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## 'Obscene in the Extreme' by Rick Wartzman

John Steinbeck's classic about the 1930s Dust Bowl drew its share of controversy

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By Glenn C. Altschuler



George E. Marsh

A dust storm approaches Stratford, Texas, on April 18, 1935. In the Dust Bowl era, a single dust storm could linger for days. The storms prompted a mass migration out of the Plains states, forming the basis for John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath."

Published in April 1939, "The Grapes of Wrath" was an experiment in Depression-era "documentary fiction." Author John Steinbeck alternated chapters on the Dust Bowl, the migration of tin lizzies and the plowing under of an orange crop in California, with a narrative about the experiences of the Joad family on the road and in Central California.

In a year, 429,000 hardcover copies of the novel were sold.

Growers in California and their political allies denounced the novel as "a damnable lie, a black infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind."

The material in it, they fumed, was Red and Blue. Red because Steinbeck wrote, with evident approval, that "when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need." Blue because he put into the mouths of his characters "a panoply of profanity," ending the novel with Tom Joad's sister, Rose of Sharon, breast-feeding a starving hobo.

The board of supervisors of Kern County, Calif., where the novel was set, voted Aug. 21, 1939, to ban it from schools and libraries. A few days later, a copy was burned in the county seat of Bakersfield.

In his new book, Rick Wartzman, a journalist, uses this little-known episode in American history as a window on "a troubled and confused generation."

Wartzman's vivid account brings to life the cast of characters in the censorship controversy. Petitioning to rescind the ban introduced by Supervisor Stanley Abel, the "gruff, stubborn, thick-necked" Ku Klux Klan member, were his brothers, Lindley and Ralph, both of them members of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Joining them was Kern County librarian Gretchen Kneif, the daughter of a newspaper editor from Milwaukee. Savoring her moment in the sun, Kneif reminded board members that "Ideas don't die

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By Rick Wartzman  
Public Affairs  
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because a book is forbidden reading." She then offered her inventory of 48 copies of "The Grapes of Wrath" to libraries throughout the state.

Wartzman's sympathies for free speech and the farm laborers are not difficult to detect. The growers, he indicates, treated the migrants well when there was cotton to be picked but paid them starvation wages, housed them in deplorable conditions, disdained them as "dirty, immoral scum" and "threwed 'em over" when they no longer needed them.

In 1936, Los Angeles sent a "Bum Brigade" of 136 cops to prevent migrants from entering California from Nevada, Oregon and Arizona.

Wartzman also understands that there were no easy answers to "the plight of these human tumbleweeds." The migrants, he points out, were a financial burden on California residents. Despite hard times, the state's relief policy was relatively generous.

Voters could not be blamed for trouncing a proposal (called "Ham and Eggs") to give \$30 every Thursday to all unemployed persons over age 30. Although property taxes shot up by 50 percent between 1934 and 1939, Kern remained the only county to provide free medical care to migrants.

In 1941, as defense spending brought the Depression to an end, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down California's Indigent Law, which made it a crime to carry a destitute person across state lines.

"The right of persons to move freely from state to state," Justice William O. Douglas declared, "occupies a more protected position in our constitutional system than does the movement of cattle, fruit, steel and coal."

Earlier that year, after Stanley Abel had been defeated for re-election, the Kern County Board of Supervisors lifted its ban on the book. Fifteen minutes after the news was broadcast, Gretchen Kneif reported, a patron asked to borrow it.

The problems of poverty and economic exploitation have proven more difficult to solve.

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