

Of Mice and Men and the Great Depression

When John Steinbeck wrote his play in 1937, the United States and much of the world had been mired in a severe economic depression for eight years with little hope of an impending recovery. Issues raised by the play -- unemployment, hunger, homelessness, dislocation, disillusionment, and racial tension -- were daily household realities. Nearly one quarter of working Americans were without a job, and many more were severely underemployed. *Of Mice and Men*--as a play, as a mirror, and as a social statement--is deeply rooted in the depredations of this time and the hopelessness that formed the Depression-era perspective.

While we tend to view this play, and even the Great Depression itself, with a certain sense of nostalgia, Steinbeck, the characters in his play, and his contemporary audience were physically and emotionally embedded in this difficult period--they had been for some time, and for all anybody knew, they might continue to be for generations to come. Steinbeck was one of many prophetic voices from this era that included the likes of Federal Theater director Hallie Flanagan Davis, photographers Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, and writer James Agee. The works of these men and women were not merely reflections of their society, but were calls to action, challenges to their viewers: "And what will you do about it?"

To sidestep the conventional interpretations of this play and to keep *Of Mice and Men* anchored to its original social critique, it is necessary to remain faithful to the prophetic tradition, the "truth-telling," that Steinbeck was working within. If successful, then we might recognize the relevant parallels to our own day: "we too live in difficult times, they may never end, and what will we do about it?"

To accomplish this, a critical mass of primary-source documents was assembled from several repositories, most especially from the Fromkin Memorial Collection on American Social Justice in the UWM Libraries' Special Collections Department. Much of this evidence forms the content of this lobby exhibit and informs much of the play's production. The content and materiality of these artifacts were used extensively for the dramaturgy of the play, and the Special Collections Department itself was utilized as a laboratory for the director, actors, set designer, costumer, stage manager, and dramaturge. The emphasis on physical evidence transforms the play, we hope, from our traditional understanding of it as a complex character study into a clarion call for social response.

Under the direction of Max Yela, Head of Special Collections, this exhibit was researched and produced by Joe Davies and Abby Von Arx, graduate interns in Special Collections, and were assisted by graduate intern Lindsay Barone, and undergraduate student assistants Jessica Bublitz and Grace De Wolf Hern.