

TEACHER'S GUIDE  
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MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

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**We Were Just Okies to Her . . . ": Rev. Billie H. Pate on Moving to California**

*Billie Pate's family worked as sharecroppers in Texas, farming land owned by someone else and giving the landowner a share, or portion, of the crop they produced each year. During the Depression, crop prices sunk too low to sustain the family. Like other farm families who migrated to California, they were drawn by the promise of work, the hope of eventually being able to own land in an agriculturally rich state, and the knowledge that the state provided higher relief payments than other states. The Pate family migrated in 1935 when Billie was ten. In this oral history excerpt, he describes his work and school experiences in California. Michael Neely interviewed Pate in March 1981 for a San Joaquin regional oral history project.*

Pate: So we got here in the fall of 1935 and we were living out in this one ranch and we picked cotton that fall because my father couldn't get a job, and then the winter months came on and they were terribly bad. We lived in the camp with no running water and no inside plumbing...

Neely: Did you pick cotton?

Pate: On the weekends, yes. When it wasn't raining, we worked...

Neely: Did the money go to the children or to the family?

Pate: Family, always to the family. And this was how we survived. We worked. We always worked and even during the next summer when I was eleven—in 1936 I was eleven. We hired out in the fields. At eleven I chopped cotton with adults, and then we chopped cotton, hoed all summer...

We started school also. There was a school at the cotton camp, but my mother didn't want us to go to that school... the school at the camp had many Mexican Americans, and we were not accustomed to these people. We had never been around them and so my mother wasn't comfortable with it at that time...

Probably this was one of the hardest years of my life, the first year we came... for some reason our teacher resented us and made it known that she didn't like the Okies and the Arkies and the Texans... We were really trash to her...



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Then there was a term, we were called Okies. Oh, we weren't from Oklahoma — that's just a term for this group. We were just Okies to her and Okies were inferior...

Neely: What were the reactions you had to being treated as trash?

Pate: Oh, I certainly didn't like it because I didn't feel like trash.

Source: "Interview with Rev. Billie H. Pate," California State College, Bakersfield - California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the South San Joaquin Valley, pg. 7.  
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