



# Children of the Dust: An Okie Family Story (Plains Histories)

*Betty Grant Henshaw*

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"With the same effortless matter-of-fact utility as the flour sack dresses she wore, Henshaw, daughter of Oklahoma farmers during the Dust Bowl, offers an episodic account of the lives of migrant farm workers through depression, war and beyond. A collection of vignettes building toward Henshaw's father's decision to make the big move to California—to reunite with family and find more steady work—first-time author Henshaw's spare, earnest prose goes beyond the requisite flintiness and eloquence of rural life, offering a multitude of characters making hard choices for high stakes. Detailing the challenges of the Okie dilemma, as well as the joys it accorded them in family unity and worker camaraderie, Henshaw recounts grueling work, sudden house fires, community pie suppers and the continual, teasing promise of better work and lodgings just ahead. A precocious youngster who observed her life as if she had always anticipated writing about it, Henshaw's portrait of a farmer's life on the move is warm and vivid, steeped in family and labor, and idyllic only in the flawless way she tells it: "I had hardly become used to the sight of pine trees when we came upon tall cactuses with thick arms reaching toward the sky." Henshaw's is the story of a family first and a time second, and this Dust Bowl narrative is all the more illuminating for it."—Publishers Weekly "[This is] not another Dust Bowl story, not a tale of failure. . . . The Grants loved each other and their lives, and it fell to Betty by her nature to record that loving world, with its struggles and its abundant fun, its good folk, and above all, a family that flourished, even in hard times." —Sandra Scofield, from the preface "[Henshaw's] book fills the gap concerning the post-1945 Okies who went West, and she shows us that they too had to overcome immense obstacles to survive. Unlike the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, they survived indeed." —Southwestern American Literature

Betty Grant Henshaw was born into a large family of tenant farmers in Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl era. For years her father, Bill, worked himself to exhaustion, trying to earn enough to provide for his wife and nine children and to buy his own small farm, but he was never able to get ahead. Other family members had joined the great migration of Okies to California. Finally yielding to pressure from others, with some reluctance Bill piled his family in the Ford pickup and set off along Route 66 for the Golden State. There the family found abundant opportunities to work, but work often meant backbreaking labor in the fields for dirt-cheap wages in hundred-degree heat. Bill did his best to shield his family from the brutality of the fields. His abiding respect for work, which he cultivated in his children, led his family through difficult times. In the end, although he missed Oklahoma, Bill was proud to find that the Grants could thrive in any soil. Now in her seventies, Betty Grant Henshaw lives in Medford, Oregon. Sandra Scofield is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Occasions of Sin: A Memoir*.

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