usually derogatorily called "Okies," because most of them had migrated from Oklahoma. Others came from Arkansas, Kansas, and New Mexico. After the years of drought in the area that became known as the Dust Bowl and after they were thrown off their land, these farmers moved to California to start a new life, hoping to own their land. However, their luck was not as large as their hope and many were left homeless and unemployed.

According to Steinbeck's novel, this was because the California landowners barely paid the workers enough to live on. Apparently, this offended some of Kern County's citizens, especially the Associated Farmers of Kern County. They completely supported the Board of Supervisors' resolution that stated the novel "misrepresented conditions in the county and the whole San Joaquin Valley" and blamed the local farmers for the plight of the indigent farmers. The group also solicited other organizations in the valley for support. W.B. Camp, a prominent rancher of the time and president of the Associated Farmers, said that his organization would "fight to remove the 'smear' on the good name of Kern, the state of California and agriculture."

Despite the denials of those who felt they were falsely portrayed by Steinbeck, there are those who were there that say it is true. When asked by Kathi Durham on March 9, 1981 if Steinbeck's portrayal of the treatment of the farm workers was accurate, Eual Murmduke Stone said, "Oh, they treated them like dogs, they was treated like dogs. They only wanted them to get their crops picked." Stone could be considered an "Okie," since he moved from Oklahoma to California in 1929. Also, Mary DeArmond, a Bakersfield High and East Bakersfield High School teacher from 1938 to 1943, stated, "It (*The Grapes of Wrath*) was all true."

Even though the Associated Farmers and the Board of Supervisors couldn't get the unfair and untrue rap to stick, they tried to convince the county they were banning *The Grapes of Wrath* because of the book's obscenity. W.B. Camp explained, "We are angry, not because we were attacked but because we were attacked by a book obscene in the extreme sense of the word..." Kern County supervisor Stanley Abel defended the board by saying on August 28, 1939, "The book was banned because of the filth that is in it." True, there were "dirty words" throughout the book, as most people would call them today but the characters in this novel were not exactly the most refined and educated. Besides, didn't the board's resolution banning the book state that it misrepresented conditions in the county? Which one was the true, motivating reason?

Whether or not the book stated untruths or was obscene, there were many Kern County residents who believed the ban was a threat to the first amendment, including organizations like the National Council of Freedom from Censorship and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Raymond W. Henderson, representative of the Kern County branch of the ACLU, did not believe *The Grapes of Wrath* should be given to school children and that the ACLU wasn't interested in the truth of the book, but said, "What we do protest is a public board setting itself up as a board of censorship in violation of the first amendment of the federal Constitution." (12) Vernon Bell, a Kern County resident during the ban, declared when asked about *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Censorship is a threat to our way of American life." (13)

Finally, after a year and a half, the Kern County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to cancel the ban in January of 1941. (14) However, the book wasn't allowed to be used in the Kern High School District until 1972, when Bell requested to teach it to his classes at East Bakersfield High School. (15) Now it is taught every year. Hopefully, Kern County students and others will now understand what it was like to truthfully be an "Okie" in California, despite the once strong protests of the landowners. Steinbeck did us all a great favor by communicating the truth.

*The Grapes of Wrath* has come a long way in Kern County. It is now ironic to think what once left a bitter taste in California's mouth, became "the most popular book in America." (16) Some critics call it "...the greatest fictional work of a generation." (17) It just goes to show, censorship can't stop an "electrifying" novel.

- \* 1. John Steinbeck, jacket notes, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (New York: Viking Press, 1939) inside cover.
- \* 2. "Literary Calendar," *Wilson Library Bulletin* October, 1939: 102.
- \* 3. Samuel Sillen. "Censuring *The Grapes of Wrath*," *A Casebook of The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. Agnes McNeill Donehue (New York: Crowell, 1968) 6.
- \* 4. Eual Murmduke Stone, interview, *The Grapes of Wrath in Kern County*, with Kathi Durham (Bakersfield: Bakersfield College, 1982) 7-8
- \* 5. *Bakersfield Californian* 22 August, 1939.
- \* 6. "Literary Calendar," *Wilson Library Bulletin* October, 1939: 120.
- \* 7. "Support of 'Grapes' Ban is Urged by Farmers' Group," *Bakersfield Californian* 22 August, 1939.
- \* 8. Mary DeArmond, personal interview, 7 March, 1993.
- \* 9. "Support of 'Grapes' Ban is Urged by Farmers' Group," *Bakersfield Californian* 22 August, 1939.
- \* 10. "Board Holds Hearings on *Grapes of Wrath* Ban," *Bakersfield Californian* 28 August, 1939.
- \* 11. "Literary Calendar," *Wilson Library Bulletin* October, 1939: 102.
- \* 12. "Liberties Union to Protest Book Ban," *Bakersfield Californian* 23 August, 1939.
- \* 13. Vernon Bell, personal interview, 25 February, 1993.
- \* 14. *Bakersfield Californian* 27 January, 1941.
- \* 15. Vernon Bell, personal interview, 25 February, 1993.
- \* 16. "Literary Calendar," *Wilson Library Bulletin* October, 1939: 102.
- \* 17. "'Grapes of Wrath' to be Filmed as Storm Rages on Accuracy," *Bakersfield Californian* 22 August, 1939.